STARTING THE RACE RIGHT: A CASE STUDY OF A FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM AIMED AT INCREASING PERSISTENCE AMONG URBAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Since the early part of the 1990s, the City of Boston has made substantial progress in increasing the number of graduates from its school system who go on to college. However, while the Boston Public School system’s postsecondary enrollment rate exceeds national averages, the system faces a serious issue in that the vast majority of its college-bound graduates do not end up earning a college degree. Low college student retention rates plague graduates of the BPS system, a problem that is significant for many reasons given the importance of a college degree in Boston’s metropolitan job market. In response to the disclosures of the college retention rates for BPS graduates, Northeastern University launched Foundation Year, a first-year college program aimed at increasing the level of preparedness of students and, subsequently, their likelihood of completing a college degree. This case study provides an in-depth analysis of the Foundation Year program and, in doing so, illustrates the ways in which one institution is seeking to address low college retention rates amongst urban students. A qualitative research approach was employed to gain insights into the program through the views of individuals associated with the program as well as through the review of archival program documents. The results of the case study provide a comprehensive view of the first-year program and show how, despite sharing many characteristics with first-year programs at other colleges and universities, Foundation Year is unique in its attempt to increase system-wide persistence rates rather than institutional retention rates. The program’s “transition out” pathways model is a distinctive component of Foundation Year that runs counter to the constructs of the dominant theory in the college student retention literature which calls for increased integration between students and institutions of higher education. Additionally, the findings of the study highlight the fact that faculty and the student-centered pedagogical approaches they employed in the classroom were
identified as key factors to helping students earn a college degree. Ultimately, the researcher leverages the findings of the research to challenge the conventional viewpoints of student retention models by arguing that more focus be placed on solving system-wide student persistence (as compared to institutional retention) and that more attention be paid to the role that faculty and teaching practices play in solving the college persistence issue for marginalized urban students.

Key words: college student retention, persistence, urban student, first-year program
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Chapter I: Introduction

In November of 2008, the Boston Private Industry Council and the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University released a study detailing the college persistence rates of students who graduated from Boston Public High Schools (BPHS). The results of *Getting to the Finish Line: A Seven Year Longitudinal Study of the Boston Public Schools Class of 2000* (Sum, A., Sullivan, N., Smith, C., & Northeastern University, B., 2008) reflect a general lack of success of BPHS students in graduating from post-secondary institutions. Among other things, the study illustrated that approximately two-thirds of BPHS students who enrolled in college after graduating in 2000 failed to earn degrees within seven years, with rates being the lowest at two-year and four-year public institutions (Sum, et al., 2008). Department of Education national statistics also support similar findings, as two groups of students often found in urban areas—low-income and minority students—have significantly lower college completion rates as compared to other students\(^1\) (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2009).

Coinciding with the release of this study, Northeastern University unveiled its plan of an intensive one-year college program aimed at increasing the likelihood that BPHS students persist in college. The project, referred to as Foundation Year, proposed to offer “students rigorous academic and career preparation as well as wraparound support services that include advising, tutoring, mentoring, social networking, and work ready skills” with the hope of better preparing these students for college (Northeastern University, n.d.). The above problem of practice and the programmatic solution to the problem of Foundation Year serve as the focus of this doctoral thesis.

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\(^1\) While the focus of this study is on the particular issues confronted by urban students as they attempt to graduate from college, it should be noted that persistence rates are also a significant area of concern for students from rural areas with significant low-income and minority students. Past research has shown that college completion rates of students from both urban and rural areas are consistently less than those rates of suburban students (Herzog & Pittman, 1995).
While the results of the *Getting to the Finish Line* study highlight an issue facing BPHS students, that study does not provide a possible explanation of why retention rates are so low among this population or what institutions should be doing to address it. Similarly, while the mission and intent of programs like Foundation Year clearly seek to address the retention issue facing urban students, it is not explicitly clear how the structure of such programs will aid in increasing persistence rates. As such, the primary goal of this investigation is to provide more clarity on the challenges to college persistence for urban students\(^2\) and the proposed solution and intervention that Northeastern University has put in place to address the student persistence problem facing the City of Boston. In short, the research attempts to document the ways in which support structures at the start of the race may impact the number of students making it to the finish line.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals of the Research**

The problem that informs this study is significant for a number of reasons. First, on a general level, low persistence levels at college is a cause of concern for society. Baum and Ma (2007) highlight many of the benefits of obtaining a post-secondary degree, including increased earning power, better health, decreased chances of unemployment and poverty, and higher instances of volunteerism and political activism. As statistics continue to show that large percentages of students are not able to successfully complete college, educators and policy makers at all levels must be concerned about the impact that these statistics have on society. Further, given the links between a college education and enhanced socioeconomic standing

\(^2\) It is important to note that, for the purposes of this work, the phrase *urban students* is being used in a narrow sense to refer to students from metropolitan areas who are typically low-income and from minority groups. This clarification is important as the descriptor *urban* can be interpreted in various ways and, if one utilizes a broad application of this term to include all individuals who simply live within the defined limits of a city, the context of this paper will be lost.
(Baum & Ma, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001), the problem of college persistence has particular importance for metropolitan areas throughout the country where child poverty rates—a prime indicator of the economic condition of an area—continue to outpace those rates found in both rural and suburban areas (Savage, 2008). The socioeconomic impact is further magnified in cities like Boston that have a high concentration of knowledge-based industries requiring a college-educated workforce (McSweeny & Marshall, 2009). Finally, the impact on individual students who fail to complete their degrees is of great significance as student non-completers who pay tuition through out-of-pocket payments or by obtaining student loans bear a significant financial cost but, yet, are not able to take advantage of the aforementioned economic and personal benefits associated with earning a college degree.

As a result of the heightened importance of urban student retention at both the individual and societal levels, one of the primary goals of this research is to add to the existing literature on student retention. While the scholarly literature on student retention is expansive, the fact remains that the problem of low student retention in higher education has not been solved; continued investigation in this area is necessary, particularly as it relates to marginalized populations which have been less studied over the years. This research adds to the existing literature on student retention by providing an in-depth view at a first-year program specifically targeted for urban students.

From a practitioner-based standpoint, the identified problem is noteworthy for any higher education administrator focused on aspects of enrollment management. For individuals who are charged with developing practices and processes to recruit and retain students, a problem with persistence rates amongst urban students takes on increased significance as individuals must determine ways to encourage students to remain in school and complete their degrees.
who drop out of a college end up costing the institution future earnings as the college no longer collects on tuition, fees, and possible alumni donations from those students (Schuh, 2005). Furthermore, even within the public institution arena, issues of student retention are important as more and more states utilize performance-based criteria to determine the allocation of funding to colleges and universities; over the past decade, findings have continued to show that student retention and graduation rates continue to be the most frequently used indicators within state funding formulas (Burke, n.d.; Burke & Serban, 1998).

Given the significance of the retention problem for practitioners in higher education, another central goal of this research is to help inform interventions aimed at solving the problem. In focusing on a specific programmatic intervention and providing an in-depth analysis of the program, other higher education practitioners will have a potential program blueprint from which they can draw upon when attempting to develop their own retention-aiding strategies. Simply stated, this research seeks to inform the discussion around institutional efforts to better persistence rates for students from the metro Boston area.

Finally, while this research is not intended to be evaluative in nature, the research exercise has uncovered information that is likely useful for the Foundation Year program itself. Given the relative infancy of Foundation Year, any investigation of the program is likely going to influence its continued evolution. A secondary goal of the research, therefore, is to help administrators at Northeastern University better understand their program and, ultimately, help inform decisions that are made about the future of the program.
Research Questions

The central research question in this study is directly linked to the identified problem of practice and supports the intellectual and practical goals discussed above. The research question guiding this investigation is: *How are institutions of higher education attempting to solve the identified problem of practice with respect to low college graduation rates among marginalized urban students?*

This central question led the researcher to focus on the Foundation Year program as the unit of analysis within the investigation. Under this larger question, there are three more focused research questions which, ultimately, guide the exploration of a first-year program for marginalized urban students. These three questions are:

1. What are the key characteristics and components of the Foundation Year program and how do these components compare to those of other first-year supportive programs?
2. What elements of the Foundation Year program do student participants perceive as being the most useful in helping them succeed in college?
3. What elements of the Foundation Year program do faculty members and administrators identify as being the most useful in helping students succeed in college?

Organization of the Research Project

This doctoral thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter I of the manuscript provides the reader with an understanding of the key theoretical frameworks that structured the research. These theoretical frameworks—Vincent Tinto’s student integration theory and social and cultural capital theories—provide a lens from which the issue of college student retention can be viewed from. Taken together, the frameworks provide structure to the complex and diverse issue of
urban college student retention by placing the research within a sociological context and focus
the discussion on the importance of the relationship that exists between institutions of higher
education and students.

Chapter II provides a review of the scholarly literature on college student retention. The
literature review affords the reader the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the historical
context of college student retention and the importance of first-year programmatic interventions.
Given the vast amount of literature that exists on the topic and the specific focus of the identified
problem of practice on urban students, the review purposefully begins with a very general
overview of student retention and then narrows down to provide a detailed focus on past studies
involving low-income and minority students. Ultimately, the review of literature illustrates that
there is a general dearth of studies focused specifically on populations of students from a
singular urban area or on programmatic interventions that target individuals from a specific city,
thus highlighting the importance of this research investigation.

Chapter III details the methodological approach that was used to answer the
aforementioned research questions guiding the study. The methodology section provides a more
detailed explanation of the study’s research questions while also fully explaining the study’s
research approach, strategy of inquiry, and data collection procedures. The methodology section
naturally leads into Chapter IV, which begins to summarize the research findings of this
investigation. In this chapter, a comprehensive description of the Foundation Year program is
provided to the reader, as well as a brief comparison of the program to other first-year programs
at other institutions. Chapter V continues with a description of the key themes that emerged
through the interviews with faculty and staff. Chapter VI, details the interpretation of the study’s
findings, discusses the practitioner and scholarly significance of the research, and identifies areas
of future research related to the topic. Finally, the manuscript ends with Chapter VII, the Conclusion, in which the researcher leverages the findings of the research to challenge the conventional viewpoints of student retention best practices by arguing that more focus be placed on solving system-wide student persistence (as compared to institutional retention) and that more attention be paid to the role that faculty and teaching practices play in solving the college persistence issue for marginalized urban students.

Theoretical Frameworks

**Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure.** Institutions of higher education devote a great deal of time and resources to the student experience. Both two-year and four-year colleges and universities provide extensive advising services and student activities that aim to increase the level of interaction between students and institutions. However, to what extent does engagement between the student and institution impact student retention? In discussing issues of student retention among urban students, it is helpful to gain a better understanding of how significant the level of student-institution interaction may be on an individual student’s likelihood of remaining enrolled at an institution. As such, Tinto’s (1993) interactionalist theory of student departure provides an effective lens in exploring the degree to which institutional action can influence student retention.

With well over four hundred citations in the scholarly literature on student retention as of a decade ago (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997), Tinto’s theory of student departure is arguably one the most influential theories regarding college student retention, both within American higher education, as well as in systems of higher education in other countries (for example, see Thomas, 2002; York, 2000). Beginning in the early 1970s, and more prominently through the various editions of his seminal work, *Leaving College* (1993), Tinto postulates a theory of student departure that highlights the importance of the role that institutions play in the
departure process, particularly with regard to the manner in which institutions influence students’
social and intellectual development. Tinto’s model focuses on individual student experiences
within the formal and informal social and academic systems of a college or university and argues
that increased levels of integration within these systems lead to heightened institutional
commitment and persistence (Tinto, 1993; 1998).

Despite being heavily cited in the student retention literature, the bodies of work that
have informed Tinto’s theory are often omitted or only discussed in passing. However,
understanding the influences behind Tinto’s model of student retention provides an important
context to his theory and serves to highlight the emphasis his theory places on the level of
connection between student and institution with respect to student departure. Tinto’s theory is
foundationally informed by the constructs of two somewhat contradictory areas of study:
anthropological studies on the rites of passage in society, and sociological studies of suicide.
Regarding the former, Tinto compares the process of student persistence to the process of
“becoming incorporated into the life of human communities,” in that each process requires
individuals to pass through various stages on their way to full integration (Tinto, 1993, p. 94).
Building on the rites of passage scholarship of Arnold Van Gennep, Tinto identifies three stages
of passage encountered by students during their college careers: separation from past
communities; transition between high school and college; and, integration into the life of the
college. Ultimately, the rights of passage construct is used by Tinto to stress the longitudinal
process of college student retention and to highlight the fact that not all students become fully
integrated into the academic and social communities of an institution, thus leading to their
eventual departure.
With regard to the study of suicide and its applicability to student retention, Tinto relies on concepts from the work of Emile Durkheim to emphasize the voluntary nature of institutional departure and to highlight the significance that a community’s social environment plays in an individual’s decision to remain within that community. Referencing Durkheim, Tinto argues that, just as the absence of social and intellectual membership in society will lead to more individuals taking their own lives, the absence of similar memberships in the fabric of college life will lead to more individuals departing the institution. Ultimately, Tinto uses the sociological concepts of suicide to contextualize the importance of “the largely informal processes of interaction among individuals on campus which lead to incorporation” into the fabric of an institution (Tinto, 1993, p. 99).

Relevant to the engagement between students and the academic and social systems of an institution, Tinto’s theory highlights the importance of creating opportunities that seek to increase the level of interaction among students and other members of the community, including faculty, and staff. In order to create these opportunities, Tinto recommends that institutions set appropriate first impressions for students who are applying for admission; properly orient students and assist students in the transition from high school to college; make personal contact with students outside of the formal confines of the academic system; and utilize counseling and advising programs. Additionally, Tinto (1998) emphasizes the formative impact of the first year college experience, and advocates for stand-alone first-year programs that create “learning communities” among students and faculty. To this end, Tinto recommends that the first year of college be reorganized “as a stand-alone academic unit with its own administrative and organizational structure and with its own faculty and staff whose sole task is to educate new
students” and that seeks to promote “shared learning experiences among both its students and faculty” (Tinto, 1998).

Over the past two decades, Tinto’s theory has been challenged on the basis that it is too reliant on the traditional aged student and does not address factors of retention for adult learners (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Tierney, 1992), students at non-residential colleges (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004), or students of other minority groups, including various ethnic, physically challenged, gay, lesbian and at-risk students (Metz, 2002; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Despite these criticisms, Tinto’s interactionalist theory of student departure is still an important theoretical framework in the study of urban student persistence and first-year programs as it informs the institutional agenda for countering student attrition. Tinto’s theory deemphasizes the characteristics of individual students, and highlights the manner in which institutional action fully integrates students into community life. Tinto’s theory is also significant for this investigation because of its emphasis on both the academic and social systems of a college. This aspect of the social interactionalist theory is relevant to the study of first year programs, as it broadens the scope of analysis and urges consideration of how both academic and social factors are addressed in retention efforts. Finally, Tinto’s theory is important to this study due to its focus on institutional—as opposed to system—departure. Tinto is deliberate in acknowledging that his theory "is not a systems model of departure" but rather a model that speaks to the reasons of student departure from a given college or university (1993, p. 112). Undoubtedly, the stated problem of practice related to urban student retention is an issue that entails both institutional and system-wide implications. Thus, utilizing Tinto’s theory as one of the frameworks for this investigation provides the necessary focus on the institutional level of the student retention issue.
**Cultural Capital and Social Capital.** Cultural and social capital theories both augment Tinto’s focus on college student departure at the institutional level, as well as extend the scope of analysis of student retention to include student departure from the higher education system all together. Where Tinto’s theory of retention has been criticized for not properly addressing the impact that background and culture play within minority group retention (Guiffrida, 2005; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999), cultural and social capital theory focus the analysis on how educational systems fail subordinate (i.e. those individuals with less cultural or social capital) groups within society. Viewing the student retention problem through these two theoretical lenses is extremely important for this study given the high minority student composition in our country’s inner-city areas. In addition, the two theories are helpful for an analysis of retention for a specific group of students as the theories focus more on the individual cultural and social characteristics of students and seek to explain how these characteristics work in conjunction with the established norms and practices of the educational system to either benefit or disadvantage students.

**Cultural capital theory.** Cultural capital is a sociological concept that, broadly defined, refers to “the knowledge and experience that results in behaviors and practices aligned to the values of those who are in position to legitimize them” (Rueda, Monzo, & Arzubiaga, 2003). The concept of cultural capital is heavily influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1977; 1986), who, in echoing Marxist principals of social class structure, illustrates the ways in which an individual’s culture leads to the reproduction of class structure within society (MacLeod, 2008). According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three forms, which he describes as the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states. Cultural capital in the embodied state speaks

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3 As an example, in the aforementioned Finish Line study, over 61% of the college-bound Boston Public High School students were Black or Hispanic (Sum, et al., 2008).
to the understanding of cultural norms and knowledge that is acquired, over significant periods of time, through parental and familial inheritance (Robbins, 1991; Swartz, 1997). In its objectified form, cultural capital represents material goods or objects—including things such as paintings, textbooks, and films—which can only be fully understood, or “consumed,” by individuals who possess the necessary embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Robbins, 1991; Weininger & Lareau, 1997). Finally, the institutional state of cultural capital refers to capital which is institutionally sanctioned—typically by a recognized system of education—to hold a specified level of value within society (Bourdieu, 1986); educational systems that issue credentials to individuals who have certain competencies or skills legitimize the embodied cultural capital of these individuals and provide them with a new form of capital that is highly valued in the prevailing social class structure (Swartz, 1997; Weininger & Lareau, 1997).

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital has particular significance to the educational arena. In fact, the origins of cultural capital theory first presented themselves to Bourdieu in the educational setting as he sought to “explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success... to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Bourdieu uses the concepts of cultural capital to explain how educational institutions serve to reproduce social inequalities rather than act as agents of social change and mobility. In a school setting, students who have a high degree of cultural capital are those students who have the knowledge and experiences similar to those individuals teaching the classes, writing the textbooks, and deciding on policy. Schools require cultural resources that are unique to students from the dominant classes and, as such, end up favoring those students over less advantaged students (MacLeod, 2008). Because the acquired cultural knowledge, skills, and norms of the lower classes are not
favored as much, individuals who come to a college or university with a form of capital that is not highly valued by the institution may have a more difficult time being successful (Wells, 2008). In this regard, the ability to persist is linked to an individual’s ability to navigate a system of cultural norms which may or may not be in sync with the norms he or she grew up with.

As it relates specifically to the study of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the constructs of cultural capital theory are particularly fitting. Low-income individuals, by definition, are not members of the dominant class and, therefore, have less exposure to the type of information or skill sets that are valued within the school system. Cabrera, et al. (2004) explain that

students of lower socioeconomic status are disadvantaged in the competition for academic rewards because their . . . sociocultural environment may not provide the types of cultural capital required for success in school, such as academic attention, certain linguistic patterns, behavioral traits, orientation toward schooling, high expectations, or encouragement of college aspirations.

Thus, as it relates to the study of urban student retention, cultural capital theory provides possible insight into the reasons why this group of students is less successful at persisting through college than their more wealthy peers from suburban areas. Additionally, whereas Tinto’s (1993) theory provides a framework for analyzing why students depart from individual institutions, cultural capital theory helps conceptualize why students would not be successful at any institution within the higher educational arena. Cultural capital theory, as it pertains to retention, is less about the fit between an individual student and a specific institution but more about the global disconnect that exists between the social norms that are valued by the higher education system and the knowledge and experiences that are possessed by students entering into the system.

Social Capital. Like cultural capital theory, social capital theory provides another opportunity to explore the ways in which nonmonetary forms of capital can serve as important bases of social mobility, power, and authority. Whereas other forms of capital—such as
physical, economic, and human capital—are very tangible in nature, social capital is less concrete and measurable as it speaks to the connections and relations between individuals in a social setting (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000).

The scholarly literature on social capital is extensive and varied, with focus being placed on the implications of social capital at both the societal (Print & Coleman, 2003; Putnam, 1993; 2000) and individual (Bourdieu, 1983; 1986; Coleman, 1988; 1990) levels. With respect to the societal level, the notion of social capital theory speaks to the ways in which positive social connections serve to strengthen the effectiveness of societies; for example, Putnam (2000) argues that communities that are rich in social capital are reflective of communities with high levels of trust and civic engagement among its citizenry. For the purposes of this investigation, however, the application of the theoretical constructs of social capital will be focused exclusively at the individual level due to the study’s focus on individual student departure from colleges and universities.

At the individual level, social capital is acquired by individuals through the personal connections that they have formed via their association with certain social networks or groups (Coleman, 1990). In rather simplified terms, the concept of social capital theory speaks to the potential advantages that come about through who you know rather than what you know; association with certain groups or social networks affords individuals the access to resources that can be used to their benefit. Accordingly, individuals who possess large amounts of social capital are rich with respect to the number of social networks they belong to. As Bourdieu (1986) states, “[t]he volume of social capital possessed by a given agent . . . depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is
connected” (p. 249). Further, Lin (1999), in his application of the theoretical constructs of social capital theory, highlights the fact that individuals rich in social capital not only need to have access to the resources entrenched within a social structure, but that they also need to use or mobilize these resources for “purposive actions.” In other words, the acquisition of social capital requires both being exposed to social networks made up of individuals who are rich in other forms of capital and a deliberate utilization of these networks to better one’s position in society.

With respect to the educational context at the primary and secondary levels, social capital theory has been used to illustrate the link between educational attainment and the existence of strong relationships among parents, children, and school teachers and administrators (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1997). It is through effective social relationships with their children and school officials that parents are able to transmit their financial and human capital, which can then be used by their children to their benefit (Coleman, 1990; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1997). Moreover, the concept of social capital continues to impact educational attainment at the postsecondary level as well, as evidenced by the work of social interaction theorists like Astin (1993b), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), and Tinto (1993) who have shown that participation in college-sponsored activities and peer social networks increases the likelihood of college success. This correlation, as Putnam (2000) points out, has been held consistent across various types of institutions and student ambition levels, resulting in the simple notion that “at Harvard as well as in Harlem, social connectedness boosts educational attainment” (italics added, p. 306).

In the context of the current investigation of urban student persistence within institutions of higher education, social capital theory provides yet another perspective to consider when exploring the possible reasons why urban students, on a whole, are not successful in obtaining a college degree. Specifically, the theory focuses the exploration on the possible ways in which
urban students are disadvantaged in the higher education setting because of their lack of connections to key social networks which could prove helpful in their understanding and navigation of the social norms of a college or university setting. Portes (1998) describes how studies on urban and minority populations have illustrated that the lack of social capital in inner city families and communities results in high levels of poverty, unemployment, and dependency on social welfare programs due to the fact that social networks in these areas do not extend beyond the urban area and thus deprive individuals of valuable information and connections; similarly, urban students who grow up in communities and families that are short on social capital come into higher education institutions without the necessary connections needed to be successful at college.

Aside from providing an additional explanation of why certain students do not persist in college, both cultural and social capital theories are also significant for this study as they provide a framework to analyze institutional efforts in countering the effects of student attrition. While social and cultural capital theories have been used to illustrate the social reproduction tendencies of educational institutions, the two theories can also serve to highlight the ways that educational institutions can promote change and equity by providing cultural and social capital to disadvantaged students (Monkman, Ronald, & Theramene, 2005). In analyzing the success and key characteristics of supportive first year college programs for urban students, the constructs of cultural and social capital theories will help determine the extent to which such programs seek to address the social and cultural disconnects that exist between urban students and the higher education system.

It is important to note here that, while the notion of race factors into an analysis of cultural and social capital, this study did not specifically set out to address the impact of race
within the college-going experience for students. Research has illustrated that a racial divide exists between black and white students with respect to college completion rates (Carey 2008; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Additionally, research which seeks to gain a better understanding of the role that race plays in college completion efforts has been carried out (Allen, 1992; Hamilton, 2009; Lay and Wakstein, 1985). As such, while themes related to race may have emerged during participant interviews, this study did not set out to specifically answer questions about how the race of program participants impacted their experience in the first-year program. Moreover, because the relationship between the race of faculty and student retention has been studied (Hickson, 2002), the racial composition of the faculty of the Foundation Year program was also not a consideration in this investigation.

Overall, together with Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, cultural and social capital theories provide the necessary theoretical structure to investigate the identified problem of practice. College student retention is a problem that can be viewed from many different perspectives. The three identified theories above place the investigation of this problem into a sociological context as they seek to understand the causes and cures of student departure with respect to the social and cultural interactions between a student and the institution. These theories served as an important guide in the exploration of the literature on urban student retention, in the shaping of the study’s research questions and methodological design and, ultimately in the collection of data and subsequent analysis of the findings.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Prior research on college student retention and institutional programmatic interventions help contextualize the importance of this research investigation. This analysis of the scholarly literature is guided by four distinct questions, each of which enhances an understanding of the identified problem of practice and subsequent proposed research project. While fairly straightforward in nature, the questions are useful as they help organize the literature in a way that provides the reader first with a broad overview of the problem of practice and then with a more narrowed focus on proposed solutions and interventions to address the problem of practice.

The four guiding questions of this literature review are:

1. What are the dominant themes in the literature pertaining to college student retention?
2. What research is available in regards to retention as it relates specifically to urban college students?
3. What type of literature is available on first-year college programs aimed at increasing student persistence?
4. What type of literature is available on first-year college programs aimed at increasing student persistence specifically for urban students?

The first two questions speak directly to the problem of practice that informs this research project and provide a significant amount of literature, as both the issue of college student persistence and the educational struggles of urban students have been prominently researched over the years by practitioners, researchers, and policymakers alike. In fact, the literature is so immense and varied in these two areas (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997) that a full review of the literature is not possible given the scope of this project. However, while the scope of this paper does not allow for a complete investigation of the literature on student retention, a more narrowly focused examination in this area is important as it sets the context for the proposed
research project; a review of the prominent scholarly works within the broad areas of student retention and urban student retention will allow the reader to gain a better understanding of the dominant themes in these areas and observe how the identified problem of practice has been researched, to date.

While the first two questions guiding the review of the literature contextualize the identified problem of practice, the third and fourth questions speak more directly to the proposed research project and its focus on an intervention strategy aimed to solve the problem of practice. As it relates to the investigation of first-year retention programs (question #3), the scholarly literature, once again, is fairly comprehensive. The first-year of college, from a standpoint of student retention, is widely documented as one of the most important periods of time for a student (Allen, 1999; Astin, 1993a; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster 1999; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993, 1996). Studies aimed at detailing programmatic interventions that take place during this pivotal first year are significant for this study at they provide the reader with a general context of why a first-year program like Foundation Year is created and its perceived importance in addressing the identified problem of practice.

Unlike the abundance of literature existing for the first three questions guiding this review, the literature pertaining to first-year programs aimed at increasing student persistence for urban students is far less and, as such, narrows the focus of the review quite substantially. This question is important for the review as it directs the reader’s attention to the primary area of investigation for the research project and illustrates the investigation’s overall significance. Ultimately, utilizing a general-to-specific structure in the review of the literature results in a twofold purpose as the review places the research study into the larger context of the research surrounding the identified problem of practice and highlights the investigation’s contribution to
the scarcity of scholarly research in the area of first-year programs designed to increase urban student retention.

To fully answer the questions guiding the literature review, various types of research have been reviewed, including both quantitative and qualitative research studies in peer review articles, ethnographic accounts that take the form of books, government and non-profit association publications, academic research center studies, and previously published doctoral student dissertations. Together, these bodies of literature provide a vast amount of information about the student retention issue for urban college students and, to a lesser extent, higher education’s attempt to solve the issue through programmatic interventions.

**Key Definitions.** The notion of student departure from institutions of higher education is often discussed and described in the scholarly literature using various terminologies, including such words as retention, persistence, attrition, withdrawal, and stopout. At this stage, it is important to provide the reader with some level of clarity regarding the differences between these terms in order to minimize confusion. Berger and Lyon (2005), in their historical examination of college student retention, provide one of the more succinct analyses of these terms, which is replicated here, verbatim, to assist the reader in better understanding the scope of student departure:

- Attrition—refers to students who fail to reenroll at an institution in consecutive semesters.
- Dismissal—refers to a student who is not permitted by the institution to continue enrollment.
- Dropout—refers to a student whose initial educational goal was to complete at least a bachelor’s degree bit who did not complete it.
• Mortality—refers to the failure of students to remain in college until graduation.

• Persistence—refers to the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion.

• Retention—refers to the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through graduation.

• Stopout—refers to a student who temporarily withdraws from an institution or system.

• Withdrawal—refers to the departure of a student from a college or university campus. (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 7)

Additionally, the definition of the word *urban* is something that is used inconsistently in the literature on higher education. Based upon the context, the word can be used to describe all individuals who are from a metropolitan area, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status or individuals who are from particular ethnic and/or demographic backgrounds. Given the inconsistency of its usage, it is important for the purposes of this review of the literature to define how *urban* is being used in this context. As such, the word urban in this proposal refers to individuals who are from metropolitan areas who are typically from low-income or ethnic minority backgrounds.

**Section I: General Overview of College Student Retention Literature**

While Tinto’s (1993) theoretical model of student retention has been discussed in length in the prior section, a deeper investigation into additional college student retention literature is necessary in order to fully understand the context of the identified problem of practice. As such,
This section provides a more comprehensive review of social integration models of student retention and, to a far less extent, an overview of the dominant viewpoints of psychological models of student retention. Finally, the section concludes with a brief discussion of the usefulness of cultural and social capital theories in models of student retention.

**Social integration models of student retention.** The study of college student retention appears in the scholarly literature as early as the 1930s when McNeeley’s (1937) analysis of college student mortality at twenty-five universities identified various reasons for student departure, including academic and disciplinary dismissal, financial difficulties, sickness, and lack of interest. While investigations of student departure continued in the decades after the 1930s (Iffert, 1955; Marsh, 1966; Sexton, 1965; Summerskill, 1962), the formation of theoretical models of student retention did not begin to take form until the 1970s (Berger & Lyon, 2005). It was during this decade that student retention researchers began to document the importance of the level of interaction between an individual student and an institution, beginning first with the work of Spady (1971) and, subsequently, expanding to the early work of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1975).

Spady’s (1971) in-depth review of student retention studies from the 1960s and early 1970s set the stage for the social interaction theories that have dominated the college student retention research of the past forty years. Spady’s (1971) influence on Tinto’s theoretical framework is easily identifiable in the theoretical model proposed by Spady, as evidenced by the following passage:

> [o]ur basic starting point [of a model of student attrition] is the assumption that the dropout process is best explained by an interdisciplinary approach involving an interaction between the individual student and his particular college environment in which his attributes (i.e., dispositions, interests, attitudes, and skills) are exposed to influences, expectations, and demands from a variety of sources (including courses, faculty members, administrators, and peers). (p. 77)
Spady’s model focuses on both psychological and sociological constructs to contextualize the issue of student retention; his work introduced the notion of institutional fit into the student retention conversation and highlights the importance of a student’s level of social integration within the fabric of a college or university.

Similar to both Spady’s (1971) model and Tinto’s (1993) model of student integration, Astin’s (1975; 1993) student involvement model focuses on the level of participation that students have with respect to their coursework, faculty members, and peer groups on campus. Astin’s research highlights the interconnectedness between a student’s level of involvement, commitment, and persistence by postulating that a student who is highly involved in an institution is more committed to the institution, and, in turn, is more likely to be successful in persisting. In his highly influential work, *Preventing Students from Dropping Out*, Astin (1975) describes the results of a longitudinal and multi-institutional study from the late 1960s and early 1970s which provide a great deal of insight into student retention behavior. In addition to identifying the primary variables which assist in the predictability of student retention—such as family background, academic performance, and financial aid—this work also provided direct support to the theoretical notion “that a student’s tendency to drop out of college is inversely related to the degree of direct involvement in the academic and social life of the institution” (Astin, 1975, p. 176). Nearly twenty years later, Astin’s (1993) research continued to point to the importance of social integration and involvement with life on campus as he found that a student’s peer group has the most significant influence over a student’s social development during the undergraduate experience.

The research work of Pascarella and Terenzini (1979; 1983; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977) in the late 1970s and 1980s helped further solidify social integration theory as an
important explanation of student retention. The authors, through various studies, attempted to measure the variables involved in social integration theory to determine the cause/effect relationship as it pertains to student retention. In one such study, Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) utilized the statistical method of path analysis to test a number of the variables central to Tinto’s model to determine their relationship to student retention, ultimately leading the authors to conclude “that the constructs outlined in Tinto's model have reasonable predictive power in explaining variance in freshman year persistence/voluntary withdrawal decisions” (p. 224). Of the variables studied, the authors identified peer-to-peer and peer-to-faculty interactions as being the most important predictors of student retention. Over the years, similar research has been conducted that further validates the work of Pascarella and Terenzini (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson 1997; Coll & Stewart, 2008) and, in doing so, has kept the theoretical constructs of social integration theory at the forefront of the student retention literature (Baker, 2008; Miller, 2007; Nagada, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; Strayhorn, 2008).

Student retention research from outside of the United States further supports the dominant viewpoints in the literature from the U.S., as themes of student-institution integration, institutional fit, and student involvement are abundant in the literature. For example, Yorke’s (2000) study of student retention in the United Kingdom confirms that there are various factors contributing to student non-completion in higher education and that these factors involve both student and institutional characteristics. Yorke’s (2000) identification of the causes of non-completion—including such variables as choosing the wrong field of study, inadequate staff support, and experiencing emotional difficulties with others—speak directly to the level of fit between student and institution and reflect how the dissatisfaction with aspects of the student experience is a likely cause of withdrawal. Related ideas are also presented by Thomas (2002),
who, in her case study of a university in England, identified seven significant factors that played a role in student retention: academic preparedness, academic experience, institutional expectations and commitment, academic and social match, finance and employment, family support and commitments and university support services. Similar to the claims of Tinto and other social integrationist theorists, she explains that if students feel “that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early” (Thomas, 2002, p. 431).

Furthermore, in a retention study of students at two universities in Scotland, Christie, Munro and Fisher (2004) illustrate elements of social integration by concluding that causes of non-completion were linked to various interconnected factors related to both individual and institutional characteristics. Chief among the factors of non-completion cited by the authors are poor course selection, difficulties with becoming integrated into the student life of an institution, lack of fit between student and institution, and financial difficulties. In their comprehensive study of student retention factors at Canadian institutions of higher education, Madgett and Belanger (2008) also found that a student’s sense of belonging and level of integration into the academic and social systems of a university were key factors to retention. However, in a finding contradictory to the student integration literature and other findings that show students who go home more often during college are more likely to drop out (Astin, 1993; Massey, Fischer, Lundry, & Charles, 2003), Madgett & Belanger (2008) arrived at the conclusion that students who have not permanently moved out of their home are more likely to remain enrolled in college as they have a pre-defined support network of family and friends. This finding raises important considerations for institutional efforts to improve retention, particularly as it relates to urban
students who may attend local institutions and decide not to live on campus but who may not necessarily have a solid support network at home.

**Psychological models of student retention.** While social integration theories have dominated the student retention landscape over the past few decades, similar models of student retention based in psychological—rather than sociological—constructs have also emerged in the literature. Shortly after the emergence of Spady and Tinto’s work in the 1970s, Bean (1980) criticized their models due to the fact that the models did not pay necessary attention to the causality of individual variables that may impact student attrition. Instead of focusing on the sociological concepts of suicide and rites of passages to drive his theory, Bean used an organization theory model of employee turnover in work settings to illustrate a causal model of student attrition. His model introduces the concept of level of satisfaction and illustrates how student satisfaction is linked to institutional commitment; like employees who elect to leave work environments because they are not satisfied, Bean (1980) postulated that college students who are not satisfied with certain organizational characteristics will be less committed to the institution and, in turn, will be more likely to leave the institution. This notion of institutional commitment, which has been defined as “a student’s overall impression of, sense of belonging to, satisfaction with, and choice to attend the institution again” (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004, p. 209), incorporates a number of different variables that impact student retention and has proven to be a strong predictor of student persistence (Bean, & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993).

Over the years, Bean (1982), Bean & Eaton (2000) and others (Luke II, 2009; Rodgers & Summers, 2008) have continued to champion the effectiveness of psychological models of student retention which point to the ways in which psychological processes—such as an
individual’s assessment of self-efficacy or one’s coping behavioral choices—impact the decision to remain enrolled at an institution of higher education. Moreover, the work of Milem and Berger (1997), Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007), and Jacobs and Archie (2008) highlight the importance of the psychological concepts of *sense of belonging* and *sense of community* to retention studies. In their study of first year students, Milem and Berger (1997) found that students who were more involved with an institution had higher levels of *perceived* integration with the university, ultimately leading to increased intentions of enrolling beyond the first year. Similarly, as a result of their study of student retention, Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) concluded that “[s]tudents who reported more peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty, peer support, and parental support also initially reported having a greater sense of belonging,” which, subsequently, lead to higher levels of persistence (p. 829). These findings have been further validated by the work of Jacobs and Archie (2008) who, in their study of over 4,000 first-year students at a university, illustrate a positive relationship between sense of community and student persistence.

**Cultural and social capital in models of student retention.** More recently in the student retention literature, the concepts of cultural and social capital have been used to help explain the possible reasons for student attrition from institutions of higher education (Baber, 2007; Berger, 2000; Jensen, 2011; Leese, 2010; Wells, 2008; Wells, 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Such studies have reflected the previously-discussed notion that “students with access to higher levels of cultural capital have advantages throughout the educational pipeline in attaining educational goals” (Berger, 2000, p. 114). In other words, those students who have been previously exposed to the cultural and social standards and principles that are valued in the American higher
education arena are more likely to persist at college as they are equipped with the necessary
capital to navigate the college system and leverage social networks to their advantage.

Wells’ (2008) analysis of student retention within the community college setting supports
the positive correlation between social and cultural capital and student persistence in
postsecondary education. Further, in his analysis of the first year experience of African
American students at a predominately white institution, Baber (2007) highlights the stress that
can be caused by the disconnect between the dominant culture perspectives of an institution and
the cultural perspectives of minority students. Baber writes that:

> When [the African American] students begin to develop a strong ethnic identity, they often face a conflict between dominant perspectives—grounded in White, middle-class standards of style, music, and speech—and non-dominant ideology. While this conflict begins long before arrival to postsecondary institutions, it is intensified by students extended departure from their home community (Baber, 2007, p. 161)

While Baber’s investigation did not focus on the rate of persistence among the small number
(15) of study participants, his research is useful in showing how the constructs of cultural capital
theory can be utilized to frame the college student experience for minority students.

**Other factors associated with student retention.** Aside from literature on student
integration theoretical models and models framed within cultural and social capital theories, the
college student retention literature is dense in studies aimed at identifying specific student
characteristics that serve as predictors of student persistence. For example, financial factors
(Bettinger, 2004; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1992; Cabrera, Stampen & Hansen, 1990; Gross,
and ethnicity (Avakian, MacKinney, & Allen, 1982; Muraugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999), level
of parental education (Ishitani, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Thayer, 2000), measures of
high school achievement (Daugherty & Lane, 1999; DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004;
Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000), and enrollment status (Chen & Carroll, 2007; Tietjen-Smith, Masters, Smith, & Waller, 2009) have all been identified as variables that impact a student’s likelihood of completing college. While institutions of higher education are not able to address student retention issues by changing these characteristics of students who enter their doors (e.g. they cannot go back and make student performance in high school better), it is useful for administrators at colleges and universities to be knowledgeable of the characteristics that are predictive of retention as it provides a way to focus intervention strategies on those individuals most likely at risk of departing an institution or the system of higher education altogether. Because financial factors, level of parental education, and measures of high school achievement are, in many ways, at the core of the discussion pertaining to urban students, a further exploration of these correlative variables continues in the next section of the literature review.

Overall, research in the area of college student retention is both deep and varied. The abundance of literature in this area makes it very difficult—if not near impossible—to capture all the nuances of college student retention in one research project, a realization that Spady (1977) recognized even thirty years ago when the research was far more limited in scope than it is today. However, gaining a solid understanding of the central arguments and findings within the student retention literature is important. The remaining sections of the literature review provide a more detailed focus on the student retention literature specifically as it pertains to urban students and intervention strategies utilized to minimize student departure from college.

Section II: Retention of Urban Students

The state of affairs of urban education in the United States has been well documented over the past few decades. Kozol’s (1991) landmark exploration of the deplorable conditions of
urban K-12 school districts provided prominent insight into the educational struggles of urban students in America. Other ethnographic accounts (Carger, 1996; MacLeod, 2008; O’Connor, 1996) of the nation’s urban elementary and secondary school systems portray a very similar picture. Descriptions, however, of such dreadful conditions at the post-secondary level are rarely found within the scholarly literature. Instead, information about the state of affairs for urban students in college is largely focused on retention studies and enrollment data showcasing the disparities between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students from wealthier backgrounds (Aud, Fox & KenwalRamani, 2010; Hebel, 2007; Lopez, 2009; Sum, et al., 2008). The common theme in this literature pertains to the identified achievement, or attainment, gap that exists between low-income students and wealthy students and minority students and white students (Carey, 2004; Myers, 2003; Seidman, 2005).

In many ways, the literature pertaining specifically to urban student retention is extremely thin; the aforementioned Getting to the Finish Line (Sum, et al., 2008) report and its investigation into student retention from graduates of the Boston Public School system, an in-depth analysis on the college enrollment and graduation rates from students in the Chicago Public School system4 (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2006), and a report on the college access and success of graduates from the Denver Public Schools (Buckley & Muraskin, 2009) represent three of the few retention studies focused entirely on an urban student population.

4 The study of the Chicago Public Schools, From High School to the Future: A first look at Chicago Public School graduates’ college enrollment, college preparation, and graduation from four-year colleges, is very similar to the aforementioned study conducted on BPS graduates. It is a comprehensive study that provides data on how well students from Chicago do in high school and, subsequently, in college. Similar to the BPS study, this investigation reports some troublesome findings with respect to college persistence for this urban population. For example, when aggregated with data on high school completion rates and college acceptance rates, the statistics from this study reveal that only “about 6 percent of students who begin high school in CPS earn a four-year college degree by the time they are in their mid-twenties” (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2006).
However, while retention literature specific to urban students may be lacking, there is a great deal of student retention literature that is very helpful in informing the discussion of the retention of students from metropolitan areas. Specifically, this literature can be grouped into two general categories: research focused on minority, low income, and first-generation students and research conducted at urban institutions of higher education.

Literature on minority student persistence is rich in research that seeks to identify predictors of student retention. For example, Astin (1993) and others (e.g. Choy, 2002), have shown that college students with lower levels of socioeconomic status are less likely to persist in college. Similarly, literature on the impact of being a first-generation college student (Ishitani, 2003; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Thayer, 2000) confirm the positive relationship between increased parental education level and increased retention rates, a relationship which was recognized early in the work of Spady (1971) and, more recently, highlighted in the seminal longitudinal retention work of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). Finally, Astin (1993) found that commuter students that live at least ten minutes away from campus are at a high risk of dropping out, a finding particularly noteworthy for urban students who may elect to attend local city colleges.

Scholarly literature involving theoretical models of retention for minority college students began to take form in the late 1980s and early 1990s, due in large part to the fact that earlier models were based exclusively on research conducted on white male students (Rendon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000). Since then, research in the area of minority student retention has grown, with investigations focusing on the experience of African American students at both predominantly white institutions (Brown, 1999; Jones & Williams, 2006; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Sedlacek, 1987) and historically black colleges and universities (Allen, 1992; Allen, Epps,
studies focusing on factors influencing Latino/a student persistence (Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004; Nora, 1987; Torres, 2006) and comprehensive studies on students specifically from low-income and first-generation backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

While addressing shortfalls of previous models of college student retention, much of the research pertaining to the retention of minority students further supports the theoretical constructs of the student integrationist models as findings have revealed that increased levels of interconnectedness among students, faculty, and staff have also proven effective in the retention of African American students at predominantly white institutions (Brown, 1999; Jones & Williams, 2006) and that academic and social integration is positively correlated to increased retention for Hispanic students (Nora, 1987). Moreover, highlighting the importance of institutional fit in retention efforts for minority students, Watson, Terrell, Wright, and Associates (2002) found that:

Many students expressed their enthusiasm concerning their institution’s initial display of diversity and multiculturalism in the recruitment process, but then their subsequent disappointment with the reality of the monocultural campuses they found after enrolling at the institution. (p. 53, as cited in Seidman, 2005, p. 19)

Further, Swail (2003), in his comprehensive assessment of minority college student retention, asserts that minority student persistence and achievement is impacted by a combination of cognitive, social, and institutional factors. Swail’s (2003) Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement combines the constructs from many of the social and psychological retention models discussed previously to explain the reasons why minority students, as a whole, do not successfully persist through college. For Swail, when an equilibrium among the cognitive, social, and institutional factors is either not obtained or is lost, “students risk reducing
their academic and social integration with the institution and therefore risk stopping or dropping out” (Swail, 2003, p. 80).

As referenced earlier, literature on minority student retention also supports the concepts of cultural and social capital theories. For example, statements that first-generation minority students are placed at a disadvantage with regards to navigating the bureaucracy of the financial aid process (Seidman, 2005), that “[s]tudent activities and organizations tend to favor traditional students who come from families where the precedent of attending college is well established” (Rendon, 1993, p.2), and that “power relations already existent in the larger society frequently get transformed in educational organizations as failure for those who are on the margins” (Tierney, 2000, p. 218) all relate to the core constructs of cultural capital and social capital theories.

Retention studies conducted at urban institutions of higher education also help inform the identified problem of practice related to the retention of students from an urban setting. Urban institutions are more likely to attract a localized student body, as many urban students often commute to school because they prefer to stay—or are required to live—at home (Torres, 2006). As such, the scholarly literature on student retention at urban institutions provides a useful lens into the retention issues facing many urban students. For example, in their longitudinal study of undergraduate student retention at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (UMass Boston), Langer, Wilton, and Presley (1987) provide a comprehensive quantitative analysis of student retention at an urban institution. Despite being over twenty years old, this study is significant to the currently proposed research project because of its focus on an institution that largely caters to the same urban population (e.g. students from the metropolitan Boston area) which informs the identified problem of practice for this project. Major findings of this study include: a 20%
graduation rate—within five years—for students who began UMass Boston as freshmen; no significant changes in the retention rate between 1981 and 1987; a finding that the strongest influence on retention is a student’s grade point average; and, a conclusion that racial and ethnic minorities have higher attrition and lower graduation rates than their white peers (Langer, Wilton, & Presley, 1987). The study of urban community colleges also provides an important insight into the retention issues of urban students as research in this arena has illustrated that increased levels of student integration with faculty and community college counseling staff are linked to student persistence (Barnett, 2006; Carroll, 1988).

Overall, the student retention literature on low-income, first-generation, and minority students, coupled with research centered specifically on colleges and universities in urban areas, provides a context to the issues facing urban students when they attend institutions of higher education. While college student retention is an issue facing nearly every institution of higher education and impacts every type of student, it is clear from the literature that students from underrepresented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds are at the forefront of the student retention discussion (Brown, 1999; Jones & Williams, 2006; Rendon, 1993; Rendon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 2000). A recent focus on this area of student retention is making up for past oversights in which the study of student retention was largely viewed from the perspective of white males. Having a better understanding of these recent developments is important as the focus of this review turns to the examination of institutional efforts to increase student retention.

**Section III: First-year Supportive Programs**

Student retention literature which advocates for the importance of increased interaction between an institution and a student is, unsurprisingly, linked to the development of college and university programs and efforts aimed to enhance the level of interaction with students.
Although one could easily draw the conclusion that retention rates are beyond the control of institutions of higher education based on the number of identified student characteristics that are positively correlated with dropping out, institutional action has proven to be an effective means of influencing student retention (Brotherton, 2001; Carranza, 2007; Clewell & Ficklen, 1986; Pan, Guo, Alikonis & Bai, 2008; Trotter and Roberts, 2006). Levitz, Noel and Richter (1999) state that “[i]nstitutions can control their dropout rates to a great extent based on the energy and effort that is put into getting students started right on the path and through the first year of college” (p. 36), a sentiment echoed throughout the literature by researchers who preach the effectiveness of institutional efforts even while acknowledging that the characteristics students bring with them to campus are strong predictors of retention (Barefoot, 2004a; Gardner, Barefoot, Swing, 2001; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004).

While institutional retention programs and efforts have proven to be effective throughout the course of students’ undergraduate enrollment, studies consistently find that the largest percentages of students who drop out of college do so during the first year of college (Berkner, et al., 1996; Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999; Porter, 1989). As such, the first year of college is often identified as the most crucial time period to influence student attitudes and behaviors that will positively impact their likelihood to remain enrolled in college (Allen, 1999; Astin, 1993; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993, 1996). It follows, then, that increased attention has been placed on the establishment of retention strategies during the first year of college (Montero, 2009; Swanson, 2003; Tinto 1998; Trotter & Roberts, 2006; Wright Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). The idea of placing students in first-year programs, or “freshman seminars,” has been in existence since the late 1800s, when Boston University implemented a program to provide students with the skills necessary to survive college
It was not until the early 1980s though when institutions of higher education—faced with declining enrollments—put a great deal of emphasis on programs seeking to aid retention during the first year of college (Raymondo, 2003). Over the past three decades, the student retention literature includes numerous studies on the importance of first-year intervention strategies.

Tinto (1998), as previously discussed, places a great deal of emphasis on the first year of college and the importance of forming meaningful social connections during this time. Tinto recommends that institutions do more than merely create supportive first-year programs by encouraging colleges and universities to rethink the entire organization of the freshman year; his advocacy for a stand-alone academic unit that is entirely focused on educating first-year students reflects how significant the social connections made during the first year are to retention. The work of Barefoot (2000; 2004a; 2004b) reflects a similar advocacy for the importance of first-year programming. Serving as a co-director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, Barefoot has written extensively on the first year of college and, like Tinto, has advocated for a reengineer of the structure of the first year to accommodate the diverse population of students now attending institutions of higher education. The first year of college, according to Barefoot (2000) should have a core set of objectives, including: increasing student-to-student interaction; increasing faculty-to-student interaction; increasing involvement and time on campus; linking the curriculum and the cocurriculum; increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement; and, assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college (p. 14).

Aside from the literature which speaks generally about the importance of first year programmatic strategies, the scholarly literature on this topic also includes research on individual
first-year programs aimed at increasing student retention. For example, Wright Sidle and McReynolds (2009), in their investigation of a freshman year experience course at a public four-year university, conclude that their “study supports the findings from colleges and universities across the country that freshman-year experience courses can be an effective strategy for increasing the success and development of students during their first year of college” (p. 443). Schnell, Louis, and Doetkott (2003) arrived at similar findings in their longitudinal study of a first-year seminar as their research showed that students who participated in the program graduated at higher rates than those who did not attend. Additional literature in this area provide comprehensive summaries of individual institutional retention programs (Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, & Roberts, 1998; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), which prove helpful in understanding the key components of effective first-year programs.

The concept of first-year programs aimed at increasing retention rates among students is well-documented in the scholarly literature. The vast majority of the literature favors the idea of first-year programs or reflects findings that first-year seminars and programs have a positive correlation to increased retention rates. The literature, however, is thin on conflicting findings that suggest a negative or neutral relationship between first-year intervention strategies and retention (see Raymondo, 2003 for one of the few examples). Thus, it is important to note, that this research project focused on a first-year supportive program is framed within this larger body of knowledge. It is important to make note of the fact the core concept of the program—that is, providing additional support to students in the first year of college—is widely recognized as a key element in efforts to increase retention among college students.
Section IV: First-year Supportive Programs for Urban Students

Similar to the literature on the retention of urban students, literature about first-year supportive programs for urban students is limited with respect to research specifically focused on students from urban areas. However, as stated before, examinations focused on urban institutions (Cunningham, Cardenas, Martinez, and Mason, 2006; Flores & Kubo Della-Piana, 2000) and research centered on low-income, first generation and minority students (Braunstein, Lesser, & Pescatrice, 2008; Dale, 1995) provide a valuable context for understanding the relationship between retention programs and urban college students. The scholarly literature in these areas help the reader conceptualize the identified problem of practice and frame the proposed intervention within studies that have focused on students from similar backgrounds.

Braunstein, Lesser, and Pescatrice (2008), in their study of a special freshman year program for low-income and first-generation students, illustrate a quantitative approach to the study of programs targeted at retention. In their study of over 2,400 freshmen and sophomore students at a private liberal arts college in the Northeast, the authors analyzed student demographic and enrollment data to compare the retention rates of disadvantaged students in a special first-year program to the rates of students not enrolled in the special program. The authors found that the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate over the three year-period studied was nearly identical for the all-freshmen and program participant groups, leading them to conclude that the first-year program for disadvantaged students was providing benefits for students in increasing the likelihood that disadvantaged students persist at the college (Braunstein, Lesser, & Pescatrice, 2008). In a similar study at a large urban public institution of higher education, Potts and Schultz (2008) analyzed the retention rates between students placed in both academic cohorts and in a freshmen seminar to a control group of students who did not
participate in either the cohorts or freshman seminar. While statistical tests of retention rate differences between the two groups showed no statistically significant differences, the authors found that the freshman seminar and academic cohorts did make a difference for those students who were identified as being “at-risk” (Potts and Schultz, 2008).

Qualitative assessments of first-year programs for minority students provide further information about the perceived success of these programs. Additionally, such assessments often identify key components of the programs. For example, in their study of a community college retention program for Latino students at Lansing Community College in Michigan, Cunningham, Cardenas, Martinez, and Mason (2006) indicate that, despite the relative infancy of the program, the supportive program has helped Latino student participants persist at a better rate than program non-participants. The authors identify five components of the program that are integral to its success, including: technology, community connections, workforce development, academic success, and mentoring and support. In their study of an undergraduate student retention model for students at the urban-based institution, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), Flores and Kubo Della-Piana (2000) discuss the importance of promoting social and academic integration during the first year of college, particularly for students from high-risk groups. In reviewing the preliminary results of an institutional retention model that seeks to increase the level of integration between students and faculty and provide additional academic and social support structures for students, the authors conclude that the program has been effective in increasing retention rates and advocate for the institutionalization of the model. Despite being focused on an institution from Texas, this study is particularly relevant to the proposed research project based on the composition of the students at UTEP, a primary Hispanic serving institution; the authors describe the typical student at UTEP as a “[y]oung male, first in his family to attend
college, still lives with his parents, commutes to school and holds an off-campus part-time job, anticipates earning a college degree in four years” (Flores & Kubo Della-Piana, 2000, p. F1F-8), a depiction very similar to the description of the student body within the Boston Public School system.

A study of a freshmen year program at Purdue University for first generation, low-income, or physically disabled students (Dale, 1995) revealed student participants were retained at a far greater rate than students who did not participate in the program. Dale’s (1995) examination of the HORIZONS at Purdue program showed that, after ten semesters of enrollment, program participants were retained at 85% while the control group retained at 47% and also showed that program participants identified the existence of a support network, learning effective study skills, and tutoring as the most important components of the program.

Muraskin (1998), in her monograph, A Structured First Year for At-Risk Students, provides a useful analysis on recommended elements of a first-year retention program geared towards at-risk students. In relying on both theoretical elements from the student retention literature and observed insights from, what she terms, “real life” first-year structured programs, Muraskin’s examination is helpful as it provides a starting point from which one can begin an investigation into a specific first-year program.

One possible reason for the lack of literature of supportive programs targeted specifically for urban students is simply that there are a small number of such targeted programs to study. The concept of retention-enhancing programs targeted at specific populations is something that, in many ways, runs counter to the recommendations of social integration theorists like Tinto (1985, 1993) and Astin (1985). For example, Tinto (1993) argues that the success of targeted programs for minority students “hinge upon the degree to which administrators and students
[from these programs] alike perceive themselves as central to the daily life of the institution” (p. 74). In other words, while a supportive program for urban students may provide enhanced levels of integration between the students of the program and the administrators and educators in that program, if the program further isolates the students from being integrated into the institution at large, it will not be as successful.

As previously stated, this review of the scholarly literature, due to the scope of the proposed research project, does not cover all areas of college student retention. While literature on early intervention/college preparation programs in the K-12 setting (Edmunds, Bernstein, Glennie, Willse, Arshavsky, Unlu, et al., 2010; Tierney, 2000) and pre-freshman summer bridge programs (Maggio, White, Jr., Molstad, & Kher, 2005; York and Tross, 1994) raise important considerations in the discussion of urban student college success, for the purposes of the proposed study, a focus strictly on first-year programs is most significant.

Overall, research in the area of first-year supportive programs aimed at increasing the persistence rates of minority students and students of low socioeconomic backgrounds has shown that such programs are useful in retaining these at-risk students. Further, examinations of first-year programs situated in urban institutions of higher education yield similar findings. Together, the literature in these areas help frame the discussion surrounding the identified struggles of urban youth to earn a college degree and, subsequently, the possible intervention strategies that can be put in place to assist these students.

**Literature Review Conclusion**

A review of the scholarly research on college student retention reveals a significant amount of literature. The problem of college student retention is, deservedly so, an important topic within the arena of higher education that continues to receive more and more attention. Retention of all populations of students is of concern to higher education administrators and
society at large. Moreover, the investigation into the retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds—e.g. ethnic minorities, low-income and first-generation students—is also prominent in the research literature. As studies continue to show that students from low-income, first generation, and minority backgrounds persist at lower rates than other students, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers alike provide more attention to this critical problem of practice. Further, the notion that the first-year of college is extremely important to retention efforts and that institutional efforts during this first year can impact the persistence of students is widely documented in the literature.

What is less frequent in the literature, however, are comprehensive assessments of supportive programs aimed at improving retention for students from one particular urban area or studies of supportive programs that aim to solve the problem of system—rather than institutional—departure. As cities like Boston, Chicago and Denver collect and analyze data that illustrate that graduates from their public school systems are not successful in graduating from college, it is important that research be conducted specifically on students from these urban areas. Intervention strategies that are specific to only one institution of higher education and are geared generally towards any students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not be applicable to a population of students from the same urban area that ends up attending various types of institutions. This research study is unique in its focus on an intervention program that is geared entirely towards students from one urban area and is not institution-specific. It is important to note here that the investigation did not aim at contributing to the existing literature which identifies predictors of student retention. Research in this area, as illustrated in the above review of the literature, has been undertaken for years and administrators and policy makers have at their disposal an abundance of resources from which to draw. The primary contribution of this
investigation is its narrow focus on a singular intervention program which seeks to address the student retention problem facing urban youth. In short, the research study fills in a gap that currently exists in the literature as very little research has been conducted on programs that target students from specific urban areas.

The unique focus of the study is also significant as it recognizes the importance of conducting college student retention research with a highly diverse population of students. Well over ten years ago, in light of the demographic changes occurring within the American higher education landscape, Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) highlighted the importance of studying diverse samples of college students. This finding was further reiterated by Reason (2003) in his examination of current student retention research. Examining a program that is targeted at a population of students from an entire metropolitan area resulted in a study which includes students diverse in gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, and family educational background characteristics.

Finally, despite the amount of literature available on student retention and the decades in which it has been studied, student persistence rates among low-income minority students continue to be a problem that plagues the American system of higher education. As such, additional research in this area is needed; it is only through the creation of new intervention strategies and programs—and the subsequent scholarly examination of them—that we will truly be able to address the student retention problem. This investigation centered on a newly created retention program will aid in the efforts to help solve the college student retention problem of practice.
Chapter III: Research Design

Research Questions

The research design of this study is guided by one overarching question and three focused research questions. The central research question of this study is: *How are institutions of higher education attempting to solve the identified problem of practice with respect to low college persistence rates among marginalized urban students?* It is this question that led to the identification of Foundation Year as a program to study. The three more focused central research questions pertaining directly to Foundation Year are:

1. What are the key characteristics and components of the Foundation Year program and how do these components compare to those of other first-year supportive programs?
2. What elements of the Foundation Year program do student participants perceive as being the most useful in helping them succeed in college?
3. What elements of the Foundation Year program do faculty members and administrators identify as being the most useful in helping students succeed in college?

The fundamental purpose of these questions was twofold: first, to provide a greater level of understanding of the Foundation Year program and, second, to illustrate the relationship between the Foundation Year program and the problem of low college persistence rates among City of Boston residents. Additionally, these questions are significant as they serve an important function in connecting the theoretical aspects of student retention to the practical aspects. The questions provide the opportunity to identify criteria that is discussed in Tinto’s (1993) framework and, subsequently, allow for comparison between established theory and practice. The ability to do this comparison between a theoretical construct and a practice-based approach
yields information informing best practice as well as a refinement of the theoretical construct for marginalized urban students.

Ultimately, Foundation Year has been devised as an intervention strategy to address the aforementioned problem of practice. It is important to note that the chosen research questions purposefully omit any reference to measuring the effectiveness of this program. Given the relative infancy of the program, it is not possible at this time to study how successful the program is as an intervention strategy. Rather, the research questions guiding this project were geared exclusively towards gaining a better understanding of the intervention strategy driving the Foundation Year program.

The central research questions are each contextualized by the research study’s theoretical frameworks and review of scholarly literature. For example, the first research question is informed by past research studies which document the key elements of supportive first-year programs. As the researcher attempts to answer this question, insight from prior studies will provide an initial framework for what program characteristics to look for and which components may be different from past programmatic interventions. Additionally, the second and third questions are informed by the study’s theoretical frameworks and by prior student retention studies which identify key factors in the persistence of college students.

The research questions that guide this study are also significant in that they expose the researcher to multiple sources of evidence. For instance, in attempting to answer the first question, the researcher relied on numerous data sources to identify the key characteristics of the program. Moreover, the second and third questions provided the researcher with valuable viewpoints from different constituents of the program. Gaining the perspective of both students and faculty was important in this study as it provided a deeper level of understanding of the
Foundation Year program and provided a possible point of comparison in determining whether students, educators, and administrators in the program value the same elements of the intervention strategy.

Overall, while the central research questions are ultimately focused on one specific student retention program, the answers to the questions add to the general research of college student retention by providing a detailed description of the retention-aiding efforts of one institution.

**Methodology**

The conceptual framework and research questions of this study lent themselves to the utilization of a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research has been described as a “means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Further, the study can be classified into the interpretative tradition of qualitative research which seeks to understand an issue or situation from the perspectives of participants (Locke, Silverman & Wyrick Spirduso, 2010). A qualitative research approach is best suited for the study as the aim of the investigation is to understand how individuals involved with a first-year retention program perceive the program. A qualitative approach is appropriate as the study is focused less on actual outcomes of the program and more on the process of arriving at the program’s intended outcomes. As Foundation Year represents a unique model of first-year programs—both in its design and its intended audience—it is important for this study to capture detailed information about the experiences of those individuals involved in the program. In order for higher education administrators and policy makers to accurately address the college student retention problem as it pertains to students from urban areas, a deeper understanding of proposed intervention strategies
is needed. A qualitative research approach assisted in providing this level of understanding of the Foundation Year program.

**Strategy of Inquiry.** A strategy of inquiry serves as the approach used in obtaining the information needed to appropriately answer a study’s research questions; conceptually, it is the method that is utilized by a researcher to move from theoretical constructs to the observed world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2007). For this research investigation, a case study approach was employed to collect information about the Foundation Year program. Creswell (2009) defines case studies as “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (p. 13). Furthermore, Weiss (1998) explains that a case study:

> is a way of organizing data so as to keep the focus on the totality. It tries to consider the interrelationships among people, institutions, events and beliefs. Rather than breaking them down into separate items for analysis, the case study seeks to keep all elements of the situation in sight at once. The watchword is holistic. (p. 261)

The overarching research question of this study lends itself to a case study as it attempts to identify how a particular problem of practice is being addressed. As Yin (2009) explains, case studies are most appropriate when a researcher is attempting to answer a how or why research question. Further, a case study approach is appropriate for this investigation as it aimed to explore multiple aspects of the Foundation Year program and present a detailed summary of what the program is. The focus of the study is not on an individual aspect of the program, per se, but rather on the program as a whole. In order to arrive at a full understanding of how the Foundation Year program aims to increase student retention rates among its participants, a comprehensive investigation into the composition and key components of the program was necessary. Ultimately, the utilization of the case study approach was largely influenced by the
work of Yin (2009) and Stake (1995) who both provide substantial analyses of case study research.

**Project site, project participants & data collection.** The site of the research study was Northeastern University (hereafter referred to as NU), a large private urban research university located in Boston, Massachusetts. The institution was chosen exclusively due to the fact that it is the home of the first-year college program, Foundation Year, which serves as the focus of this case study. Foundation Year is housed within NU’s College of Professional Studies and, as such, this particular College served as the primary location for data collection. As the researcher’s current place of employment, NU provided a great deal of accessibility for this research project and was appropriate given the fact that the project was carried out within the realm of practitioner-based research in which investigators study an identified problem of practice from an internal vantage point.\(^5\)

Program participants of this study included faculty and students who are involved in the Foundation Year program. Regarding faculty involvement, the total number of participants was five. Given the fact that one of the central research questions guiding this project seeks to understand the perspective of faculty involved in the program, it was important that purposive sampling (Weiss, 1998) was used to select these individuals to ensure that their experiences and perceptions are included in the study of the program. As the faculty of the Foundation Year

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\(^5\) While “practitioner-based research” is somewhat of a loosely-defined term, Levy (2003) provides a useful description, indicating that “[p]ractitioner-researchers investigate and evaluate educational situations inductively, looking critically at their own educational assumptions, values, aims and actions in relation to the perspectives of participants in their programmes” (p. 91). It is important to note this here as research carried out in this tradition differs from other forms of research that place importance on having primary investigators external to the environment conducting the research.
program are known to the researcher as a result of his current position as an employee at the research site, direct outreach was made to these individuals to seek participation in the study.

The inclusion of both former and current students of the Foundation Year program was also integral to the study as the researcher aimed to better understand the experiences of students in the identified first-year program. However, whereas particular faculty and staff were targeted for participation in the study through a purposeful sampling process, students were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study. Working directly through program staff members, the researcher requested that a letter be sent to all former and current students in the Foundation Year program seeking participation in the study. Individuals who responded back with an interest in taking part in the study were contacted by the researcher directly. In all, a total of six students participated in the study. This sample size provide sufficient qualitative data to gain a rich understanding of the student experience in the Foundation Year program as it relates to student success and retention.

**Data collection.** The collection of data in this study was guided by two primary propositions. According to Yin (2009), propositions are important to a case study research approach as they help focus the researcher on specific areas of the case; given that it is impossible to study every aspect of a case, propositions tell the researcher “where to look for relevant evidence” to help answer a study’s research questions. The two primary propositions guiding this study were:

1. That the structure and design of the Foundation Year program is unique and differs from other first-year programs in a number of ways.
2. That providing students additional academic preparedness and increasing their understanding of the social and cultural norms of college are the most important components of the Foundation Year program in helping students obtain a college degree.

Keeping in line with the typical characteristics of qualitative research, the researcher in this study served as the key instrument in data collection activities (Creswell, 2009). Information was gathered through two primary methods: individual interviews with program participants and analysis of program documents. Individual interviews with both student participants and administrators involved in the program provided in-depth information about the Foundation Year program. The interviews with both students and faculty were conducted in a semi-structured manner in which a list of pre-determined questions was used to guide the conversation. A semi-structured interview approach provided a great deal of flexibility as it allows the researcher “to conduct the conversation as he thinks fit . . . to give explanation and ask for clarification if the answer is not clear, [and] to prompt the respondent to elucidate further if necessary” (Corbetta, 2003, p. 270). This type of interview process was important for this research study as it allowed participants to express their views of the program and also provide the researcher with the ability to inquire further about new themes that emerged during an actual interview; while the theoretical frameworks and literature review provided a general context of the type of themes that will likely come up during the investigation and helped inform the list of pre-determined interview questions, the semi-structured interview process allowed for the exploration of additional themes as they arose. Further, as Yin (2009) explains, “interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs or behavioral events” (p. 108). As such, speaking to individuals involved in these affairs or events provided important information and also helped to identify other places to look for data. Using Patton’s
(2008) categorization of interview question types as a guide, interview questions were grouped into background, knowledge, experience, and opinion questions. All participant interviews were digitally recorded to allow for transcription and analysis.

The analysis of program documents provided an additional layer of information about the Foundation Year program that augmented the information gathered through interviews. Documents included a program mission statement, marketing materials, meeting minutes, internal and external memos, as well as data collected about the program that has been utilized for external grant applications. As a key participant in the Foundation Year program, the researcher had access to the necessary program documents and had the ability to easily arrange for interviews with key personnel.

**Data analysis.** The analysis of the collected data primarily followed the six-step qualitative data analysis process described by Creswell (2009). In short, Creswell’s model calls for organizing and preparing data, reading through data, coding data, generating descriptions and categories of data, conveying the findings of the analysis, and making an interpretation of the data (see Appendix A for a graphic display of the process). In this case, interview data was transcribed into electronic documents while program documents were compiled and arranged by document type. Data was then organized by a coding process in which data was placed both into predetermined categories and categories that emerged throughout the data collection process. Predetermined categories, which were largely informed by the theoretical frameworks and the review of the scholarly literature, included groupings such as *social integration, cultural capital, social capital, academic support, social norms, student retention, financial support,* and *remedial/non-credit education.*
In order to facilitate the data analysis process and ensure that additional emerging themes were captured during the data collection process, the coding of data occurred shortly after it was obtained. Thus, even though study participant interviews took place over a span of a few weeks, the data of completed interviews were coded immediately in order to allow new themes to materialize. As such, the interview questions in the case study protocol (see Appendix B) were modified throughout the data collection process to deepen the investigation of new themes. After all data was coded and general descriptions were created, the analysis moved into the findings and interpretation stages, in which data was presented in narrative form.

**Validity and Credibility**

The most significant possible threat to the validity of this study is the researcher’s relationship to the Foundation Year program. While the researcher’s professional connection to Foundation Year provided direct access to the data which served as a significant advantage, the connection also served as a possible threat to the validity of this study as it raised questions of researcher bias and reactivity.

Researcher bias involves the subjectivity of the researcher and how the researcher’s preconceptions and own theoretical understanding may impact a study (Maxwell, 2005). Because the researcher has been involved with the Foundation Year project from the early stages of its development, it is likely that he has his own thoughts and opinions about the design of the program. The researcher must be very careful not to let these biases influence how data is observed and interpreted. Overcoming this threat to validity is particularly important in this research project given the fact that one of the traditional prejudices against the case study method of research is that researcher bias can too easily impact the overall findings and conclusions of the study (Yin, 2009). One way that the threat of researcher bias was limited was by utilizing
respondent validation during the course of the study, a technique that calls for “systematically soliciting feedback about your data and conclusions from the people you are studying” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 111). With respect to this particular study, respondent validation was achieved by providing the transcription of each interview to the corresponding study participant and seeking affirmation of the data. Ultimately, this technique helped ensure that the researcher did not misinterpret the explanations of study participants and guarded against analyzing data in a manner that aligned results with what the researcher thought about the issue rather than with what participants actually think or believe.

The second significant threat to the validity of this study is reactivity, “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). When this study commenced, the researcher’s role with respect to the Foundation Year program was not as clearly defined, as the researcher played a role of both researcher and administrator. The researcher anticipated that participants in the study might act differently in meetings or be less willing to say certain things since they were now included as part of a study. In the collection and analysis of data stages, the researcher was also aware that his role as researcher could impact the data; answers that were given by participants could be impacted by the researcher’s role as their colleague and, as such, this was taken into account during the analysis. Additionally, utilizing a wide variety of data sources and including a diverse number of participants in the study worked to minimize the impact of reactivity on this study. As Yin (2009) explains, “a major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence,” a technique that ultimately results in the development of converging lines of inquiries which enhance the quality of both the study’s findings and conclusions (pp. 114-117).
Overall, it is important to note that, regardless of the measures put in place to diminish the validity threats, the researcher was aware of the fact that he was not an unbiased observer in the study; in participating in practitioner-based research, taking on the role as both researcher and administrator posed possible threats to the study and this was recognized during all aspects of the research project.

Protection of Research Subjects

While the investigation posed no physical or mental harm to study participants, ethical challenges were posed through the research project, particularly with respect to the notion of confidentiality. Because permission was sought to name both the institution and program under investigation within the research project, it was very important that the researcher take measures to protect the confidentiality of participants and that student and faculty participants could only be identified as students or faculty in the Foundation Year program. While the questions asked of participants were not intrusive in nature, in order for participants to feel comfortable answering questions about their experience within the first-year program, it was important that subjects were confident that their identity would not be named in the study. This was particularly important for student participants who would have automatically been associated with a program geared towards low-income urban students. In order to protect the confidentiality of students and faculty, no specific names were utilized in the study and any identifiable information recorded during the interview process was stricken from the transcription. Further, at the conclusion of the research project, all digital data was destroyed.
Chapter IV: The Case of Foundation Year

The next two chapters of this manuscript present the findings of the investigator’s research. The current chapter is primarily focused on answering the first research question of this study, which is concerned with identifying the key components of the Foundation Year program at Northeastern University (NU) and providing a context of how these components compare to other first-year supportive programs. There are three primary sections which make up the chapter. Section I provides an overview of the research process undertaken to collect data on the Foundation Year program. Section II, which is the most comprehensive section of the chapter, provides a detailed description of the Foundation Year program, including background information about NU as well as information about the program’s general structure, admissions process, curriculum, student support model, faculty, and funding model. The unit of analysis in this section is the Foundation Year program as a whole. Finally, the chapter concludes with Section III, which provides a summary of data on other institutional first-year programs.

Section I: Overview of Research Process

The researcher began the case study investigation of the Foundation Year program in April of 2011 and completed the study in June of 2011. The research was guided by three primary research questions:

1. What are the key characteristics and components of the Foundation Year program and how do these components compare to those of other first-year supportive programs?

2. What elements of the Foundation Year program do student participants perceive as being the most useful in helping them succeed in college?

3. What elements of the Foundation Year program do faculty members and administrators identify as being the most useful in helping students succeed in college?
In order to collect the data necessary to answer these questions, the researcher utilized interviews of individuals associated with the program and the analysis of program materials and documents. These data collection techniques yielded a great deal of data for the study.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher in person. In all, a total of eleven interviews were conducted, consisting of five program faculty, four current students, and two former students. The development of interview questions was informed both by the scholarly literature on supportive first-year programs as well as by the initial information gathered during the review of public Foundation Year program documents. For example, given how much the first-year program scholarly literature emphasizes the development of faculty-student relationships during the first year, the researcher elected to include interview questions which asked faculty and students about their perceptions of these relationships. Similarly, the identification of Foundation Year as being strictly a commuter program led the researcher to include a question in the interview protocol that asked students and faculty about the possible impact of not allowing students to live on campus.

All interviews were digitally recorded. In addition, during interview sessions the researcher took notes on key ideas or new themes that emerged, which allowed for the expansion of certain questions. Thus, while the interview protocol served as the primary guide for all interviews, unscripted follow-up questions were asked to probe deeper into certain topics or ideas which emerged in the interview. After the interview, the digital recording of the interaction was transcribed by an external transcription service and provided back to the researcher for review. Interview transcripts were then coded based on identified themes. In order to protect the confidentiality of all participants, no names were utilized during interviews or in the subsequent analysis of data.
The collection and review of archival program documents took place in parallel with the participant interview process and provided a great deal of data for this research project. The exercise of collecting and reviewing program documents served three primary functions during the data collection phase: it augmented, clarified, and validated information gathered during the interview process; it helped identify new themes and sources of information which could then be further explored during subsequent interviews; and, it provided a means to obtain opinions and points of views from individuals who were not part of the interview process. Examples of documents that were part of this data collection process include: newspaper articles, press releases, internal “FAQs” developed for press releases related to the program, information from the program website, meeting minutes, marketing brochures, PowerPoint presentations utilized during public information sessions and internal training sessions, materials used in the admissions decision processes, copies of Foundation Year student surveys conducted by internal staff, and copies of program reports and summaries provided to third-party organizations. Appendix C provides an inventory of materials reviewed during the document analysis process.

All research was conducted in accordance with the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which approved this study. Unsigned informed consent forms were issued to all participants. Additionally, a formal request was made to the dean of the College of Professional Studies seeking permission to utilize Foundation Year as the singular unit of analysis for this doctoral research project. Based on this request, permission was granted by the College to allow the researcher to use Foundation Year as the subject of the case study, to name both Foundation Year and NU in the study, to access internal program-related archival documents and data, and to directly approach Foundation Year staff and faculty for participation in the study.
The specific timeline for completing the data collection process was as follows:

- April, 2011: Gained approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the data collection process. Began archival document review, organization and coding.

- May, 2011: Identified participants and conducted interviews with faculty, administrator, and student participants. Transcribed the interviews. Provided transcribed interviews to participants for review.

- June, 2011: Drafted the narrative of the results and analysis of data.

- July, 2011: Finalized the results and analysis. Wrote conclusions and suggestions for further study.

In many ways, the analysis of data began during the initial stages of data collection and continued through the completion of this manuscript. As Stake (1995) explains, in qualitative case study investigations:

> [t]here is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations… There may be a period in which we concentrate more on analysis than anything else. We mark “Analysis” for those two weeks on our calendar. But even for the quantitative researcher, analysis should not be seen as separate from everlasting efforts to make sense of things. (pp. 71-72)

In order to assist in the ongoing analysis of the data collected, the researcher employed a number of techniques which helped organize the data in a logical fashion. An important technique in the analysis process was to draft brief memos at the conclusion of each participant interview. These memos served as a semi-structured way to capture the key highlights from the interview. The memos oftentimes included bulleted lists and the identification of key quotations from participants. Ultimately, these memos made the subsequent analysis of transcriptions more effective as it refreshed the researcher’s memory of the interview and allowed for greater focus
on key themes. The utilization of open coding techniques in reviewing both interview transcripts and program documents also proved effective in organizing and making sense of the collected data. As data was being collected, the researcher generated general categories pertaining to the composition of the program; for example, categories were created for things such as the admissions process, curriculum design, and funding structure of the program. Additionally, categories were created that related specifically to the theoretical frameworks guiding this study. As the researcher went through program documents and transcriptions, key phrases, ideas, and concepts were placed into the various categories. Again, going through this exercise as data was collected helped identify areas of additional investigation; if a certain aspect of the program came up during an interview that had not previously come up through document analysis, the researcher was able to approach the next set of analysis with an eye towards identifying additional information on that specific area.

From a coding perspective, the identification of key components and emerging themes was less about frequency and more about organizing concepts into related categories, whether they came up in a singular instance or multiple times. Given the relatively small sample size of interview participants, it was important to capture as many ideas and themes as possible and report the findings in order to provide the clearest picture of the program.

**Role of the researcher.** As an administrator at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies, the researcher has direct interaction with the Foundation Year program. This research was conducted in the realm of practitioner-based research in which the researcher was acutely familiar with the unit of analysis. As previously outlined in the methodology section of this manuscript, this familiarity provided a significant advantage in the data collection process.
but also posed various threats to the integrity of the research; these threats have been addressed in the aforementioned section on validity and credibility.

Additionally, the decision to utilize Foundation Year as the subject of a case study was influenced by the researcher’s familiarity with the program. Stake (1995) in his investigation of the case study methodology writes:

A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case. A single leaf, even a single toothpick, has unique complexities—but rarely will we care enough to submit it to case study. We study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its contexts. Case study is the study of the particular and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances. (Stake, 1995, p. xi)

In reflecting back on the decision to engage in practitioner-based research focused on a singular first-year college program, ultimately, it was the researcher’s profound interest in the Foundation Year program and his acknowledgement of the program’s importance within the current political, social, and economic environment of the City of Boston that warranted the program’s utilization as unit of analysis in a case study.

The next section of this chapter provides a comprehensive description of the Foundation Year program, beginning first with background information on NU and the College of Professional Studies and then moving into more specific areas of the first-year program.

**Section II: Description of the Program**

**Northeastern University.**

In order to fully comprehend the structure and primary aims of the Foundation Year program it is important to gain a general understanding of the larger institution with which the program is affiliated. Northeastern University (NU), founded in 1898, is a large private research university located in Boston, MA. NU’s mission statement declares that the University’s primary mission is to “[t]o educate students for a life of fulfillment and accomplishment. To
create and translate knowledge to meet global and societal needs” (Northeastern University, n.d.). The University has a rich history of blending academic experience with real world job experience through its cooperative education program.

As far as student body size is concerned, during the 2010 year, NU’s fulltime student enrollment was 20,530, with an additional 8,099 part-time students enrolled (Northeastern Facts and Figures, 2010). Structurally, the University is divided into eight separate colleges and one School: College of Arts, Media, and Design; College of Business Administration; College of Computer and Information Science; College of Engineering; Bouve College of Health Sciences; College of Professional Studies; College of Science; College of Social Sciences and Humanities; School of Law. Over the course of the past decade, NU has undergone significant transformation with respect to the number of fulltime undergraduate students seeking admission to the university as well as the academic profile of the incoming freshmen class. These changes have resulted in the institution moving up eighty-one spots in the U.S. News and World Report rankings since 2001, with its most current ranking (August, 2010) at number sixty-nine.

While the institution has undergone significant transformation and moved from a once local commuter institution to a top-tier research institution attracting students from throughout the world, it still very much maintains a focus on urban engagement, particularly with regards to the neighborhoods of the City of Boston that surround the NU campus. To this end, the University highlights the fact that it enrolls and graduates more students from the Boston Public School system than any other private college or university. Furthermore, the campus’ design and

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6 A recent seventy-page Executive Summary (Executive Summary, n.d.) prepared by Northeastern and submitted to the City of Boston outlines the various financial and societal benefits that NU provides to the City. In addition to going into detail on the economic impact of the University on the City of Boston, this document also lists many of the programs and initiatives, including Foundation Year, which NU specifically provides for the City.
layout—with no gated or walled off areas separating itself from the public sidewalks and roads—has been used to stress the importance of urban engagement; as former University president Richard Freeland once indicated, “We [Northeastern] are totally the opposite of Harvard. We celebrate our open edges so nobody can miss the point that we open to the city” (Klenotic, 2000). Perhaps even more important though is the notion that strengthening urban engagement is one of key features in the University’s academic plan. According to the academic plan:

In order for Northeastern University to thrive in the twenty-first century, our institution must be engaged locally and globally in urban settings that represent an increasing portion of the world’s population. Our commitment to partnering with the City of Boston and the neighborhoods that surround our campus will be accomplished through a clearly articulated set of institutional priorities that are carefully planned and implemented. All members of the Northeastern community must become knowledgeable and engaged citizens in our diverse, urban setting.

The challenges faced in Boston mirror many of the challenges of urban centers around the globe. The world’s population is becoming increasingly concentrated. Metropolitan regions are now home to the majority of the population. Every city must create sustainable and necessary infrastructure. Challenges exist because of disparities in income, housing, health status and services, public safety, exposure to violence, and quality of education—here and elsewhere. Through engaged research with partners in our own city, we will build critical expertise necessary to address urban issues and issues of social justice. At the same time, our work will benefit significantly from, and contribute to, the knowledge and experience of other urban centers, both nationally and internationally.

Northeastern’s expertise in the challenges facing urban communities will be informed by collaborations with our own neighborhoods and with other metropolitan areas around the world. These initiatives will serve as the catalyst for these efforts. (Academic Plan, 2007)

This academic plan language is important in gaining a context of the Foundation Year program and understanding why its existence at a place like NU makes sense; Northeastern’s role in identifying the problem of practice facing college students from the City of Boston and proposing an intervention strategy are reflective of its commitment to urban engagement and its desire to find solutions to problems that impact individuals in all urban areas.
The College of Professional Studies.

As one of the nine colleges that make up NU, the College of Professional Studies (CPS) focuses primarily on providing educational opportunities to working professionals. Founded in 1960 as University College, CPS, in similar fashion to the transformation experienced by the University at large, has experienced a great deal of change in recent years. Early in its history, the College was one of the largest part-time undergraduate colleges in the United States, operating upwards of twenty satellite campuses in the metro Boston area and offering students the opportunity to take various credit and non-credit courses. However, with the introduction of graduate programs and online degree offerings in 2006, the College changed from a primarily regional undergraduate college to an institution focused on professional graduate education, expanding into national and international markets, and providing flexible and diverse educational delivery modes to promote access among many different types of learners. Today, the College’s mission speaks largely to its entrepreneurial spirit, flexibility, and focus on the practical applications of coursework:

The College of Professional Studies is committed to providing career-focused educational programs that are designed to accommodate the complex lives of motivated learners. Offered in a variety of innovative formats, our courses are taught by accomplished scholars and practitioners who have real-world experience. The result is an educational experience founded on proven scholarship, strengthened with practical application, and sustained by academic excellence. (Mission, Vision, & Core Values, n.d.)

CPS also plays a significant role in carrying out the access and urban engagement mission of NU. In fact, one of the core visions of CPS is to become the national leader in “innovated educational models serving urban students obtaining college degrees” (Mission, Vision, & Core Values, n.d.). The Foundation Year program, with its aim of educating students from the metropolitan Boston area, thus fits very nicely within the College’s vision.
A unique aspect of CPS that is worth mentioning due to its impact on Foundation Year is the academic calendar it operates under. The College operates on a quarter-based academic calendar, which includes a Summer, Fall, Winter and Spring term. Each term is twelve weeks in length, with the exception of the Summer term which is eight weeks in duration.

The Foundation Year Program.

Information about the Foundation Year program was gained through the review of program documents, which included both public sources such as the Foundation Year website, newspaper stories, and PowerPoint presentations shown at program information sessions as well as internal archival records such as meeting minutes, survey results, and memos. Additionally, information about the program was gathered through interviews with program participants; as it pertains to this section, interview data was largely utilized to verify information gathered from the document analysis exercise, as well as to gain an understanding of areas of the programs that were not well represented in archival documents.

The following summary of the key components of the Foundation Year program is organized within the following areas: program origins; general program structure; admissions process; program curriculum; “wrap-around” services; program faculty; pathways options upon program completion; and, tuition costs and funding model.

Program origins. The first public mention of NU’s intention to create an intensive first-year program specifically for City of Boston residents occurred in November of 2008 through coverage in a Boston Globe story (Vaznis, 2008). The announcement of Foundation Year in the Globe coincided with the announcement of two other related items: first, the unveiling of the results of a longitudinal study focused on the college completion rates of Boston Public School (BPS) graduates in the 2000 entering freshmen cohort and, second, the launch of a new college
success initiative endorsed by the Mayor of Boston, Thomas Menino. The study, *Getting to the Finish Line: A Seven Year Longitudinal Study of the Boston Public Schools Class of 2000* (Sum, A., Sullivan, N., Smith, C., & Northeastern Univ., B., 2008) which was prepared by NU’s Center for Labor Market Studies and was co-sponsored by the City of Boston and the Boston Private Industry Council, identified a number of alarming trends with respect to the college graduation rates of students from the BPS system. The results of the study, in turn, prompted Mayor Menino and the City of Boston to launch the “Success Boston: College Completion Initiative,” an initiative aimed at doubling the college graduation rate for BPS college enrollees from the BPS class of 2011. The Success Boston initiative is focused on three key areas of the college process: *getting ready, getting in, and getting through.* The role of higher education institutions in the Boston area is particularly important for the third component of the initiative, as City officials look to partner with institutions to identify ways to successfully get students through college and earn a degree.

The November 2008 *Boston Globe* story highlighted the results of the BPS study, unveiled the city’s new initiative to solve the issues discovered through the study, and identified an institutional response—NU’s Foundation Year—related to the newly announced initiative. In this initial announcement, the article explained that “Northeastern University will establish a special one-year program for Boston public high school graduates who are not ready for college, as part of a city initiative to boost the low rate of local students who earn higher degrees” (Vaznis, 2008). While the article does not go into great depth about the structure or key components of the, at the time unnamed first-year program, it makes reference to the fact that the program will provide credit-bearing classes for students who will spend more time in class than
the typical freshman student. The initial program announcement included endorsement from NU President Joseph Aoun who stated that:

> this is not a time for retrenchment. It is a time to redouble our efforts…Creating paths to learning is both a moral obligation and a matter of economic sense. Higher education is the pipeline of intellectual capital that will help Boston and the nation recover and prosper. Northeastern’s resources have long been at the service of the community, and especially the Boston Public Schools. (Vaznis, 2008)

Speaking specifically to the Foundation Year program, Aoun confessed that “[t]here is no guarantee that the intensive program will succeed …We are going to take a risk, but it’s a calculated risk” (Vaznis, 2008).

Following the November 2008 announcement by the President, the first cohort of students in Foundation Year was formed in July of 2009. This first class consisted of forty-four graduates from BPS schools. One year later, in July of 2010, the second cohort of Foundation Year students, this time numbering seventy six students, began the program. Finally, at the time of this writing, the third cohort of students (79 in total) had just begun their studies.

**General program structure.** Foundation Year is a twelve-month program for undergraduate freshmen students that begins during the summer quarter at CPS. Students in the Foundation Year program are admitted into a two-year Associate degree program, having the option to choose a major in either Liberal Arts or Business. Students attend classes in all four quarters of the academic year, beginning their studies in July for a five-week “Summer Academy” and ending their year of classes in the last week of the following June. Aside from vacation periods, students in Foundation Year attend the program from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday thru Friday. During this time, students attend class, meet with faculty and advisors, participate in study groups, and utilize tutoring services. Additionally, students receive transfer counseling and support in applying to other schools as the model of the program is, as its name
implies, a one year program. Foundation Year is a cohort model in that students only take
classes with other Foundation Year students and no non-Foundation Year students are able to
enroll in course sections offered for Foundation Year.7

All students who participate in Foundation Year are from the City of Boston, a residency
requirement that has evolved slightly over the three years of the program’s existence. In the
program’s pilot year, only graduates from the BPS system were admitted. Then, in the
program’s second year, the scope was widened a bit to include both BPS graduates as well as
graduates from charter schools in the metro Boston area. Finally, during the third year of the
program, residency requirements were extended to include any recent high school graduate with
a Boston address, whether a student attended a BPS school, charter school, parochial school, or
Metco school.8 Although the vast majority of students in the program come from low
socioeconomic backgrounds and many help contribute to their families’ financial situation,
students in Foundation Year are asked not to work more than twenty hours per week at an
outside job.

Although taking place at a residential four-year private institution, Foundation Year is
strictly a commuter program. Students, regardless of their desire or ability to pay for on campus
housing, are not able to reside in dormitories at NU. However, Foundation Year students are

7 The exception to this statement is that there are some students who have expressed an interest
in pursuing a science track rather than liberal arts or business. These students take upwards of
two “public” biology courses with other College of Professional Studies students during the
course of the year.

8 The Metco program is a program funded by the State of Massachusetts which allows students
from certain cities to attend public schools in other communities across the state who elect to
participate in the program. According to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Metco “is a
voluntary program intended to expand educational opportunities, increase diversity, and reduce
racial isolation” and currently serves 3,300 students who attend 33 school districts in
metropolitan Boston and four school districts near Springfield, MA (Metco Program, n.d.).
able to take advantage of the wide range of available resources on NU’s campus, including the library, fitness centers, cafeterias, and health center. Students have the opportunity to take part in student activities, clubs and organizations although, based on the 9:00 AM-5:00 PM structure of the program, students are not allowed to participate in varsity athletics. From a physical space standpoint, the program does not have a permanent or well-defined “home” on campus. Faculty members have offices in a section of the library while classes are offered in classrooms located throughout the NU campus. The campus’ student center has evolved into the de facto home of many of the Foundation Year students as, without an on-campus dormitory to go to, students frequently gather in the student center between classes.

**Admissions Process.** The Foundation Year admissions process differs from the processes utilized by the traditional undergraduate residential day division at NU and by the College of Professional Studies for its undergraduate programs. The admission process for students interested in Foundation Year commences with the completion of a Foundation Year application, an online application that requires students to complete various bio-demographic and educational history questions. In addition to the online application, a completed admission application also includes an official high school transcript or GED report, a teacher evaluation, a guidance counselor report which includes senior year attendance information and a personal essay which address why the Foundation Year program is a good fit for the applicant. Standardized test scores, including the SAT or ACT, are not required elements of the Foundation Year application process. The stated requirements for being eligible for the program include: live in the City of Boston; be a high school graduate or hold a GED completion certificate; and, have a track record of consistent and punctual class attendance.
Students who complete the online admissions application and personal essay are invited to take part in a mandatory interview day. The interview day is utilized by the Foundation Year staff to collect more information about each candidate. The interview day is a full day event in which applicants have an individual interview with NU staff members, participate in a group interview exercise in front of the Foundation Year faculty, receive information about the program, and, finally, take a variety of assessment tests. In all, over sixty NU faculty and staff are employed during the interview day.

The individual interview is a two-on-one interview in which prospective applicants are paired with two NU staff members who serve as the interviewers. Prior to the interview day, interviewers are trained by Foundation Year staff on how to conduct the interviews, on the types of questions to ask for, and how to identify possible red flags from the applicant’s answers. Interview questions are focused on gaining a better understanding of an applicant’s willingness to utilize wrap-around support services, level of self-motivation, ability to cope maturely with issues and problems, level of interest in college academics, ability to effectively time manage, and, future plans after Foundation Year. Sample interview questions include:

- Foundation Year is a community – teachers and students see each other every day and work together constantly. What would you enjoy about this? What would be difficult for you?
- Give an example of a time this year when someone has given you feedback. How did it feel? What did you learn from this experience?
- Has there been a time when you wanted to quit something or give up? If so, describe what this was like for you. If not, where does your motivation come from?
- Has anything affected your ability to do well in school?
• Since Foundation Year students will commute to campus, where will you live next year?
  How will you commute?
• Why are you interested in continuing your education?
• Describe a time in high school when you had more than one assignment due on the same day. Talk us through how you managed this.
• Why are you interested in Foundation Year?
• How did you learn about Foundation Year? What was the application process like?
• We know these may change. But right now, what is your Plan A, Plan B and Plan C for after Foundation Year?

At the conclusion of each interview, interviewers are asked to provide their full assessment of the applicant by completing an interview feedback form (see Appendix D).

In addition to completing this form, interviewers are also instructed to notate any glaring areas of concern, or red flags, that come up during the interview process. Sample red flags for applicants include:

• An applicant appears to have inflated confidence and patterns of not seeking help are both concerning.
• An applicant describes what others do wrong without seeing how they influence situations: e.g. “I am used to doing things on my own; I take care of myself.” “I don’t know.”
• An applicant’s motivation appears be entirely external (e.g. parents, rules, money, etc.).
• An applicant blames others or has not overcome obstacle/adversity(e.g. “poor me” attitude).
• An applicant’s outside-of-school responsibilities may—or will-conflict with demands of Foundation Year.

• An applicant has not started thinking/planning for where and how to live next year.

• An applicant perceives Foundation Year as an easy option.

• An applicant is set on going to Northeastern and is not receptive to other colleges.

In addition to the individual interview, prospective students are also required to take part in a group exercise with other applicants. This group exercise provides each one of the Foundation Year faculty the opportunity to observe and interact with all applicants, an opportunity that would not be possible if the Foundation Year faculty were involved in conducting individual interviews. This group exercise component of the interview day was introduced during the recruitment of the second cohort and continued to be utilized for the third incoming Foundation Year class. The group exercise places applicants in small groups and asks them to work collaboratively in a critical thinking exercise that involves a hypothetical situation.

One faculty member described the process in the following manner:

The group interview is this, sort of, hypothetical situation. Eight passengers on a plane and there’s a description of each passenger, and they essentially have something going for them but maybe something going against them, and you [the student] want to save four. You want to rank them one through eight. One through four being the ones you’d save; five through eight, the ones that perhaps gets sacrificed… Who do you want to save the most? That’s one. Who do you want to save the least? That’s eight. So we [the faculty] have them decide on their own, quietly, without talking for the first five minutes, and then open it up to a small group discussion. There’re about four or five students at the table. And then, they’re supposed to come to a consensus. We observe them having this discussion and essentially just rank them based on a few different categories. (Personal communication)

This problem solving exercise allows the faculty to observe how applicants work with other students, to judge how engaged applicants are in team building exercises and to determine how
interested applicants appear in the program. Appendix E illustrates the scoring rubric utilized by faculty which, ultimately, is used to assist in the admission decision making process.

The final component of the interview day is comprised of three short tests, used to provide a baseline measurement of each applicant’s proficiency in reading, writing, and math. For the reading portion, the Nelson-Denny Reading Test\(^9\) is utilized while a NU-created assessment is used to measure math skills. Finally, the writing assessment asks students to write an essay by answering the following question:

People seldom stand up for what they truly believe; instead, they merely go along with the popular view. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Write an essay in which you support your opinion with specific examples from history, current affairs, literature, or personal experience.

Overall, the reading, writing and math assessments are utilized by the Foundation Year faculty for two purposes: one, to help inform the admissions decisions by providing an additional data point in the review of each applicant’s file; and, two, to provide the faculty with a general understanding of the competencies of the students coming into the program, allowing them to structure the curriculum in the upcoming year in a way that seeks to address the weakest skillset areas.

After the completion of the interview days and the collection of all required materials, admission decisions are made by the Foundation Year program staff. In making admission decisions, Foundation Year faculty have identified the following type of students as being a “good fit” for the program: those who are on an upward trend in high school after a rocky start and those who are interested in college, but unprepared academically based on course selection or poor performance. Additionally, faculty and staff of the program have identified recent recent

\(^9\) The Nelson-Denny Reading Test is a reading survey test that is utilized to “[t]o assess student achievement and progress in vocabulary, comprehension, and reading rate” (Nelson-Denny, 2010). The test takes approximately thirty-five minutes to complete.
immigrants and English language learners as individuals who will likely benefit from the program, largely due to the relative success of these individuals in the first two years of the program.

When reviewing the admission applications and notes from the interview days, program faculty look for applicants who show the following traits:

- **Motivated**: Willing to work hard to achieve their goals and earn a college degree;
- **Committed**: Willing to commit to a full-time experience; willing to commit to a rigorous academic program and take advantage of support;
- **Ability to benefit**: Would benefit from a highly structured, supportive cohort-based program;

Without the requirement of SAT or ACT scores, standardized metrics are used less in the admissions process. Rather than utilizing baseline standards of average GPA, class rank, or standardized test scores to group applicants and determine their admission, the decision-making process is very comprehensive in the sense that it gives weight to academic performance in high school, interviewer rankings and comments, group interview assessments and recommendations from teachers, guidance staff and personnel from community-based organizations who may work with students.

After admissions decisions have been made, acceptance packets are prepared and sent to students. In addition to the acceptance letter that is typically found in the admit packet at most undergraduate institutions, the Foundation Year acceptance packet also contains a student Commitment Letter (see Appendix F) which outlines the responsibilities and requirements of being a Foundation Year student. This letter sets the stage for what the program will entail and
is utilized by the faculty of the program to hold students accountable for their academic performance and levels of professionalism throughout the duration of the program.

**Program curriculum.** Admitted students who elect to enroll in Foundation Year officially begin their year-long program in July, with a five-week term referred to as *Summer Academy*. During Summer Academy, students are enrolled in their first two credit-bearing courses, a sociology course focused on diversity and a public speaking course. In total, throughout the program, students take a total of eleven credit-bearing courses. According to program documents, the Foundation Year curriculum was designed to closely resemble the first-year curricula found at many other institutions of higher education. For the most part, the curriculum is highly structured, with limited variation in the courses that students in the program are able to enroll in.

Overall, the curriculum is organized into three main categories, including a set of *core* courses, *elective* courses and *non-credit* courses (see Figure 1). The core courses include classes in the English, mathematics, sociology and communications disciplines. The elective courses, meanwhile, are divided up into two tracks: a business track and a liberal arts track. At the beginning of the Foundation Year program, students elect which of these two tracks they would like to pursue. Students who choose the business track have the opportunity to enroll in macroeconomics, microeconomics, and business law. On the other hand, students who elect the liberal arts track can choose to pursue courses in the social sciences—including courses such as Introduction to Art, Psychology Fundamentals, and Introduction to Philosophy—or in the physical sciences, where they take a sequence of biology courses. The core and elective courses of the Foundation Year curriculum are further augmented by a series of non-credit courses that provide students with the opportunity to develop additional skills to be successful in a college
environment. These courses, which are explained in greater detail below, help support both the academic as well as the social development of students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Courses</th>
<th>Summer</th>
<th>Fall</th>
<th>Winter</th>
<th>Spring</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>College English 1</td>
<td>College English 2</td>
<td>College English Workshop</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Contemporary</td>
<td>College Algebra 1 or Pre-Calculus</td>
<td>College Algebra 2 or Statistics 1 or Calculus 1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>American History</td>
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<tr>
<th>Business Courses</th>
<th>Macroeconomics</th>
<th>Microeconomics</th>
<th>Business Law</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intro to Art or Biology 1</td>
<td>Psychology Fundamentals or Biology 2</td>
<td>Intro to Philosophy &amp; Ethics or Biology 3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal Arts Courses</th>
<th>Foundations of Math 1</th>
<th>Foundations of Math 2</th>
<th>Personal Leadership and Career Development</th>
<th>Experiential Learning/Industry visits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information Literacy</td>
<td>Personal Leadership and Career Development</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Leadership and Career Development</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Credit Courses and Experiential Learning</th>
<th>Personal Leadership and Career Development</th>
<th>Experiential Learning/Industry visits</th>
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</table>

*Figure 1. Overview of curriculum offerings for Foundation Year students.*

It is clear from both a review of program documents and from comments made by faculty during the interview process that the credit-bearing courses are an integral part of the Foundation Year model. For example, in an internal FAQ document released after the aforementioned *Boston Globe* article announcing the Foundation Year program, the following information was released to staff members:
Question: The study didn't delve into reasons for the lack of college success. What makes you think you have the answers?

Answer: Research has indicated that there are numerous reasons for lack of college success including the inappropriate use of remedial programs in a noncredit setting. Research shows that if students receive credit, they have a higher probability of persisting. (College of Professional Studies, 2008)

This same theme was reiterated during faculty interviews, as individuals pointed to the existence of credit-bearing coursework as an important component and one that seemed to distinguish the program from other first-year college programs. As one faculty member commented:

[W]e are running into a lot of programs that are identifying our students right now who are applying and saying, you know, come to this program for a year, you are not earning any credit, but once you are done then you are a bonafide student. So I think, in comparison to Foundation Year, you know, the students are not jumping through hoops before they start to earn college credit. They are coming in, they really, you know, hit the ground running, but understanding that you may not be ready, but we’re not going to hold you back a year while you are sort of earning these skills—you are doing that as you go. So I think that would sort of be the fundamental comparison that we are seeing between Foundation Year and the other programs that we are encountering. (Personal communication)

Similarly, another faculty member remarked that

[s]o I guess one thing I always make clear when people ask me this question is that they are getting college credit, they are college students. When I’ve explained to the people, maybe it’s just because of the way I’ve explained it that they have the perception that it’s a preparatory program and that they aren’t in college. But they are in college. They do get credit. (Personal communication)

Students who earn a successful grade in every credit-bearing course will earn 44 Quarter Hours (QH) worth of credit. These 44 QHs represent approximately 32 Semester Hours, an amount of credits consistent with a typical freshmen year at most two-year or four-year institutions.

In addition to the core and elective courses, students in Foundation Year are also required to enroll in a number of non-credit courses which augment the work they are doing in other subject areas. The non-credit courses are a mix of what are often termed as remedial courses, as well as courses that can be classified in the personal enrichment category. The remedial courses
are centered on math fundamentals, largely due to the low math scores with which students typically come into the program. In order to get students up to speed to be ready for the credit-bearing math courses offered in the third and fourth terms of the programs, students are placed into Foundations of Math 1 and Foundations of Math 2. The emphasis of math in the design of the Foundation Year program and the reflections of some faculty members make it clear that the lack of math skills for urban students serve as a significant obstacle to completing college. As one faculty member stated about the perception that many urban students come into college with:

these kids that come in don’t realize that they are, you know, ill-equipped for math and that they have to go back to math—that they wouldn’t have thought that they would have to at the college level. Maybe they thought they were free and clear of the math that they need to graduate. So, math has become a barrier for a lot of kids. (Personal communication)

Aside from the non-credit math offerings, there is a sequence of three other non-credit courses that is integrated into the curriculum of Foundation Year: Information Literacy; Personal Leadership & Career Development; and, Career Readiness and Experiential Learning. Unlike the Foundations of Math courses, these courses are less focused on academic coursework and more focused on providing students with the skills and information necessary to produce college level work, navigate the culture of college, and be successful in the professional work environment.

Information Literacy is offered to students during the Summer quarter, with the intent of providing students the necessary technology skills required for college-level work. As the course description explains, the class exposes students to basic information technology tools used in researching, evaluating and displaying information.

Personal Leadership & Career Development, offered during the Fall quarter, is aimed at equipping students with the skills needed to navigate college and at building leadership capabilities within students allowing them to get more control of their college and professional
careers. Given that many of the students in Foundation Year are the first in their families to attend college, program staff view this course as an essential component in providing students with an understanding of the college environment and of the norms and rules that are expected of them as college students. As one member of the faculty described:

[in Personal Leadership and Career Development] we are teaching students what it means to register for classes, what it means to budget your time in college, what it means to study independently, how, really, you interact with professors differently from how you would interact with high school teachers, how you take ownership of your learning in a way that is more self-directed than it has been in high school. (Personal communication)

Other faculty explained this course as building the “soft skills” students need to be successful in college.

Finally, in addition to providing students information about how to be successful college students, the final non-credit course, Career Readiness and Experiential Learning, also assists students with becoming successful professionals. Given NU’s focus on the integration of academic course work and real world work experience, this non-credit course is an important part of the Foundation Year experience.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Course Prerequisites</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Course Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>The goals of the 6 week spring career exploration track are as follows:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To provide a range of community based and classroom based activities to encourage a deeper understanding of the connection between education and career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To reinforce the importance of being punctual and present, clear communication, good work ethic, taking responsibility for one’s own actions, being creative and entrepreneurial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To encourage students to synthesize and present in their own words what they see as next steps for themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To enable students to start a professional network.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Objectives:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students will examine career paths of different professionals through panel discussions and shadow days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students will identify educational pathways to achieve career/s of interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students will solve a case study and construct a manual of “tips” around the importance of honing certain soft skills in the workplace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students will participate in a mock interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students will present a summary of their learning to the rest of their classmates, CPS staff and external partners.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Sample Course Description and Course Objectives of a non-credit class. This particular course, Career Readiness and Experiential Learning, is held during the final term of
the program and is focused on assisting students identify possible careers they may be interested in and in developing the skills necessary to interview and network successfully.

Overall, Foundation Year students are graded in the non-credit courses, although the grades do not impact a student’s overall Quality Point Average (QPA) within the Associate Degree program. Students earn Continuing Education Credits (CEUs) for their successful work in the non-credit courses; the courses appear on a separate transcript within a student’s record in NU’s student information system.

A final aspect of the Foundation Year curriculum that is worth noting is the fact that it is designed so that students start off with a less-than-fulltime load of courses and progress into fulltime status as the year goes on. Thus, even though students attend from 9:00 AM-5:00 PM during the first two terms of the program, their credit bearing courses do not reflect full-time status. This schedule was purposefully designed to allow for the learning curve that students have and to maximize their opportunity to be successful in the credit-bearing classes. To this end though, students in Foundation Year courses spend considerably more time directly interacting with faculty than typical undergraduate students. As one faculty member remarked, “part of the design [of the program] is that these students would have more contact hours and more content hours. So, although the class showed as a four quarter hour class, we actually had many more contact hours with faculty as a design of the program.”

“Wrap-around” services. In addition to attending classes, one of the key features of the Foundation Year program is the notion of “wrap-around” support services. This phrase appears in many of the program documents and was mentioned during all the interviews with program faculty, as well as with many of the students. Included in these wrap-around student support services are individual and group advising sessions; an individual and group tutoring model; a program-specific writing center and math lab; access to and regular feedback from Foundation
Year faculty; and, transfer counseling services. At the focal point of all of these services is the individual student. In explaining the approach of the student support structure, one faculty member commented that:

the program is really about students who have self-identified as needing help academically or in other ways to succeed in college and the program is really focused on explicitly teaching skills that will keep students in college. So, we don’t assume that they know any of the structures or systems in a college setting, we explicitly teach that, we provide wrap-around support for all their classes. We think really in very individualized ways about our students and what they need. So the focus of the program is really about not only getting them through the first year of college, but really having them get an understanding of who they are as a student, so they can graduate in four years. (Personal communication)

The diagram in Figure 3 further illustrates the student-centric approach of the wrap-around support structure of Foundation Year.

Figure 3: Diagram of wrap-around support structure within Foundation Year. This diagram illustrates the various support structure components that surround a student during the Foundation Year program. The circular nature of the diagram reflects the idea that each of the wrap-around services are connected to one another and work in collaboration to foster development within each student.
One of the most significant aspects of the wrap-around services component is the advising model that exists within the program. Foundation Year has two fulltime advisors who, in addition to teaching various non-credit courses throughout the program, commit substantial amounts of time meeting with students in an advisory capacity. Referred to by one faculty member as the program’s “intrusive advising model,” the advising structure in the program utilizes a three-pronged approach which consists of pre-determined individual and group advising sessions as well as ad hoc individual meetings that take place during open hours held by the advising staff.

The group advising session within the program is referred to as “Advisory” and is a formal part of each student’s schedule. In these advisory sessions, students meet for an hour each week in a group setting facilitated by one of the two fulltime advisors. In addition to this weekly exposure to advising, students are required to have two dedicated meetings each quarter with their advisor; these sessions are one-on-one sessions. Moreover, students who are on academic probation are required to meet with their advisors on a weekly basis. Finally, students have the opportunity to gain more advising support by stopping in to see their advisors or when the advising staff reaches out to students directly based on any new academic or personal issues that may arise.

As far as the content of the advising sessions is concerned, it largely depends on the format of the advising. Group sessions, for example, are more geared towards the development of the general skills or temperaments needed to successfully navigate the culture of college. One faculty explained:

Our student advisors teach … those explicit, sort of, weekly modules. They're once a week for an hour and a half around the dispositions that students, we call it skills and dispositions that students need to be successful. It's college readiness stuff. So they will do a workshop on … or a class on … time management. A
class on study skills. A class on note taking. A class on classroom dynamics. A class on financial literacy. (Personal communication)

Meanwhile, individual advising sessions can be more focused to the unique individual and, oftentimes, spill into issues involving students’ outside or personal lives.

The advising model is one that entails a great deal of flexibility and attempts to respond to the current needs of students. As one member of the faculty indicated:

we tend to want to teach to what is happening in the program at the time. So we can point to specific examples. So when we see a certain subset of students fail biology because nobody read the text book, then we address the issue of why it is important that if a reading is, you know, assigned that the assumption is your professor is not going to test you, they are going to assume you will write the material and they will assume that you are ready to be tested on it. It seems intuitive, but it's really not. (Personal communication)

Another hallmark of the wrap-around services within Foundation Year is the amount of feedback that students receive from faculty. Faculty members within Foundation Year spend numerous hours outside of the classroom meeting with students to discuss specific assignments or the general progress students are making. These meetings take place through multiple avenues: during structured faculty office hours, during tutoring sessions or lab sessions that faculty often attend, on an appointment basis or, at times, on an informal drop-in basis.

In addition, students receive feedback from faculty in a more formalized manner through the program’s quarterly review process (see Appendix G for a copy of the faculty assessment tool used during the review). This process entails each student meeting with the entire Foundation Year faculty at one time for approximately fifteen to thirty minutes each quarter. These meetings give the faculty the opportunity to address the students about their strengths and weaknesses and provide honest feedback to the students about their place within the program. One faculty member described these sessions as the place where “all our ‘ah ha’ moments with
students” come from. Furthermore, another faculty member commented on the strength of personal reflection which takes place in these reviews:

I like the fact that we meet with students every semester at the end of the quarter to talk about their progress and what they feel are their strengths and weaknesses. There’s a lot of reflection involved in it. It’s nice when we have this end-of-the-quarter meetings with students because we can tell the students, “You still have long ways to go with your writing. Keep with it. Keep seeing a tutor. You’re working so hard, great job. I’m proud of you.” That’s a nice feeling. (Personal communication)

From the student perspective, there were notions that these quarterly reviews made students very nervous and put them in a vulnerable position as they are critiqued by all members of the Foundation Year team. However, there seems to be a level of comfort created with these reviews that, in the end, make students appreciative of the critical feedback received. As one student explained:

I think it’s [the quarterly review] great. I think it’s a great opportunity for a student to identify where they need work and get that feedback directly from a person who is arguably the most qualified to tell you where you should head. I think that the way, the, sort of, demeanor of the professors in the quarterly review isn’t, ‘you did this wrong, you did that wrong, you did that wrong’ and I think that is the best thing because it is very positive—“you did this great, but you could use a little more work in that because you fell behind.” Or maybe, like I said, papers were being turned in late you need to work on maybe your procrastination and having that opportunity with your professors and your advisors and whoever else is in there having as many eyes on you as possible I think is beneficial. I mean as long as you understand that these flaws aren’t the end of the world and you can work on them. (Personal communication)

Tutoring is also an integral part of the Foundation Year wrap-around support model. The main focus of the tutoring is on enhancing writing and math skills, although tutoring is also held for the elective biology and economics courses.

English tutoring sessions take place twice per week, for thirty minutes each session. One of the thirty minute sessions is mandatory for each student. Additionally, there are drop-in hours at the writing center that also take place throughout the quarter, allowing students to seek out
additional help with certain assignments. There are three writing tutors hired to work directly with the program who facilitate these tutoring sessions, each of whom has a master’s degree. The writing tutors meet regularly with faculty to ensure that the work they are doing on writing is in sync with classroom assignments.

Math tutors are also hired to work directly with the program and are responsible for operating the math lab, which is open two days per week for approximately ninety minutes each day. Similar to the tutoring model for English, the math tutoring model has certain hours that the students are scheduled to attend while also providing the option for drop-in sessions on an ad hoc basis. In order to ensure that tutoring sessions are in focus with the learning taking place during formal classroom sessions, Foundation Year math tutors attend the formal class sessions and work closely with individual faculty on content. The tutoring sessions are not simply for low performing students, as one faculty member described:

So, it’s not just the place for kids with low grades. It’s a place for kids who are currently not sure that they’ll be able to get their homework done, that they’ll be able to understand the issues coming on the next quiz and so forth. So, there are kids that are high functioning, low functioning with a particular class, sometimes it’s just the case of being around the math. (Personal communication)

Finally, tutoring support in select elective courses is also available for students. These sessions take place twice per week, for one hour each session.

The final component of the wrap-around support model is the transfer counseling that students receive. This counseling is utilized to support the pathways model of the program, which is explained in greater detail in a subsequent section. By design, Foundation Year seeks to place students at other colleges and universities at the conclusion of the program. In order to assist in this transition to other schools, Foundation Year places an emphasis on working with students to find the “best fit” school for them. The transfer counseling component provides
students with guidance on the college application process and requires students to research various schools.

The transfer counseling is both embedded within the Personal Leadership non-credit course as well as in student advisory. During the Personal Leadership course, students are taken through the basic steps of the college application process, including college selection, essay writing and completing financial aid forms. Individual advisor sessions, meanwhile, are focused more on each individual student’s specific circumstance and discussing best strategies to get into the “best fit” schools. In order to facilitate the identification of the best fit colleges, students are asked to generate a list of at least eight schools they would be interested in attending. This list is guided by a survey that students take at the beginning of the program which seeks to identify an individual’s skills and career interests, preference for size and location of a school, estimated ability to pay, and whether students are interested in public or private schools. The Foundation Year advisors use this information and the initial lists generated by students to work with each student about the types of schools each should apply to, taking into consideration the current academic, financial, and outside-of-school situation for each student.

Overall, the structure of Foundation Year places a heavy emphasis on wrap-around student support services. This support comes in various forms and augments the credit-bearing work that students are doing in the program by providing individualized advising and increasing the number of interactions that students have with program faculty and staff. Thus, while the program is touted as a 9:00-5:00 program—leading many to think of the program as a thirteenth year of high school\footnote{This notion of a thirteenth year of high school appeared throughout the interview data, on both the faculty and student side. Faculty mentioned that individuals external to Northeastern often ask them whether the program is a thirteenth year or indicate after hearing them talk about the}—students are not simply sitting in a classroom the entire day. The
structure of the program provides students the opportunity to increase contact time with faculty outside of the classroom through one-on-one meetings and tutoring sessions, as well as affords students the chance to gain additional career and college readiness skills that will hopefully prove beneficial to the students as they transition away from Foundation Year to other institutions.

Figure 4: A typical daily schedule for a student in Foundation Year. This figure, taken from a presentation slide show to prospective applicants, details a typical day of a Foundation Year student, illustrating the balance that exists between in-class and out-of-class learning activities.

Program faculty. The Foundation Year program has eight full-time faculty associated with the program, including two math faculty members, two English faculty members, one humanities faculty member, two student advisors, and one program director. Based on the most recent incoming class of students into the program, Foundation Year has a low student-to-faculty ratio of 10:1. The full-time faculty who are hired for Foundation Year work solely for the program; the faculty hold appointments within CPS and do not hold other teaching appointments program that “oh, it sounds like 13th grade.” Similarly, some students made reference to the fact that the commuter-only aspect of the program and the, at times, rigid schedule made the program seem like an extension year of high school.
at the University or have students advising responsibilities outside of Foundation Year. A Foundation Year faculty position entails more than just teaching. During the interview process, all faculty indicated that their jobs extended well beyond the teaching that takes place during the structured hours of a class session. Between meeting with students during tutoring sessions, ad hoc encounters on campus, and formal office hours, the faculty in Foundation Year engage with students on a frequent basis, oftentimes talking to students about issues or concerns that extend beyond the scope of class assignments and spill into the personal lives of students.

The backgrounds of the faculty members result in a unique mix of experienced K-12 and higher education educators. A common thread that is woven throughout the entire team is experience working with urban youth, whether at the secondary or postsecondary level. In fact, a number of the faculty have specific experience working directly within the BPS system, providing for somewhat of an “insiders” perspective to the types of students coming into the Foundation Year program.

Finally, in addition to the eight full-time faculty, the program relies on various adjunct faculty to teach in the program. Adjunct faculty are utilized to teach the elective courses, including Biology, Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Business Law, and Introduction to Art.

*Pathways upon completion.* While students in Foundation Year are admitted into a two-year Associate Degree within CPS, the design and intent of the program is to have students matriculate to other colleges and universities after the conclusion of the first year. As such, the program has three pathway options available for students as they exit out of Foundation Year.

The first option is that students apply to another institution as a transfer student. Students who have successfully completed Foundation Year earn one year of college credit. Assuming other institutions accept the NU courses as transfer credit, students who pursue this first option
will end up as second year students at another college or university. The aforementioned college counseling that takes place during Foundation Year directly assists students with this pathway option; a great deal of time is spent with students identifying schools that would be a good fit for them, taking into account their academic abilities, financial situation, and other outside-of-school commitments. Furthermore, in order to enhance the pathways options for students, NU has attempted to create partnerships with other institutions in the metro Boston area to serve as “receiver” institutions for Foundation Year students. To date, eleven other institutions of higher education have indicated a desire to serve as partner institutions, some of which have signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding. Through this institutional partnership process, Foundation Year seeks to identify colleges and universities that will take exiting Foundation Year students and agree to provide certain services or benefits to students, such as an increased level of student advising support by individuals familiar with Foundation Year, an agreement to accept all credit-bearing Foundation Year courses as transfer credit, additional financial assistance to support students with high levels of financial need, and an agreement to share certain types of enrollment data to facilitate any outcome tracking performed by NU.

It is important to mention here that, within this first pathway option, is the possibility that a student may elect to apply to one of the fulltime residential “day” colleges at NU. During the interview process and review of archival documents, it became increasingly clear one of the main reasons why students elect to apply to Foundation Year is because of the “Northeastern University” name. Student participants in the interviews were very open with the fact that going to NU was a main reason for enrolling in the program. As one student remarked, “I was surprised that not everyone wanted to go to Northeastern in Foundation Year because that is what I wanted. And why wouldn’t anyone else want that? It’s Northeastern.” In order to
diminish the perception that Foundation Year’s purpose is to be the “backdoor” into NU’s fulltime day program for underprepared students. Foundation Year staff make it abundantly clear from the beginning of the program that going to NU is not the purpose of the program. During recruitment events, informational sessions and the interview days, students are told the message that Foundation Year does not equal NU’s full-time residential program; in fact, interviewers during the interview day are trained to attempt to identify a student’s interest or motivation for coming to the program and indicate a “red flag” for those students who seem to be primarily motivated by the “Northeastern” name.

The second option presented to students as they complete Foundation Year is to shift their area of focus from college to the workforce. Recognizing that not all students who come into the program may be able to excel as a full-time college student, the program helps facilitate some students into the workforce while also encouraging the students to still remain enrolled in college on a less-than-full-time basis. The career development and work readiness skills taught throughout the year are aimed to help students in this situation.

![Figure 5: Pathway options after Foundation Year](image)

*Figure 5: Pathway options after Foundation Year. This figure provides a summary of the three options designed for students as they exit the Foundation Year program.*
The final pathway option presented to students is to remain enrolled at CPS and complete their Associates Degree. Since Foundation Year students are admitted into a two-year program from the onset of the program, students have the option to continue pursuing their studies at CPS. Students who elect this pathway option do not receive the same support structures as they did during Foundation Year. While they are still very much considered NU students and have access to the same services on campus as other students, these students primarily take evening or online courses as CPS predominately caters to the working professional and offers very few day-time courses.

*Tuition costs and funding model.* For the 2010-2011 academic year, the total tuition cost for Foundation Year was $16,040. These tuition costs include textbooks for all courses, a personal laptop for each student, and other supplemental materials required for class. Not included in this figure are housing or meal costs; as a commuter program, students do not have the option to reside on campus and are not required to sign up for a meal plan, as are many freshmen students at traditional residential institutions. While the figure of $16,040 is relatively low for a full year of college at a private four-year research university, the program is not self-funded, by any means. Rather, NU puts significant dollars into the program to cover the true costs for running the program. Information from a report generated for a third-party organization involved in Foundation Year provides a useful summary of the reasons behind the discrepancy between tuition costs—which were purposefully kept low to allow for access for low-income students—and the true costs of program delivery:

> College tuition seldom matches a college’s actual cost of delivering educational services. This is certainly the case with Foundation Year’s pilot year for many reasons. First, as a pilot program, significant staff resources were devoted to designing the program, recruiting for and marketing the program, and establishing the corollary features of the program, including the industry and higher education
collaborations. Second, by design, Foundation Year is a staff-intensive program because it prioritizes individualized student attention and support through small class sizes and a wrap-around model of support with extensive faculty hours and paid undergraduate and graduate tutors devoted to providing regular academic assistance. Third, the program caters to low-income youth hailing from the Boston Public Schools, and as such, the program design team opted to include student books, technology, and materials into the program costs to make sure that students would have all of the tools they need to be successful in their courses. The students’ low-income status and inability to pay the program tuition also places a significant cost burden on the College of Professional Studies because the College significantly discounts the tuition cost through scholarships to students to make up the gap between state and federal grants and the Foundation Year tuition. (Internal report to Jobs for the Future, n.d.)

On an individual student level, the overarching principle guiding the program’s approach towards the distribution of financial aid is encompassed by a phrase that appears throughout both internal and public program documents: “The Foundation Year Program is designed to enable access for qualified students regardless of family income or ability to pay.” The design of the financial aid model leverages available federal (e.g. Pell Grants and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants), state (e.g. MassGrant, Massachusetts Gilbert Grant), and institutional aid resources. It is important to note that the awarding of federal loans is not part of the initial award package; rather, the program’s aim of providing students with a way of covering the direct costs of the program is done entirely through grant and scholarship funds. Federal loan recipients are limited to those students who seek additional funding to pay for out-of-pocket educational expenses or individuals whose families have the demonstrated ability to pay for a portion of the tuition but choose to utilize loan funds to cover the amount owed.

In order to ensure that a student’s ability to pay does not stand in the way of completing Foundation Year, members of NU’s Office of Student Financial Services (SFS) are closely

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11 In reviewing data supplied on the first cohort of Foundation Year students, a vast majority of the students had the full $16,000 tuition cost covered through grants and scholarships.
involved with the program. Administrators from SFS meet with the Foundation Year staff on a weekly basis to discuss specific student situations and ensure that all student account matters are resolved or being worked on. As student circumstances change throughout the year, so too does the level of funding from NU; if students encounter financial setbacks during the course of the year that require additional support, award packages are often adjusted. While the FAFSA data determines the eligibility for federal and state funds and provides a general way to assess each student’s financial position relative to one another, the funding model of Foundation Year, ultimately, provides for a very individualized assessment of each student and seeks to eliminate the financial barrier to college that faces many students from urban areas. As the aforementioned report states, “[t]he final aid amount awarded was not based on a finite amount of resources CPS had allocated toward this program, but entirely on the college’s determination of students’ ability to pay” (Internal report to Jobs for the Future, n.d.).

Section III: Other First-year Programs

At the onset of this investigation, one of the researcher’s main research questions sought to identify how the key components of Foundation Year compare to other first-year programs; this comparison was considered to be an essential element to documenting Foundation Year as a case. However, as the researcher began the in-depth analysis of a singular first-year program, the primary focus of the investigation became more about what Foundation Year does and less about what other programs do. Stake (1995) speaks about this phenomenon within case study research when he explains that:

The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does. There is emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself. (p. 8)
As a result of this realization, the investigation became less focused on the comparison of Foundation Year to other programs and more focused on understanding Foundation Year itself. This being said though, a basic understanding of how Foundation Year compares to other first-year programs is important, particularly from a practitioner-based standpoint; for an administrator looking at the program it is very helpful to be able to determine which components of the program are common to other designs and which may be more unconventional. This section of the research findings was largely informed by a review of the best practices in first-year programming that are included in the scholarly student retention literature (e.g. Barefoot, 2000; 2004a; 2004b; Tinto, 1993) as well as an internet-based review of the types of first-year programming that exist at other institutions of higher education.

The research on other institutional supportive first-year programs illustrates that most programs are typically referred to as either first-year experience (FYE) programs or first-year seminars. Regardless of their name though, the key components of the programs are largely the same; the review of other colleges and universities showed that most first-year programs geared towards increasing the retention of freshmen students involved the following components: an emphasis on academic advising; a summer orientation that serves as a “bridge” from high school to college; a seminar course focused on providing college “survival skills”; the development of peer-mentoring partnerships; the creation of living-learning communities that bring together students and faculty; and, a focus on the development of study skills and academic skills through tutoring services. Figure 6 provides a sample of various descriptions of first-year programs that appear on the websites of other colleges and universities.
- Coursework with a strong emphasis on research methods, expository writing, time management, critical thinking and analytical skills;
- Tutoring in all areas of the college curriculum;
- Personal, academic and career counseling;
- Opportunities to learn and grow in a college atmosphere that is acutely sensitive to the wide range of obstacles that confront ethnically and educationally diverse students.

- To give students the academic and personal guidance needed to earn a Baccalaureate degree;
- A series of designed experiences offer academic, cultural, and social support as well as vital information to aid students in understanding and working effectively within the college community.
- Primary purpose of promoting both academic and personal growth for all students through academic assistance, support and peer mentoring.
- Provides students the opportunity to make connections with faculty and other students, to discover the wide range of resources … and to become part of the university and local community.

- Studying and learning in groups
- Accessing vital campus and college resources
- Exploring a chosen major
- Creating a career plan
- Developing important study skills
- Interacting in a multicultural environment
- Learning how to access & manage electronic information

- These highly interactive, small-enrollment courses are designed to bring you immediately into the intellectual life of the college

*Figure 6:* Descriptions of the components of first-year programs at other colleges and universities. The information indicates a common theme of programs that provide academic and social support to students and opportunities for increased integration with the institution.

While most of the FYE and first-year seminar programs reviewed contained elements similar to those found in Foundation Year, there are some important differences to note. In particular, the cohort model, pathways structure, specific focus on students from one urban area, and the utilization of dedicated faculty to teach students in the program were all elements of Foundation Year that did not appear in the review of other programs. For example, most other programs were broader in their scope, extending to either all incoming freshmen students or all students who are identified as “at-risk” students because of their ethnicity, socio-economic
background or being the first in their family to attend college. Additionally, no other programs identified utilize a cohort model for students; rather, students come in as “traditional” first-year students, take courses with all other freshmen, and utilized the services of the program to augment their coursework. Finally, no other institution reviewed utilized a “transfer out” pathways model for students; all programs reviewed were aimed to foster integration between students and the institution and help students persist and graduate from that specific college or university. The notion of taking students in for one year and then transitioning them out to another institution was not a component found anywhere in the scholarly literature or in the review of the webpages of other programs. Table 1 provides a comparative summary of the key components of Foundation Year with respect to ten other first-year programs. The comparison group includes programs at large private research universities similar to NU as well as programs at large public universities and small private liberal arts colleges.
Table 1
Comparison of Key Components of Ten College and University First-year Programs to Foundation Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Cohort model</th>
<th>population served</th>
<th>Pathways model</th>
<th>set courses</th>
<th>advising</th>
<th>tutoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foundation Year</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>urban area</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westfield St. N.C. State</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>at-risk</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidson</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>all freshmen</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia Southern</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>at-risk</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive-Harvey College</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>all freshmen</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univ. of Cincinnati</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>all freshmen</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univ. of Wisconsin</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>at-risk</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York College CUNY</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>all freshmen</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana U. Purdue U.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>at-risk</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Pathways model refers to the model in Foundation Year of transitioning students to another institution after completion of the program; Set courses is an indication of whether students in the program take a pre-determined set of courses;
Chapter V: Emergent Themes through the Perceptions of Faculty and Students

This chapter continues the presentation of the research findings. As the above chapter illustrates, the Foundation Year program is multifaceted in its design. The program utilizes a different application process, pedagogical approach, student support system, and funding model than anywhere else on the NU campus. As such, in order to gain a better understanding of which components of the program appear to be most significant in aiding in the success of students in earning a college degree, it was important to obtain the perspectives of the individuals most closely involved with the program.

While interviews with individuals involved in the program provided a mechanism to reinforce themes identified in the analysis of documents, allowed for the additional probing of information on certain topics, and assisted in the discovery of new aspects of the program that were previously unknown to the researcher, the primary function of the interview process was to aid in the answering of the second and third research questions guiding this investigation. As these questions sought to identify the perceptions of faculty and students involved in the program, it was important to engage these participants in interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their observations of and insights into of the program. Because the program faculty are the individuals who interact with the students on a daily basis and execute on the structure of the program, it was important to gain an understanding of how these individuals view the program and the work that they do. Similarly, as the students are the individuals who experience the delivery of the curriculum, receive the support from advisors, and benefit from additional financial support, it was equally important to include their voice in the analysis of the program to paint a more complete picture of which elements are most important.
This chapter utilizes individual faculty and staff as the unit of analysis as it presents a summary of the interviews with the participants of the study. The focus of this chapter is in detailing the perceptions of study participants about the ways in which Foundation Year is aiding in college success and providing a summary of the common themes that emerged during the interviews. The chapter is organized by the key program components and themes that were mentioned throughout the interviews. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the following key elements of Foundation Year: its funding model; its advisory model; its focus on improving writing skills; its faculty; and, its pathways model.

Money Matters: The importance of Foundation Year’s funding model

Foundation Year has a funding model that provides full tuition coverage to students who are high need. The program’s motto of being “designed to enable access for qualified students regardless of family income or ability to pay” is certainly one that resonated with students as they reflected back on the most important aspects of the program. For example, one student remarked:

I think that money certainly has a lot to do with Foundation Year being the program that it is, because it makes education accessible to everyone, regardless of how much money you make. A lot of inner city students go to Boston public schools and don’t get a strong education and can come to Foundation Year to, sort of, make up for that and having to pay $42,000 or whatever it is to go to a larger program is, sort of, outrageous. Especially, when you don’t know how well you’re going to do and what you want to do in your future. So having, sort of, not a free year, but severely discounted year to learn and discover things about yourself and everything else academically and personally. I think that’s important that it be accessible. (Personal communication)

For this student, the low cost of the program was the primary reason he chose to attend Foundation Year over other colleges he was admitted to, a theme that was reiterated on numerous occasions by other students. One student, in response to being asked why he chose to enroll in Foundation Year indicated: “One big reason was the money. Financially, I wasn’t in
the best situation.” Another student explained that Foundation Year was the only option for college based purely on financial reasons, even despite the fact that he had been accepted to other institutions:

The biggest challenge is not my academy; it’s my real life. I need to make money. I need to find a place to live, food, stuff or something like that. So, I don’t think it’s very, very… I think it’s almost impossible to go to a good school because the time is short. That’s why. . . I was thinking, it’s [Foundation Year] a really good transition of program, especially for the scholarship. (Personal communication)

Similarly, a former Foundation Year student, reflecting back on his decision to attend the program, commented that:

when applying to colleges, I didn’t make the best choices in schools I sent applications to. I got letters back and packages back, but when the packages came I ended up having to pay out of pocket an average of $20,000 for each school and that was simply money I did not have. (Personal communication)

Finally, another student remarked that:

I chose to enroll in Foundation Year because this is where I have got the most financial support from. Because after a whole lot of schools turned me down [in the sense of not providing enough financial support] it was just down to, in fact, I have no other choice. (Personal communication)

For another student, the reason was even more obvious as to why she was attracted to the program, as she indicated that the only reason why she came to Foundation Year was the financial model:

Yesterday I actually came into contact with … a high school student who said that they were coming to Foundation Year and I said, “As long as you get your full tuition paid that’s the only reason why I came to the program”, it’s because my tuition was getting fully paid for. (Personal communication)

While no faculty member pointed to the program’s financial aid model as the sole reason students should attend Foundation Year, there was acknowledgment of the importance of this component of the program. For example, one faculty member explained: “Of course, one other
thing I should mention about Foundation Year is the financial aspect of it … That’s huge, I mean, giving these students what could essentially be a year of free education is huge.”

The program’s financial model also surfaced in discussions centered on the most significant challenges facing students in the transition out of Foundation Year. One faculty member explained that:

Another thing that’s a huge challenge for us and something that I feel is somewhat beyond my control right now and that I worry very much about, is their ability to persist in college without the financial piece—security—that they have when they’re in Foundation Year. We could move the students very far along academically, but if they can’t afford to continue, they’re going to drop out. And, so not only will the program look like, you know, not as strong because these students aren't persisting through, even more tragically the students who will have the ability to be persisting but will be barred from persisting because of financial aid. (Personal communication)

Implicit in this statement is the notion that the financial support of Foundation Year is very important for students with respect to getting them through the first year. There is a general sense that the funding model provides a level of “security” for students and alleviates some of the pressures that are typical on them, ultimately allowing them to focus on other areas of their academic preparedness. However, whereas many of the other components of the program appear to equip students with skills that can be leveraged in the remaining years of college, the funding model of the program simply applies to the first year of college and results in a great deal of uncertainty and concern as students leave the program. This sentiment was also expressed by students when asked to identify any barriers they perceived as existing for them in completing college:

I just think it is my financial issues. Without all my financial issues, I think I have that mindset and, the blessing of God, to go forward in life. So, I don’t think I have any barriers but just my financial issues. (Personal communication)

Thus, while the funding model of Foundation Year serves as a prominent reason why students choose the program and a factor that many of the faculty acknowledge as being a key
component of the program, it is difficult to determine how helpful the model is in ultimately getting students to earn a college degree due to the uncertainties that students face in the subsequent years after the program.

**Putting the safety net in place: Wrap-around services & the building of soft skills**

The importance of Foundation Year’s “wrap-around” support model was a key area of focus during the interviews with faculty and students. In particular, interview participants highlighted the importance of the advising model, the tutoring structure and the “explicit instruction in the systems of higher education” that take place in the non-credit courses as being key components of the program.

With respect to the advising model, faculty were far more praiseworthy of the merits of this component than were students. Faculty identified the advisory component as one of the most important parts of the program, referencing how significant the work of the advisors is, given the complex lives that many Foundation Year students face. One faculty member commented that:

> I think the advisory model is just fabulous . . . I do think this is the best thing we do, and it might be the only replicable thing that we do at the moment. But, it’s really the thing that they need the most. They don’t think they need it the most, but they do. So that constant support that the advisors will give: where are you, text you, call if they didn’t come . . . anything from, “my boyfriend broke up with me and my mom is in rehab again” to “I think I need a binder.” You know, this is amazing what they get every day and they make it work. (Personal communication)

Aside from validating the importance of the advisory model, this statement provides interesting insight into the student perspective of the advising support offered by the program by indicating that students “don’t think they need it the most.” As it turned out, of the students interviewed, very few of them pointed directly to the advising support structure as a primary factor in their success. In fact, one of the former students of the program identified the advising model as
being a non-factor for him, stating that he was “not exactly sure” how important it was as he
doesn’t “really remember much about it.” Similarly, another former student remarked that, if
there were any changes to the program he could make, it would be in providing greater emphasis
on “counseling for certain students.” He questioned whether “students who really needed it
received enough personal or academic counseling to get them through certain issues.”

The disconnect that exists between the faculty perception of advising support and the
student view raises important questions about the work being done in this area. While faculty
perceive a great benefit to this component, students were less likely to mention it as being
important. While it is possible that students do not require an intense level of advising support, it
also may be the case, as the one faculty member commented, that students are simply less willing
to admit that they need this support or don’t necessarily recognize that they do, in fact, need it.

While the advisory model did not receive widespread endorsement from both faculty and
student interview participants, Foundation Year’s tutoring model was identified by both
interview groups as an extremely important component in the program. Faculty commented on
how important it was to have such extensive tutoring available to a group of students who, by
and large, needed significant extra support in English and math. One faculty member explained
that:

We have three fulltime writing tutors who are dedicated exclusively to
Foundation Year. They have Master's degrees … We have a coach who is
working with students and the program as well. So we have an integration of
what's being taught in the classroom is being followed through in the writing
center and there's no downtime for students to have to sit and explain what their
assignment is about. That's actually very important, because if our students were
to just go to the regular university writing center that exists … they're not used to
serving students like ours who have the literacy needs that they have. (Personal
communication)

Another faculty remarked that the tutoring model is:
Fabulous, the best thing we have ever done ... I love it, it feels different this year, it really does ... last year, just, it was just a steady stream of students all day 9 to 5 in my office to talk about their papers. But it wasn’t to talk about their writing it was “I don’t know what to write,” “I don’t understand the assignment,” “I don’t have any ideas,” which is important, but they will never have access to a professor to sit with them and talk about your ideas. They have to get to a place where they can do that thinking somewhere else. (Personal communication)

While some of the faculty indicated that some students are still fighting the idea of tutoring, the student perception of the tutoring model from those who interviewed also reflected a high level of importance for this component of the program. One current student remarked,

I think the tutoring is great. I think, like I said with the one-on-one with professors or in quarterly reviews, one-on-one with writing tutors and targeting specific things that recur, maybe in all of your papers, where you don’t understand the use of a comma or semicolon and having someone who understands that one-on-one for a half hour twice a week or whatever, helps you target, like I said, what was wrong and then help you fix it to be right. (Personal communication)

Other students, in particular those who were English-as-second-language learners, also placed a high value on the tutoring model. These students saw the extra support available in the tutoring sessions as places they could practice their oral English and hone their writing skills.

While the availability of tutoring alone is a perceived strength of the program, the unique structure of the tutoring model that connects students, faculty and tutors on a regular basis is perceived as playing a large role in its effectiveness. One faculty member explained:

We also have math tutors who are in the classroom with the faculty and also in a math lab that meets weekly so the faculty, the students and the mentors are all together. What's good about that is that it not only obviously for understanding the content and having multiple voices in teaching the content, but it also has ... it elevates the level of discourse around what the students are talking about. So they're talking with people about math in an academic setting. Yeah, and, so, it's not just a ... a traditional tutoring. It's a discussion about math with people who are having conversation about it in a more academic way. (Personal communication)

Similarly, another faculty member commented that:
I think what is unique about what we do, is that we try to have the tutors be in class with our students. That has been happening in math, that has been happening in economics, to a certain extent that happened to one of our tutors in Bio. Which means they sort of understand, they can sort of be in the classroom with our students, have a sense where our students are stuck, so that the conversation is a continuation of the class and not necessarily a, sort of, you know, out of context “what do you need to know?” (Personal communication)

A final component of the wrap-around services model that was identified as being extremely beneficial for student success was the teaching of “soft skills” to students, either through ad hoc conversations and advising sessions or through more explicit teaching in the non-credit courses. One faculty member defined soft skills as the skills that most people intuitively would think individuals have to be able to successfully navigate a certain situation; for example, skills needed to answer questions like “Who is the registrar? What do you get from there? … How do you respond to an email?” This particular faculty member indicated that the program staff made “wild assumptions” about what their students did and did not know about college and that the lack of soft skills was detrimental to their success. Recognizing that students coming out of the city schools appeared to lack these important skills, the faculty of Foundation Year saw an opportunity to provide students with information that would aid in their persistence through school:

So the idea to be able to have a program that was going to be allowed to really redesign and up-end some of these practices that were putting students at a disadvantage and really being willing to say “we're not just going to assume that students know how to do these things, because we know now that they don't know how to do them” and instead of just brushing it under the rug or allowing it to cause them to fall through the cracks or drop out, we're going to put the safety net in place…those things won't be able to be stumbling blocks anymore. (Personal communication)

This particular faculty member picked back on up this theme later in the interview, stating that:

It wasn’t enough—and isn’t enough—to just say these students have weaknesses in math and English, for instance … and think that just by bolstering tutoring services to them that that will be enough to make successful. Because, what is actually more of an obstacle is that they lack the knowledge, the cultural
knowledge, the cultural capital of what it means to be a college student. Many of them are first in their families to go so they don't have the language, the frame of reference, the literacy really to navigate these systems. So, instead of assuming that they're going to know these things, we explicit teach them and a lot of Foundation Year is done in that way through classes, through non-credit classes. (Personal communication)

Given Foundation Year’s pathway model of transitioning students to other institutions of higher education after the first year of college, the importance of developing skills that speak, universally, to the culture found on most college campuses was further stressed. One faculty member stated:

I do believe that if we do a really good job of working with students around the skills, especially the soft skills they need to be successful and the transition [to another institution] is going to be easier, they are going to be able to know where to go when they need stuff, they are going to be able to understand what is required to be really mesh in the community, they are going to understand that they need to make connections with professors, they need to understand that they need to make connections with peers and the quicker they can do that, the quicker they adjust. (Personal communication)

An underlying theme in the development of these soft skills is that students, generally, gain more confidence in themselves and in their abilities to be self-advocates for things they need. One student touched on this idea when describing the transformation that took place during Foundation Year as a result of the support structures that were provided during the year:

before I entered college I saw it as pretty much a giant that I would never be able to stand up against … after Foundation Year I saw myself as a part of that giant, I feel like part of the community as if I contribute something; not fighting against it, I am working with it. (Personal communication)

While faculty perceptions of the skills developed during the non-credit courses were very favorable, the perceptions of student participants were mixed. Some students valued the importance of these courses, recognizing that they would not necessarily have gained the skills otherwise. As one student explained:

we took a college 101 course telling us all about colleges … Various things we would not have known about … like, the work-study, especially. That is a really
important thing for students and I had no idea what work study was or how it worked, and Foundation Year filled me in on all that. (Personal communication)

Another student explained how, initially, his perception was that the non-credit work would be a waste of time but, after starting to attend the classes, he ended up seeing the value of the course:

I saw that without that writing tutor my grades will not be in the B plus average right now. And I said without the advisory, I will not be able to learn things and experiment and get more information in life. And without that personal leadership, I cannot lead myself I cannot be a leader within my own confidence. (Personal communication)

Similarly, another student remarked how, for the most part, students “don’t take them [the non-credit classes] seriously and they think they’re annoying” but that he eventually came around to understand the value of the courses:

I found it useful to understand that they are put there for a reason and no one is going to have me sit in a classroom because they feel like it, that I am in this noncredit course with an objective and I need to attain that objective to be successful in that particular course whether I’m receiving credit for it or not. It is still how I am viewed by other people. So, why would I want to be viewed in a bad light? (Personal communication)

Finally, one student was clear that the non-credit aspect of the courses made them very unappealing:

Yeah, English is something that I don’t enjoy at all and probably when we have, like, classes that really aren’t credited. So like, we have to go to like advisory. I haven’t been to advisory because I’m not getting credit and I have job. Career development: I’m getting Northeastern credit for it, it’s not like my grade and credit will transfer into CPS or the Day school, so, it doesn’t really bother me, like, I’m not going to really go to the class and try my hardest. The only reason I went to my advisory yesterday is because I plan on staying at Northeastern, so, that’s the only reason. So, I dislike classes that I don’t get credit for. (Personal communication)

The student went on to explain that:

Yeah. I’m not even going to, like, lie about it, like, we used to skip class, just never went to any of our non-credited classes because nobody wanted to be there, like, nobody wants to be in the class where there’s nobody. (Personal communication)
Even though the faculty respondents wholeheartedly endorsed the value of the non-credit courses, they, too, recognized the inherent challenge of having coursework be labeled as “non-credit.” As one faculty member stated:

the non-credit things, including the tutoring, the advisory, the personal leadership and career development, are really integral to the program and really students cannot be successful in the program without availing themselves of those things, but the challenge for the program is that they're non-credit … So, having the student place as much value on those things has been very challenging … Right now, it sort of feels like “extra stuff” that they don't really have to do or why do they really have to do it. (Personal communication)

Finally, one of the students expressed that, while the non-credit designation of the courses, in and of themselves, did not make the courses unattractive, the content of the courses did not seem worthwhile in his mind: “I didn’t really know why they were necessarily essential. I mean, it wasn’t so much that they were non-credit. It was more like the content and the class I just didn’t quite get a lot of it.”

Overall, the “safety net” provided by the advising, tutoring and non-credit coursework model is perceived by Foundation Year faculty as being very important to the success of students. The skills that are enhanced and learned through these wrap-around components are thought of as having long-lasting impact on students as they transition away from the program. Students, on the other hand, perceive some components of these support structures as being more beneficial than others. By and large, the additional academic support—particularly in the area of writing—was valued very highly by students while the recognition of needing personal advising or needing to develop an understanding on how to navigate college was not as pronounced.

The importance of being understood: The impact of enhanced writing skills

Foundation Year’s emphasis on enhancing the writing skills of students was universally accepted as a key component of the program throughout the participant interviews. Both faculty
and students alike remarked that developing good writing skills was a key to student success during Foundation Year and beyond. In explaining the key structures of the program, one faculty member commented that “we think that writing is a staple. You need to know how to write to do well in any course … and to read. Just to be literate in general.” Similarly, another faculty member explained that:

their [the students] writing is just everywhere, so we have such a huge focus on the writing. We’ve been really working, as a faculty, to improve that across our own classes. I think that message is super important for the kids--they all hate English and they think they love the other classes, but then they realize they have to write in those as well. (Personal communication)

Students, as well, reflected back on the importance of developing writing skills:

I would say the writing courses definitely [were a key component of the program]. There was a ton of writing in that and it was all intensive writing. In my opinion, I did not know how to write before Foundation Year was how much I improved. And nowadays . . . pretty much all I do is write all the time, so that skill is incredibly valuable in terms of my current and long-term success. (Personal communication)

For English-as-second-language-learners, the importance of developing writing skills was, not surprisingly, at the forefront of their comments. For these students, Foundation Year provided an opportunity for them to gain competencies both in oral and written English. As one student remarked:

I liked the help that they provided [extra support], because I kind of needed it. Especially in English, I really needed the help, so, like, helped me get better at it and a lot a group programs like group meetings that they had pretty much centered on improving writing. (Personal communication)

Another student, in acknowledging the importance of the emphasis of writing in the program, explained how this component was more than just about teaching students how to write; in his assessment, improved writing skills allowed students to be better understood by others:

the ability to be understood, especially in terms of, like, their grammar and being able to form a sentence that people can understand the meaning of. So, just
improving our grammar, sort of, helped us. It helped identify our problems where we needed work. I think that had some of us not gone to Foundation Year, we wouldn’t learn how to communicate; and therefore, our ideas would be cloudy and we wouldn’t be successful in college. (Personal communication)

The student explained that this notion of being understood is important as it “gives them [students] confidence and then from that confidence they continue to succeed.”

Foundation Year’s emphasis on writing clearly was identified as a strong point of the program. The importance of good writing was recognized by both current students and former students who have seen the impact pay off as they transitioned away from Foundation Year into another college setting. Similarly, the investment that the faculty have made in providing writing support to students—either through direct faculty instruction every term of the program or through the writing lab—clearly reflect the value that they place on enhancing this skill for students.

**Maximizing the potential for learning: The importance of having a strong faculty**

The existence of outstanding faculty in Foundation Year was also a component that all interview participants identified as being extremely important. Throughout the dialogue that took place in the interviews with faculty and students, the role that faculty play in the program was a reoccurring theme. In particular, two common themes emerged within this category: one, the importance of having faculty who are readily available and genuinely care about students; and, two, the utilization of a pedagogical approach in the program that is student-centered and attempts to engage students in learning through meaningful teaching.

The design of Foundation Year, with its increased contact hours in the classroom and integrated tutoring model, increases the amount of time students get to spend with faculty, allowing for a greater level of interaction between these two groups. Both faculty and students
viewed this increased interaction as a positive feature of the program. One faculty member remarked that:

I think that the ability to just kind of drop in and talk to your professor, to think back when you were in school, I don’t know where you went but, did you have that? And if you did, you probably still value it to this day. And if you didn’t, you’re like: “Man, you get to talk” to your professors like on a peer level almost, like where it’s not overly stuffy. (Personal communication)

For this faculty member, one of the most important aspects of the program was the development of a level of “comfortability” within the group, which was largely attributed to the existence of an outstanding faculty and staff who get to truly know students and value the notion of creating a “culturally appealing” environment for the program’s students.

Students, as well, expressed appreciation for the fact that the program allowed them to develop relationships with the faculty. When asked about their favorite part of the program, nearly every one of the student participants pointed to the faculty and the relationships they have with them. The student comments convey a general sense that the relationships with faculty provided for a richer learning environment as students were more comfortable receiving feedback from faculty. As one student commented:

I definitely enjoy the fact that the faculty is so close to the students. I think that gives sort of depth as long as breadth when a professor or the director or anyone, an advisor, needs to sort of cast judgment on maybe what a student needs in order to learn—the skills that they’ll need to succeed in their life. (Personal communication)

Near the conclusion of the interview, this same student again mentioned the importance of faculty-student interactions when he mentioned that:

I just want to emphasize the familiarity that students have with professors is really important in building that relationship, can help students maybe trust their educators more, and then do better in class. (Personal communication)

The increased interaction between faculty and students not only serves to enrich the learning environment for students, it also appeals to the faculty, many of whom expressed how important
it is to them to develop close relationships with students. As one faculty member stated: “To me, one of the most fulfilling aspects of working in a program like this is that you do get to know your students a little bit better than you would in a traditional college classroom setting” (Personal communication).

The positive perceptions of increased faculty-student interactions were further augmented by the fact that the Foundation Year faculty members were perceived to be caring and compassionate educators. Throughout the interviews, the faculty were described as individuals who cared about students, are passionate about what they do, and who would go above and beyond what is expected of a typical faculty member. These elements did not go unnoticed by the students, who mentioned how important it was to have faculty who were committed to them:

To get a professor that keeps sending you messages trying to know how you’re doing, if you’re feeling good and if everything is going on give me an extra office hour, extension of the office hour time, I think that is a really positive attribute that the program brought to us. And it made us believe that we as students we still have an opportunity to make it even if we thought we couldn’t make it while in high school. (Personal communication)

Another student simply stated, “the professors really care about the students, and I think that’s a factor that a program like this needs.” Furthermore, another student explained that faculty view students in the program as if they were their own children and that this level of integration created a general sense of trust of the faculty.

The compassion that faculty have for the students also came out during their own interviews. In gaining an understanding of their background and the reasons why they came to teach in Foundation Year, it was clear that reasons other than a paycheck drew the faculty to NU. One faculty member, for example, explained that:

I found myself working with adults more than students and I had loved the classrooms so I found this—and I loved urban students—so sort of the perfect fit for me that I could be back in the classroom working with a population that I felt
that I know and love and have had moments of effectiveness with. (Personal communication)

While nearly all interview participants identified the connections with faculty as a strength of the program, this same component also had a perceived downside. When asked what his least favorite part of the program was, one student stated:

Probably the same thing [as my favorite aspect]. I think the closeness with faculty also gets familiarity with students. So students sort of know what they can get away with and what they can’t and instead of trying to impress a professor, they become so close to the professor, that they know that they maybe if they don’t turn the paper on the due date they are just going to get an extension anyway. So why do the paper on time? (Personal communication)

This idea of creating too comfortable of an environment was also reflected in responses by the faculty, as one faculty member described a recent class in which a student showed up barefoot. The faculty member argued that, in any other college class, such behavior would not be tolerated but the combination of the program’s cohort model with the close bonds that have been developed between students and faculty allowed for this to happen. Thus, in the case of faculty interactions with students, there appears to be a fine line between engaging the students in a manner that creates a level of trust and creating too comfortable of an environment that does not reflect the typical norms found on a college campus.

A student-centered approach to teaching: In addition to fostering an environment of collaboration and trust, the importance of faculty was also highlighted during the interview process because of the pedagogical approach they employ within the classroom. In conversations with students and faculty, it become increasingly clear that the general teaching practices within the program favor a more student-centered learning environment.

Faculty, for example, marveled at the ability to utilize various learning models and to adapt teaching materials to the unique needs of the students who are in the program. This was a particularly important component for those individuals who had prior experience in the K-12
sector and gave off the impression that there was far less opportunities to be creative or innovative in their teachings in that setting. As one faculty member remarked: “the level of autonomy, the creative freedom, the resources that are at my disposal are just fabulous” (Personal communication). This level of autonomy and creative freedom, in turn, enables faculty to approach their teaching in a manner that attempts to connect to the urban students in their classrooms. The notion of making learning “fun” and “cool” was mentioned by faculty on a number of occasions. One faculty member, for example indicated that: “I don’t lecture my students but try to engage and have them discuss things. It makes for a more interesting and fun class” (Personal communication) while another explained that the “the fun that we convey for it [the learning], is contagious” (Personal communication). One faculty member spoke about the importance of being passionate and being able to share that passion in a way that related to students:

I don’t think there’s enough people who make education look cool. . . you know, to make it exciting, to share your passion with somebody and to relate to them as people and not to say that our faculty, you know, physically necessary looks like that, but at least I feel that most of my faculty with me, if not all, gets that. I think that’s a core, probably for everybody whether they choose to say it or not in here. I think that one of the big problems when I look around is that students being able to identify with the instructors, also teaching to the test, teaching to the MCAS, of course, you know, a high stake test as opposed to critical thinking. (Personal communication)

Students, by and large, validated the perceptions of the faculty members in this area by describing their faculty as fun and recounting assignments that engaged them in learning. For instance, in explaining one faculty member, a current student remarked:

She is a very outgoing professor, but what I mean by that, I guess, she is a very fun professor and at the same time she is serious when she needs to be. So, she gets you, I guess, into learning and then she takes on a serious persona to force you to improve. (Personal communication)
Another student reflected back on an assignment that took students out of the classroom and into the real world, allowing students to relate to the assignment but also challenging them academically in a way that they may not have previously experienced.

For example, we had an assignment where we had to go to a supermarket and videotape the corruption of the supermarket; I mean that is not an easy task to do. You have to actually, first of all, go out and get the information, primary information, and then you have to see, you know, if there is any corruption and you have to write about the corruption if any and present it in front of the class, an assignment like that is pretty hefty. (Personal communication)

Finally, a few students used examples of the experiences of friends and families at other colleges and universities to stress the importance of pedagogical approach used in Foundation Year. For example, one of the former students commented that:

I have family that go to college and they tell me, like, stories about how the teachers are pretty much just lecturers and don’t really interact much unless you actively seek them out. But, like, the teachers in Foundation Year pretty much interact with you pretty much every class. They keep trying to make sure that you get everything and I felt that it is a better way of teaching because it kind of maximizes the potential for learning. (Personal communication)

Overall, the work of the faculty—both in their creation of interpersonal relationships with students and in their approach to teaching and learning—was identified as a very important component of the Foundation Year program. The design of the program to include a cohort model and increased contact hours with faculty members enhances the role of faculty in the program. These structural designs, coupled with the hiring of faculty who have passion for working with marginalized urban students, have led to a seemingly successful formula that has increased the level of engagement between students and the institution.

**Going through a stressful situation twice: Foundation Year’s pathway model**

One of the most unique aspects of Foundation Year is its pathways model that encourages students to leave NU and transfer to other institutions of higher education. While this model was not directly mentioned in the interviews as being an integral component to increasing the
likelihood of college completion by either faculty or students, the model was discussed by interview participants as both a strength and challenge of the program.

When asked about the pathways structure of the Foundation Year program, student interview participants revealed no concerns with the model. For the most part, students felt that the skills gained during Foundation Year would allow them to transition to another institution and fit in. One student explained:

I think that the students that are leaving Foundation Year have in their minds not they are transfer students, but, I mean, that they are new students at a new school and they are going to, I think, appreciate that and they are going to feel like they belong. Even if they do have in the back of their mind, “Oh well, I wasn’t here for freshman year,” once first semester is over at their new school or even second semester, I think, you’ll have, like, acclimated and you’ll just be submerged in the culture of that particular school. (Personal communication)

Additionally, a former student of the program explained, based on his own experience and of the experience of others he speaks with, that he felt the program was adequately preparing students to be successful at another institution and that there was nothing inherently wrong with the “transition out” model of the program. Yet, another student commented that he believes Foundation Year is doing a good job preparing students for the transition by “giving them the skills and the work ethic that they will need to succeed.” Finally, another former student reiterated the same theme by using himself as an example of how the transition out of Foundation Year can be successful. The student recounted:

I mean of course it is very different when you go from having someone support to not much support, but I felt like I was given, you know, a good basis to be able to take care of myself after that full year with them, and I had confidence, you know, in the training the professors provided. (Personal communication)

This student continued his defense of the model by indicating that Foundation Year students are not “normal” transfer students because of the extra help they receive during the program:

I definitely feel the skills are transferable because we are learning all general courses. In terms of, if this research [that shows transfer students have a more
difficult time adjusting] is a strike against transfer students in general, it might not exactly apply to Foundation Year students specifically because they would not be normal transfers. They would have got that extra support, that extra help. (Personal communication)

Aside from the students, two members of the faculty also expressed their opinion that the model has the potential to work. One instructor commented that:

I would think it'd be difficult for any transfer student, at least in the beginning, to kind of find their footing and meet people, just kind of understand the culture of the school. But I would hope that some of the skills that we've tried to impart on our students would be taken forward wherever they go. (Personal communication).

Another perceived benefit of the pathways model is that it forces students to reflect more on what the best college options are for them. As one faculty member stated, “I do like … how much it stretches students to make this decision to think about who they are, to think about where they want to go.” Given that many students initially elected to attend Foundation Year purely on the funding model and may not have chosen the institution that was the best fit for them, the pathways model that encourages students to leave NU provides students a second opportunity to find the right college or university.

As well-intentioned as this model may be in assisting students in identifying the best fit for them, it does not come without skepticism or reservation from those involved in the program. As one faculty member remarked:

I do think it's a much more challenging model. I think the design is much more challenging than those other programs where the students are, you know, either conditionally admitted to the institution or they're admitted with the supports and then the supports follow them through four years … I think it is much more challenging what we're doing … I do feel sometimes like we're pulling them in with one hand and pushing them away with the other. (Personal communication)

Another member of the faculty perceived the model as being far too drastic, in particular given the population of students enrolled in Foundation Year. She commented that:
Anecdotally, I would not choose Foundation Year because, I’m even pretty well adjusted and can work the system and knew how to apply to college by myself and things like that. But the idea of being invested in a place for one year and then having to start that process over again is pretty daunting for me and I am pretty well adjusted. So these students are really struggling with that. The minute they get here we say, “hi welcome, but, you are not here for long so your goal should be ‘where are you going next?’” And that’s hard for them to juggle that, it’s hard for them to go through that application process again, it’s hard enough the first time. So … they are writing all these essays again and all these applications, and it’s like a full time course again. Emotionally they don’t like that idea either… I think these are extremely fragile students anyway in lots of ways and we ask them to go through that really stressful situation twice. (Personal communication)

For other faculty members, there existed more of a gray area concerning the pathways model. For these individuals, the model was not thought of as a one-size-fits-all model, indicating that some students benefit from its approach as they are ready to transition to another school while others definitely need the support structures of Foundation Year for a longer period of time. One faculty member explained:

So right when they are beginning to make some gains we push them and I think they regress and we have seen that from our first cohort that, they are really, they are making this upper trajectory and we lose that once they leave. So I think we have to sort of think about that, some students are definitely ready in six month—definitely some of those kids are truly. It’s sort of others who need a little bit more time that we need to think about an alternative that will be better. (Personal communication)

This same notion was reiterated by another faculty member who struggles with the idea that students leaving the program may not be guaranteed any additional help at another institution:

they are still marginalized students, they are still learning the language of higher ed. But … and that, for some students, and I don’t want to paint all of our students with a broad brush, because some of our students will be able to leave us in one year, go anywhere and know how to navigate those systems … but for some of our students who are going to need some [help], certainly, I would like to be able to say at 'X' institution you will be guaranteed this. (Personal communication)

Overall, the pathways model of Foundation Year generated significant dialogue with interview participants. While the model, in and of itself, was not identified as a significant component that would necessarily aid in student retention efforts, the fundamental concept of
bringing students into one institution for a year and then sending them off to another institution was discussed by students and faculty as being both a strength and weakness of the program.

**Other reoccurring themes**

In addition to the key components of the program that faculty and students described, a few other noteworthy themes emerged throughout the interview process. These themes—while not directly related to answering one of the central research questions guiding this study—are important to discuss as they provide further context into the experiences of urban college students and speak to the numerous challenges facing educators and administrators seeking to solve the identified problem practice of low graduation rates among this population of students. Additionally, these themes help the reader gain a clearer picture of why the Foundation Year program is structured the way it is, while also raising important questions about whether supportive first-year college programs are even worthwhile for some students.

**The challenges of life outside school.** Throughout the interviews with both faculty and students, there was a great deal of discussion about the complex lives that students in the Foundation Year program live. Discussions centered primarily on students’ difficult family and personal lives, work obligations, and the negative influences in their surrounding communities.

In general, conversations with faculty about the outside lives of students conveyed an underlying sense of empathy for the students, while also illustrating a general sense of frustration that the demands of their personal lives provide such a barrier to the work the faculty are doing. For example, one faculty member remarked:

> So, you know, I think that, you know, teachers can do, really all they can, but I think that the home environment really, really affects whether or not students retain information, whether or not students value the information that they are getting in school, you know, whether or not, you know, whatever they are learning in school is validated at home … our students come from really complex
family lives that may not support education and that’s important too. (Personal communication)

Another faculty member recounted specific situations facing students of the program and indicated that they provided significant challenges to the students in staying on the path towards completing college:

… but the challenges of suddenly being homeless, suddenly losing a parent and not being able to go back to a home country to attend a wake or a funeral. Suddenly, you know, being asked to be a foster parent for another child, having parents who are claiming you on their tax forms but really not providing anything for you . . . These factors alone would be enough to, you know, pull them off the path … We’re facing the fact these students are in these communities that are highly complex and putting the focus first on being a student hasn't always happened. (Personal communication)

A similar feeling was conveyed by another faculty member who reflected on how little it takes to sidetrack students in the program from their studies and how, if there are multiple issues that need to be dealt with, going to school often becomes the last priority:

So, it’s the immediate, it’s the sort of just what they are marinated in, and college is really hard and I am always amazed still at the lack of persistence they have—that, when it’s raining out, my attendance is worse. It’s just sort of that whenever life gets in the way, either minor ways or disastrous ways, it is just school is the first to go, and then that leads to the home situation that they are dealing with. (Personal communication)

Similar challenges and complexities also surfaced during interviews with the students, as many of them spoke about how difficult it is getting work done at home and about the number of hours they needed to work in order to contribute to their family’s financial situation. Some students spoke of having lost parents, others of having to care for younger siblings or relatives, and others of having to support themselves as independent students. One student, in reflecting back on the impact of her home life and surrounding community on her ability to successfully do school work in the Foundation Year program, remarked that:

work wise, I feel like a lot of my work wasn’t turned in or a lot of my assignments weren’t really complete because I can’t focus at home and I know I should be
home by a certain time and I don’t like to get home, like, too late, I like to get home before the street lights kind of come on. And then when home it’s like, I can’t really do anything. (Personal communication)

Another student also hinted at the challenges confronting him in his surrounding community when he explained that “there is nothing out there in the streets—I have seen everything there is … in the smoking, the things people do, it’s only going to lead you to one place and that’s the jail.” For this student, staying late at Foundation Year and taking advantage of all the wrap-around support services provided an alternative to what he faced in his home community. Yet, even at this, the student’s challenging home life placed additional demands on him as he is the de facto parent of his siblings and therefore has to come home and cook to ensure that everyone eats and that the chores are taken care of.

For other students, the demands of making money in order to support themselves or contribute to their larger family situation placed additional burdens on them, impacting their ability to be successful in college. Despite the program’s “requirement” not to work more than twenty hours per week, some students openly admitted to working upwards of forty hours. Moreover, one student, in response to being asked what parts of the program he disliked the most responded by saying “my [outside] life, because I don’t have a lot of money, I need to work a lot” (Personal communication).

Lacking the required culture capital. The out-of-school life of students also played into discussions about the type of skills and dispositions that students in Foundation Year lack. While the notion of a lack of cultural understanding on the part of students was implicit in many discussions with faculty in regards to the importance of teaching students the soft skills of college, it is worthwhile to call out the direct statements made by faculty with respect to the perceived disconnect that exists between the cultures that students come from and the culture of college. In talking with the faculty, it became clear that the upbringings and current
surroundings of Foundation Year students put them at a disadvantage in fitting in at college, particularly as it relates to their ability to communicate effectively and understand the general norms of the rest of the college community. One faculty member commented that:

I think that there is a language, there is sort of a social acceptable language, social acceptable presence, the our students don’t come in having and the things that our students don’t know sometimes boggle my mind because they sort of been, you know, they sort of been in three blocks, and being here in Northeastern blows their mind half the time because they really understand what they don’t know and they all react to that in different ways. They may feel really small. (Personal communication)

Another faculty member also pointed to the significance that language plays in a student’s ability to connect to the college, stating that:

I don’t think our kids are particularly different than any other freshman, just an urban freshman dealing with the urban problems a little bit more than maybe the suburban problems. I think speech is a huge problem in the inner city. Speaking academically is not a highly regarded skill. (Personal communication)

In the eyes of the faculty, this lack of “academic speak” impacts the way in which students interact with other members of the Foundation Year and NU community and, ultimately, has a perceived negative impact on their ability to succeed in college.

In explaining her general thoughts on why urban students are having a difficult time completing college, one faculty member spoke of the cultural differences that often exist between students and faculty and how this difference can impact a student’s decision to remain in college or withdraw. The faculty member indicated:

You’re talking about kids who are minorities, who are looking at teachers that look nothing like them. They don’t share any of the same, maybe, values that they share. They have a whole different cultural framework … And so, the kids don’t feel like, tacitly, they don’t feel like college is for them. They don’t feel like they’re being spoken to. So, I think that that’s huge. (Personal communication)

Some faculty viewed this lack of a cultural framework as impacting a student’s ability to fully understand the nuances of the college environment and grasp the fact “that there’s a time and
place for everything.” In response to this, the program attempts to teach students how to read the environments that they are in and take prompts from the environment about how they should be acting. As one faculty member explained, we tell a student:

"You need to read the environment that you're in and take your cues from that. So when you are thinking about anywhere that you go, you are looking around and you are … you are an observer of the environment for a bit before you start behaving in a certain way. So, taking cues from the environment. (Personal communication)"

Overall, faculty of the Foundation Year program perceive a general disconnect between the environments that urban students come from and the environments found on a college campus, which ultimately puts the students at a disadvantage because they are not aware of how to act or effectively communicate with members of the college community. The program’s structure in explicitly teaching students about the norms of college and how to adjust one’s behavior based on reading the environment one is situated in is one way that the program attempts to mitigate the impact of the environment that urban students grow up in.

**Importance of motivation and work ethic.** A final theme that emerged during the interviews with both faculty and students was the importance of student motivation to success in Foundation Year. While the program provides a great deal of support to students and has a cadre of committed, caring faculty, there was an underlying message in many of the interviews that spoke to the idea that all of these positive attributes of the program are only useful if students have a strong work ethic and are committed to leveraging the resources at their disposal. One faculty member, in response to being asked what the single most important trait is for a student to be successful in Foundation Year, indicated “a work ethic.” She went on to explain that the program attempts to foster a strong work ethic amongst students by providing all the resources necessary to be successful, including extra tutoring, personal laptops, and time during the day to complete assignments. However, in the end, if students are not willing to take advantage of the
resources, they will not be successful. Ultimately, this faculty member viewed her job as doing the best she could do to prepare students while the students’ “job is to be receptive to that and work hard.”

Other faculty also spoke to the importance of motivation in making it through the program. Similarly, students also remarked that motivation was a key to making it through the program, as exemplified by one student’s remarks: “I feel like to make it through the program it requires a proper motivation and if you don’t have that you will not be able to get the basic skills being offered in the program.” This student went on to explain that:

I believe that if you are a student without much motivation, the program would not work for you … What I have seen or read about is students with, who are more goal-oriented in terms of career path or, I guess, just everyday goals tend to be more motivated, more interested, and it is not just goals they have to be autonomous goals in terms of … they have to be their own goals. There can’t be outside pressures or parental pressures, it shouldn’t be that -- it should be but choices of the students to study what they are studying. (Personal communication)

A sense of frustration—both among the faculty and students—for students who elected not to capitalize on the resources provided by the program was also evident during the interview process. From the faculty standpoint, one member explained how Boston, in general, is rich in resources for urban students as compared to other areas of the countries but that some individuals still reject the resources provided to them. She indicated:

What I think is interesting about Boston, is that I have lived in, like, eleven different states and I have never seen so many resources available to students and young people in Boston. It’s, like, “please take this, we want this for you” and there is still that, I mean, I spent a lot of time working in rural areas as well, and it’s just “if you want it here you can get it here.” It’s still hard, but this idea is still that there is this rejection of resources that are there if you want the help. (Personal communication)

Another faculty member, after explaining how some students simply go through the motions of the program, simply stated: “There’s only so much you can motivate a person who doesn’t want to be motivated—you can’t do magic with that somebody not willing to hear the act.” Finally,
another faculty member described the disappointment he feels when a student who he perceives as strong in abilities does not do well:

What’s interesting is that some of the students, who we, or at least I, thought of as the stronger students, have done pretty poorly and I'm not sure why … So I had a kid who ended up with a B-minus. But he could’ve had an A-minus. His writing was very strong. He’s one of the strongest readers. He just missed a bunch of classes and didn't hand in a bunch of work … For me, it’s two ends of the spectrum in terms of emotions. I couldn’t be more disappointed when that strong student failed. But when that kid who, really, you don’t expect to do that well, does well, it’s great, it’s wonderful. (Personal communication)

This notion of motivation is an important consideration to note because it raises questions of whether or not all students can be successful in graduating from college. Institutions can provide all the support they want but, if a student shows little interest in capitalizing on those support structures, there is little hope that he or she will successfully make it through college.

The discussion of motivation also points to the importance of the aforementioned Foundation Year admissions process which, through an in-depth applicant review process, attempts to identify students who reflect a strong sense of motivation. Motivation is a difficult thing to measure but, based on the thoughts and perceptions of the faculty and students interviewed for this research project, it is important characteristic for success in the Foundation Year program.
Chapter VI: Discussion of Research Findings

The primary purpose of this research was to provide an in-depth analysis of a supportive first-year program aimed at increasing retention rates among marginalized urban youth. The research was informed by an identified problem of practice within the City of Boston and one university’s proposed solution to the problem. At the broadest level, the research question driving this investigation was:

- **How are institutions of higher education attempting to solve the identified problem of practice with respect to low college graduation rates among marginalized urban students?**

It was this central question, coupled with the fact that there is a dearth of scholarly literature as it pertains to institutional efforts aimed at addressing low college retention rates among urban students that led to the utilization of Northeastern University’s Foundation Year as the unit of analysis in a singular case study research design.

Having identified Foundation Year as an attempted solution to the identified problem of practice, three additional, more focused, research questions were used to guide the investigation:

- **What are the key characteristics and components of the Foundation Year program and how do these components compare to those of other first-year supportive programs?**
- **What elements of the Foundation Year program do student participants perceive as being the most useful in helping them succeed in college?**
- **What elements of the Foundation Year program do faculty members and administrators identify as being the most useful in helping students succeed in college?**
These questions focused the research on the singularity of Foundation Year and also resulted in the collection of data that was more descriptive than evaluative in nature; due to the relative infancy of the Foundation Year program, the researcher’s primary motivations were not to evaluate the effectiveness of the first-year program but rather to provide a holistic, in-depth, description of the structure and key components of the program.

This chapter discusses the research findings of this investigation as it relates to the theoretical frameworks shaping the study, as well as detailing the implications of this study for higher education practitioners and scholars concerned about low college persistence rates among urban students. The chapter is organized into four sections. Section I revisits the theoretical frameworks shaping this study and discusses how the research findings support, contradict, and enhance the predominant theories on college student retention. Section II discusses the practical and scholarly implications of the case study research and serves as a call to action for other institutions to help in addressing the identified problem of practice. Section III provides recommendations for future investigation on both the Foundation Year program as well as more broad areas pertaining to urban student education and first-year programming.

Section I: Interpretation of findings

Both the theoretical frameworks informing this study and the information gained through the review of the student retention literature provide useful context in the interpretation of the findings of this study. This section first utilizes the theoretical lens of Tinto’s (1993) model to interpret the findings and then moves into a discussion of the utility of cultural and social capital theory as it pertains to the research discoveries. Next, the section introduces a new theoretical paradigm for consideration in the discussion and then, finally, ends by revisiting the primary
propositions which guided the data collection for this case study and discusses the ways in which the findings support these propositions.

**Tinto’s theory of student departure**

In reviewing the key components and structures of the Foundation Year program, aspects of Tinto’s (1993) theory are clearly evident. Tinto’s theory calls for increased levels of integration within the academic and social structures of an institution; the theory postulates that the more a student is integrated into the fabric of an institution, the more likely a student is to remain enrolled in that institution. To this end, Foundation Year provides numerous opportunities for students to become integrated into the program. The program’s structure of small class sizes, increased faculty-student contact hours, an “intrusive” advising model, and orientation to campus resources all speak to creating increased levels of integration between students and the institution. The fact that students are placed in a cohort and that faculty teach exclusively within the Foundation Year program further enhances the integration that exists between student and institution; in many ways, the structure of the program creates the feeling of a tight knit community amongst faculty and students and mirrors the type of “learning communities” that Tinto describes in some of his later works (Tinto, 1997; 1998; 2003). This feeling of integration between these groups was a prominent theme during participant interviews, as individuals attributed the relationships that existed between faculty and students as one of the most significant parts of the program. In this regard, the findings of the study confirm one of the most dominant themes in the student retention literature: that enhanced integration assists in retaining students.

The findings of this research as it pertains to other key components of the program also support Tinto’s (1993) model of student retention. As was observed previously in the review of
the scholarly literature, the early stages of Tinto’s model were initially critiqued due to the lack of emphasis on minority or non-traditional students. In response to these criticisms, Tinto’s subsequent revisions to his model attempt to address this concern by providing specific discussion about key considerations for student retention programs aimed at both students of color and at-risk students. Regarding this, Tinto (1993) writes:

The distinguishing components of programs for academically at-risk students are (1) an emphasis on intrusive intervention; (2) assessment, monitoring of academic progress, and early warning; (3) the enhancement of basic skills; (4) the development of study and learning skills; and (5) the development of appropriate learning settings. (p. 182)

The findings of the research on the Foundation Year program support many of these recommendations by Tinto. For example, the program’s advising structure illustrates a form of “intrusive intervention.” Its mandatory academic advising and quarterly review sessions are indicative of frequent monitoring of academic progress and early warning, and its non-credit curriculum component and tutoring model speaks to the enhancement of basic skills and the development of study skills. Similarly, the findings of the key components of Foundation Year validate the supportive first-year model proposed by Muraskin (1998) who, like Tinto, emphasizes the importance of social and academic integration. Among the key recommendations from Muraskin for a supportive first-year program for at-risk students are: pre-freshman academic and social preparation; intrusive advising; academic services that reinforce coursework; and, the building of community through group services.

Tinto’s observations on institutional efforts to increase retention for at-risk students are also helpful in understanding another theme which emerged during the interview discussions: the importance of hiring skilled faculty who understand the students in the program. In talking about the design of first-year programs aimed at at-risk students, Tinto (1993) explains that:
Of course, the success of all such programs ultimately hinges upon the skills of the instructors who teach at-risk students…The issue here is not just a matter of pedagogical skills. It is one of understanding the ways in which at-risk students made sense of academic work…The difficulty most faculty and staff have in working with at-risk students is, in large measure, not being able to understand “where those students are coming from” and therefore not being able to put themselves in the student’s place as the latter attempt to acquire what faculty deem to be simple concepts and basic skills. (p. 184)

The findings of this research study support this assertion by Tinto, as a common characteristic among each of the Foundation Year faculty was prior experience working with urban youth. Moreover, the interviews provided a sense that faculty were genuinely interested in working with this population of students and could relate to them on many levels.

Another area in which Tinto’s theory proves useful in the interpretation of the findings of this study is in explaining the impact that students’ outside lives have on their ability to be successful in college. A commonly expressed theme throughout the interviews was that students’ outside lives, in particular their family financial situations which often necessitate long hours of employment, impact their focus on completing coursework. While Foundation Year has a stated provision of limiting work to only twenty hours per week, the fact is that many students exceed this provision, as their families require additional financial support from these students. As one faculty member lamented:

these students don't have the luxury of being just students and although I say to the parents on like the welcome nights and all of those things, the parents are the guardians or whoever are there with the students or even the students themselves, that the best thing that they can do for themselves or for their children…is to give them this year sort of free just to be a student, because the necessity to work for these students and some of them the necessity to really contribute to their household financially, but also in terms of care for younger siblings, care sometimes for parents and other extended family members takes their focus away from their ability to concentrate on their study and the fact that they are living at home in their communities makes it doubly challenging. (Personal communication)
Tinto’s theory of engagement provides an excellent context in explaining this observed phenomenon. Tinto (1993) indicates:

In some cases, however, participation in external communities does hinder persistence. It does so because of the ways in which external obligations limit one’s ability to meet the demands of college. Such obligations serve, in effect, to “pull” one away from participation in the local communities of the college. The obligations entailed in employment are a most obvious case in point. When employment is not tangential to but part of a larger career plan, the effect of work upon contact and therefore upon retention may be particularly great … Generally speaking, employment not only limits the time one has for academic studies, it also severely limits one’s opportunities for interaction with other students and faculty. As a consequence, one’s social integration as well as one’s academic performance suffers. (pp. 63-64)

Again, the findings of this research study support one of the main assertions within Tinto’s theory of student departure. The stipulation of a maximum work week of twenty hours in the Foundation Year program and the perception of faculty that students’ outside lives present some of the more significant barriers in their academic pursuits is reflective of the arguments that Tinto makes with respect to outside influences hindering persistence for students.

Social and Cultural Capital.

While the general structure of Foundation Year and many of the key components identified by faculty and staff are in line with the dominant theme in student retention literature which speaks to increased academic and social engagement, one part of the program significantly deviates from social integration theory. Specifically, Foundation Year’s pathway model—which seeks to transition students away from NU rather than keeping them there—runs completely counter to the fundamental principles of social integration theory, which is exclusively aimed at addressing issues of institutional departure. In explicitly encouraging students to depart from the institution, Foundation Year’s pathway model appears to render useless any of the integrations that were built up over the course of the year. From a social interactionalist standpoint, the pathways model of the program places students at a disadvantage
going into their second year of college, as they will enter into an environment in which they are neither incorporated into the social nor intellectual life of the institution. While this may be true for all students in higher education who elect to transfer, the deliberate model of Foundation Year in promoting the transfer to other schools is unique. It is here that cultural capital theory provides its most important contribution to the interpretation of the findings of this study as it offers forth a lens in which to analyze the program from a system departure standpoint.

As explained previously in this manuscript, cultural capital theory, as it pertains to student retention, is concerned less about the social and intellectual fit between an individual student and a specific institution but more concerned with the universal disconnect that exists between the social norms that are valued by the higher education system and the knowledge and experiences that are possessed by students entering into the system (Baber, 2007; Berger, 2000; Jensen, 2011; Leese, 2010; Wells, 2008; Wells, 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2004). The constructs of the theory, therefore, provide a useful context for understanding the pathways model of the Foundation Year program which speaks less about an individual institution and more about the system of higher education in general.

Cultural capital theory postulates that educational institutions “systematically valorizes upper-class cultural capital and depreciates the cultural capital of the lower classes” (MacLeod, 2008, p. 14). In its most simple application to the higher education environment, the theory argues that colleges and universities value a form of cultural capital that is held by members of the upper-class. Students who lack the necessary cultural background and dispositions—either because they grew up in households where no one ever went to college or where gaining such skills were not valued—are placed at a disadvantage in attaining educational goals (Berger, 2000). If students are exposed to or provided with the necessary cultural capital that allows them
to understand the norms, behaviors and processes that are valued in a college setting, the argument is that they will be more likely to succeed in college. Extending the principles of the theory to the current discussion of Foundation Year’s pathway model, an argument can be made that the program’s model does not place students at a disadvantage by facilitating their transition to another institution. If the skills that they gain are universally applicable across all institutions of higher education, they should be positioned well to be successful at another institution. If students are equipped with the appropriate types of cultural capital, they will have the necessary understanding of the norms and values to be successful in any college setting.

Based on the thoughts and perceptions of student participants in the study, the findings of the research support the underlying constructs of cultural capital theory—students, in fact, felt that the skills and dispositions they had been taught in Foundation Year would transfer into another college or university setting. Faculty participants, on the other hand, were more reserved in their thoughts of the model. While there was general widespread agreement among the faculty that the pathways model of the program can work and that one of the hallmarks of the program is its emphasis on identifying the best “fit” for program participants post-Foundation Year, the idea of ushering students off to another institution presented its fair share of concerns. Notions of “missing the students” after only one year and concerns that students would not receive nearly the same level of support at other institutions (“regression after the transition” as noted by one faculty member) were common themes that emerged during interviews. Overall, the findings confirm the inherent tension that exists between the design of the program which provides extensive support services and advising to students and the purposeful design of the program which seeks to transition them away from NU to other institutions of higher education.
Cultural capital theory also provides a useful lens to analyze the struggles that Foundation Year students experience with respect to the lack of support they receive from their home environments. Comments from both faculty and students described a general disconnect between the messages being reinforced in the program versus the messages students received at home. For students who came from families where no one else attended college or where earning money to contribute to the families’ financial situation was valued more highly than going to college, faculty described the difficulty in getting the students to fully engage in their studies or to stay motivated. Similarly, students described the challenges in leaving school at the end of the day and going back to a community that not only was indifferent to their educational pursuits but that, at times, actively discouraged or made fun of them for being in school. Cultural capital theory, and its emphasis on the amount and types of accumulated capital that individuals obtain from their immediate environments, is helpful in understanding the impact that students’ home lives have on their ability to obtain a degree.

While there was general widespread agreement amongst the faculty interview participants regarding the goal of increasing the cultural capital of students necessary for success on a college campus, there were hints of struggles with how best to do this. Many of the faculty members commented on the inherent tension that exists between teaching students how to act the “college way” vs. compromising who they are and how they were raised. The same situation came up in multiple interviews—students seemingly being called out by individuals at NU’s student center because their behavior ran counter to what that space was intended for. The teaching moment was in instructing students to read the environment they are in, but it was apparent that the faculty struggled with this one situation, more than others. As one faculty member explained:

And, you know, I am torn, when I have conversations with them like this, you know, I do tell them that, and … everybody does, that we are living practically
and, you know, “yes be authentic of who you are”, “yes speak with your own voice,” but understand that everything matters what you say, the kind of words you use, are you throwing slang around? Because, in a sense, you are not muting and people will be distracted about the stuff that you are throwing around and may not hear what you say. (Personal communication)

The constructs of social capital theory also serve as a useful theoretical lens to examine the findings of this study. The examination of the Foundation Year program illustrates a heavy emphasis on the creation of social connections. Between the program’s cohort model, its emphasis on group work and advising sessions, and its forced interactions with faculty, Foundation Year provides significant opportunity for students to increase the number of social connections. Using social capital theory in the interpretation of these findings results in the conclusion that these increased social opportunities lead to a higher likelihood of educational attainment (Putnam, 2000). However, it is important to question how influential these new social connections are, given the fact that the structure of the Foundation Year program simply forces marginalized urban students to be in social networks with one another. The fact that students do not attend classes with other students on the NU campus and the fact that they are not allowed to live on campus significantly impacts the opportunities they have to expand their social networks beyond individuals who are from the same socioeconomic background. Students and faculty both noted the challenges that not living on campus posed to students in the program. As one student remarked:

And I would say living on campus plays a bigger role and knowing the fact that if, you also stay in more later in campus getting more help from your professors not wanting [to deal] with the fact that the gang violence in the streets and like people not safe to go home or there is no transport system then. (Personal communication)

In this instance, the inability to live on campus not only deprives students of the opportunity to increase their social capital through networks of peers who attend college, but it also forces them to leave the confines of the college campus to return to an unsafe environment that exposes them
to potential gang violence. The negative impact from a social capital standpoint is thus compounded. Moreover, for other students, the structure and demands of the program run counter to the notion of increasing social connectedness among students. As one student explained, having to attend Foundation Year 9:00-5:00 and then work a great deal to support himself financially results in little opportunity to socialize: “so, that makes my social life suck. I don’t have any time to socialize.”

While the aims of the program to increase social connectedness may fall short, one component of the Foundation Year program that directly supports the claims of social capital theory is the experiential education component of the program. Through this component, students gain exposure to various professional settings and are afforded the opportunity to expand their network of professional contacts. As one student explained, “so, this program is basically telling us, like, the networking things—people you meet that could help change your life.” In this instance, social capital theory and its emphasis on the importance of expanding one’s social network proves useful in examining the effectiveness of the experiential education component of the program.

The emergence of a new theme

Admittedly, it is rather unorthodox to introduce a new thematic element in the concluding sections of a manuscript. However, towards the tail end of the data collection process—specifically with some of the student interviews—a strong theme began to emerge which spoke directly to the pedagogical approach utilized by teachers. From the beginning, the focus of this research—both in the approach of the analysis of program documents and in the development of the interview protocol—was heavily skewed towards the administrative components and general structure of the program. The researcher was not necessarily concerned
with identifying how the actual teaching that took place within the classroom played into the conversation on student retention. Even the investigation into the curriculum of the program was primarily focused on the subjects offered, the sequence of courses and the interplay between credit and non-credit courses; the actual manner in which this curriculum was taught was not a consideration. However, in listening to students speak of their experiences with the Foundation Year program, it became evident that the approach to learning embodied by the program’s faculty was a significant factor in the students’ perceived success in the program. As such, an analysis of the research findings of this study would not be complete without some mention of the faculty’s pedagogical approach, despite the fact that this component was not part of the initial propositions guiding the data collection process.

The analysis of the research findings with respect to the type of teaching and learning that takes place within the Foundation Year program support many of the key principles of progressive education. While an in-depth discussion and analysis of progressive education is not appropriate for this manuscript, a brief discussion will be enough to highlight the salient points of this argument. Typically associated with teaching practices in the K-12 arena, progressive education, today, has been defined as an educational philosophy that reflects a commitment to the following values: attending to the whole child; community; collaboration; social justice; intrinsic motivation; deep understanding of issues; active learning; and taking students seriously (Kohn, 2008). With its roots embedded in the educational philosophy of John Dewey, progressive education became a stark alternative to the more traditional pedagogical approaches of textbook learning and rote memorization and recitation, instead focusing on the importance of a student’s environment as an important pedagogical strategy (Reese, 2005). As Dewey explained: “[f]rom the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his
inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within
the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at
school” (Dewey, 2001, p. 46).

In recent decades, the principles of progressive education have been applied to urban
education, with educators and researchers arguing that a progressive approach to teaching and
learning results in more engaged urban students and, ultimately, better learning outcomes
amongst students (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Haberman, 2006; Knapp, 2005; Scelba, 2004). The
findings of this study support such claims, as both students and faculty described the learning
environment in Foundation Year in very progressive terms. Notions of completing assignments
that were directly related to “real world” experiences, making learning fun, and placing the
students at the center of teaching and learning all surfaced during the data collection exercise for
this investigation.

Section II: Implications of the research findings

In aligning with the original goals of this investigation, the research findings of this study
have both practitioner-based and scholarly implications.

Practitioner significance

While singular case studies make the concept of generalization difficult (Yin, 2009),
there are a few key considerations that emerged out of this investigation of Foundation Year that
provide value from a practitioner-based standpoint. First, in supporting many of the principles
from the dominant literature on student retention and first-year programming, the findings of this
study provide further evidence about the key components that should be included in a first-year
program. In addition to confirming many of the aspects of first-year programming that are
already detailed in the scholarly literature (Barefoot (2000; 2004a; 2004b; Tinto, 1998), the
findings of this study also speak to the importance of hiring the right faculty and creating a funding model that lowers the financial barrier for students as much as possible. Ultimately, the findings of this study about the key components of the Foundation Year program can prove helpful for administrators at higher education institutions who are interested in developing first-year programs, in particular, programs targeted at at-risk students.

The findings of this study also have direct practical implications for institutions located in or near the City of Boston. It is very important to note that naming the institution and program directly in this investigation was a very intentional decision. As this research was undertaken within the realm of practitioner-based research, the researcher felt it was very important to identify a case that can inform the solutions that other educational administrators may develop in response to a very specific identified problem of practice. The blueprint of this program documented here should be a shared model with all practitioners of higher education who are interested in addressing low retention and graduation rates among students from urban areas. Oftentimes in higher education, an institution’s enrollment strategy or design of a particular innovation will be kept in-house, for fear of competition from other institutions. It is clear, though, through document analysis and in speaking with program faculty that Foundation Year is not a strategic model developed by Northeastern to increase enrollment and drive up tuition revenue; in fact, the pathways model of the program is designed with the end goal of placing students outside the confines of Northeastern at other institutions of higher education. As such, it is important that other practitioners have a full understanding of the design and key components of this program and be able to engage administrators of Northeastern directly.

The problem of practice that seeks to be addressed by Foundation Year is so universal that it will take more than just the efforts of one institution to solve. As one of the faculty noted:
the aim is to talk more about it in terms of … that this new design really is the
new norm, and that we are going to need to, if we were going to want students to
persist through college in four years—other than the traditional middle class white
student—then we are going to need to rethink it. So it’s much larger than just us.
And I think that we should be focusing on the structures that we have in the
program, the way that we structured and designed the program as an academic
model and as a student support and advising model. (Personal communication)

This research could prove very effective for leaders of other institutions or other cities looking to
find an intervention to poor graduation rates for urban students. Future research on this program
and on other programmatic interventions aimed specifically at assisting marginalized urban
youth obtain a college degree is necessary. It will only be though continued research into this
area and a collaborative approach amongst the entire higher education community that such a
significant problem can be addressed. The City of Boston is poised to be a national leader in
solving this problem, due to the fact that it has definitive research identifying the problem, a
wealth of higher education institutions within its city limits, and an example of a program—in
Foundation Year—that is attempting to address the problem through a unique program design.

While the findings of this investigation do not illustrate whether the Foundation Year model is
successful or not, they do provide a starting point for additional conversations on the topic. New
approaches to old problems may often be ignored or dismissed as individuals associate them with
the way that things have always been done. The findings of this investigation can be used as a
way to get others to take notice of Foundation Year and begin a dialogue about how, collectively,
the colleges and universities in the Boston area can solve the problem of practice facing the city.

Synergies between organizations devoted to carrying out research to this end and programs like
Foundation Year would make for a powerful partnership in addressing the reasons why
marginalized urban students are not making it through college.
The results of this study, when coupled with additional research on City of Boston residents, can be helpful in informing new policies and programmatic approaches. For example, a recent study (Stoutland, 2011) conducted by the Boston Foundation and the Boston Higher Education Partnership serves as a follow-up to the aforementioned study on BPHS graduates. In comparison to the longitudinal quantitative study of the BPHS Class of 2000, the study, *How Students Are Making It: Perspectives on Getting Through College from Recent Graduates of the Boston Public Schools*, provides a qualitative assessment of BPHS graduates who are currently enrolled in college. In many ways, the findings of this study confirm the central themes identified in this research investigation. The key findings of the study included: the fact that successful college students linked their success to practicing self-management skills and seeking and utilizing academic support; outside factors—mainly family and employment—played a significant role in students’ experiences in college; and, students, by and large, found it difficult to navigate the college environment and find important information (Stoutland, 2011, pp. 7-8). The findings in the Stoutland (2011) study compliment the results of this investigation and, in doing so, provide practitioners with important data points to inform possible intervention strategies.

**Scholarly significance**

While this research was carried out in the realm of practitioner-based research and its most important contributions are in the practical application of the study’s findings, the investigation also holds value from a scholarly perspective. As previously mentioned, the student retention scholarly literature is light in the area of detailed assessments of first-year programs aimed at urban students. As such, this research study adds to the scholarly literature by providing an in-depth analysis of one institution’s specialized first-year program. Additionally,
this research is important to the scholarly community as it helps give voice to a marginalized population of individuals who, historically, have not been at the forefront of research initiatives. The student retention literature has been dominated by research and the creation of theoretical models that speak, by and large, to the experience of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. This study, with its singular focus on a program geared towards marginalized urban students, assists in elevating the importance of minority populations in the larger research discussions around student retention. Furthermore, it will hopefully assist college and universities in addressing the particularly unique circumstances that impact these students’ persistence in college.

Section III: Recommendations for future research

Given the vast amount of research that already exists in the student retention scholarly literature, in some ways it seems odd to suggest the need for future research. However, the problem of low student retention and the general lack of success of marginalized urban students obtaining a college degree is as prevalent now as it was forty years ago when the likes of Spady (1971), Astin (1975), and Tinto (1975) began to formulate their theories identifying the key factors in college student retention. As such, future research is, indeed, warranted. This section provides the researcher’s recommendations for areas of further investigation, starting first with a brief discussion on the limitations of this research study and then detailing the recommendations for future research as it pertains to the Foundation Year program and issues of urban student retention, in general.

Study Limitations.

The primary limitations of this investigation are related to the chosen strategy of inquiry for the study, the case study. As a singular case study analyses, widespread generalization to
other first-year programs or institutions of higher education is not necessarily feasible. It is necessary for the reader to understand the distinctiveness of the single case study approach and is cautioned in making assumptions that the findings of this study would hold true in the review of other first-year programs. Additionally, with respect to gaining an understanding of the Foundation Year program, the findings of this study are limited due to the number of participants involved in the investigation. This evaluation of Foundation Year only included a portion of the individuals involved in the program; in particular, on the student side, specific selection criteria was not used to arrive at a sampling representative of all the students who have completed or were currently enrolled in the program. It is possible that the perceptions of students may vary depending on a number of variables such as, the gender and ethnicity, academic performance, or previous educational experience of students. Similarly, as it pertains to faculty, the individuals interviewed only represent those individuals who are involved with the program on a day-to-day basis and in forming the program as it matures. A study that included the insights of individuals involved in the initial design and creation of the program may yield a different set of data with respect to the intentions of the program and those components deemed most important from a retention standpoint.

**Recommended research on the Foundation Year program**

The limitations of this study, coupled with the rich data gathered throughout the research process, suggest that additional investigations of the Foundation Year program are necessary. As it pertains to the Foundation Year program, further research is recommended in the following areas:

**Effectiveness of the program:** As stated earlier, due to the relative infancy of the program, an evaluative study of Foundation Year was not possible at this time to determine
whether the program is successful in bettering the graduation rates for City of Boston residents. As students from the first few cohorts progress, it will be important to have research conducted which seeks to determine the overall effectiveness of the program as well distinguishing which components of the program are most important in aiding in the success of students. For example, an analysis of whether students who remain at NU obtain degrees at a higher rate than students who enter different schools after Foundation Year might indicate whether the pathways model of Foundation Year is beneficial and/or should be continued.

*Evaluative study of the launch of a new program:* Another suggested area of research as it pertains specifically to Foundation Year is assessing its development and launch from an organizational change perspective. The data collection for this study produced many references to key items or themes often found in the literature on organizational change. In observing these insights, a recommended area of additional exploration for Foundation Year would be an investigation using an organizational change lens to examine the program’s development, deployment and subsequent ongoing maintenance.

*Students of the program:* Finally, it is recommended that further investigation using the students of the Foundation Year program as the unit of analysis take place. A detailed longitudinal account of Boston’s college-bound students, following the ethnographic research approaches of individuals like Kozol (1991) and O’Connor (1996), would likely provide a powerful illustration of the struggles of marginalized urban students attempting to earn a college degree and prove beneficial for educators attempting to create interventions aimed at mitigating these struggles.

*Recommended research in other areas:* On a more broad level, this study has led to the recommendation for additional research, in general, on college student retention. Despite the
vast amount of student retention literature that has been accumulated over the past forty years, continued research is necessary, in particular in the area of student retention for marginalized populations. While the aforementioned Center for Labor Markets Studies report has been effective in identifying the problem of practice facing the City of Boston, additional research should be carried out to gain a better understanding of which variables may be the most significant from a persistence standpoint. Continued research on the problem of practice itself must take place in order to accurately inform the creation of interventions.

This study has also illustrated the usefulness and importance of an in-depth analysis of a singular program aimed at increasing retention. Ultimately, the creation of new first-year programs or the modification of existing programs could be more informed if additional studies are carried out which specifically seek to provide comprehensive documentation of program efforts already in existence. If more studies of this nature were conducted and then coupled with subsequent evaluative studies of programs, there would be a substantial body of literature from which higher education leaders and policy makers could draw from to inform their decisions.

Finally the analysis of a first-year program for students who are underprepared for college naturally draws attention to questions about the relationship between secondary and higher education. As such, additional research and attention must be paid to the, oftentimes, politically-charged relationship that exists between the k-12 and higher education systems. If students are coming into the postsecondary education system ill-prepared for the rigors of college, is this because high schools are not doing the necessary job or is it because college and universities do not know how to properly work with students from marginalized backgrounds? Continued research and consideration must be placed on the interplay between high school and
college to fully understand the role that first-year programs should play in the college experience.
Chapter VII: Conclusion

This study set out to detail the components of a new first-year supportive program that aimed to solve an identified problem of practice facing a single metropolitan area. In documenting the structure and key elements of the Foundation Year program, the researcher discovered that, while the program supports many of the recommended best practices of first-year programs, its “transfer out” pathways model challenges the traditional norms of how first-year experience programs are structured. In this respect, Foundation Year has been a helpful unit of analysis to study as the results of the investigation expand the discussion of college completion rates to include a focus on persistence from the larger system of higher education, as compared to the more traditional focus of retention at individual colleges and universities.

Additionally, while the researcher did not expect to find the strength of the faculty and their teaching approaches in the classroom as key factors identified by program participants in aiding in student success, he found this to be the case. In bringing this theme to the surface, again, the singular review of a first-year supportive program has proven useful.

Ultimately though, this investigation is more than just about Foundation Year. Resolution to the problem of practice facing the City of Boston—and most other urban areas in the United States—revealed the need for a restructuring of the way in which practitioners view the proverbial finish line and how students get there. American higher education is approaching a critical railway junction right now with respect to college completion rates: the U.S. is lagging behind other industrialized countries in college completion (Lee Jr. & Rawls, 2010); shifting demographics continue to increase the number of non-traditional students entering the higher education system (NCES, 2002); the population, as a whole, continues to become more metropolitan and comprised of individuals from minority backgrounds (U.S. Census, 2010); and,
findings have shown that almost sixty percent of undergraduate students attend more than one institution on their pathway to a college degree (Adelman, 2005). For roughly the past four decades though, solutions to increasing college completion have proceeded on a single track that represents a very institutional-specific approach centered around increasing the level of engagement students have with institutions, particularly as it relates to the out-of-class activities and social experiences of students. Given the recent trends of completion rates and the projected demographic shifts, one must ask whether it is time to change directions. It is the hope of the researcher that this investigation serves as the necessary shift in the railroad tracks that moves the discussion of college completion rates from one of institutional retention to one of system-wide persistence and steers the dialogue away from the role that student affairs plays in retention aiding strategies and more towards the important role that faculty and their pedagogical approaches play in getting students to complete college.

Current student retention models are not sufficient in addressing the challenges facing marginalized urban students. Even though Tinto (1993; 1997; 1998; 2003), over the years, has expanded his work to include more on the role of faculty in the student retention process and has called out specific challenges with respect to retaining at-risk students, his focus of attention is still fairly narrow in the sense that it speaks to individual institutional approaches that do not fully address the wide range of issues facing marginalized urban students. Similarly, higher education practitioners have spent a great deal of time and resources developing programs to assimilate students to a campus and increase the level of integration students have. The ever-expanding student affairs profession and robust out-of-the-classroom activities provided to students has been a significant focus of student retention interventions. However, not enough attention has been paid to the importance of the academic experience of students with respect to
the retention of students from marginalized backgrounds. The challenges facing students from urban areas require that the higher education community think differently about how to best get students to complete college. Student retention programming that aims to increase the engagement of students as they sit in the dining halls and dorms after the normal classroom hours or on the weekends may not be the best solution for students who are expected to be primary contributors to their families’ financial situation or for those students who do not have family members who necessarily understand what the norms and expectations of being a college student are. Practitioners creating student retention models must do more than simply acknowledge that marginalized students present a challenge to their models; instead, practitioners must start developing models specifically for this population in mind. While Tinto’s work has proven to be seminal in the area of college student retention, the higher education community needs to start asking whether retention is more than just engagement. Models that build on the concepts of cultural and social capital theories may provide practitioners with a new lens to evaluate their strategies to get marginalized students through college.

At the most fundamental level, college is about learning; it is about advancing the knowledge and skills that one has developed already. The “traditional” college experience that calls for students to live on campus and become fully integrated into the fabric of an institution may not be feasible for urban students who face numerous challenges, including the need to contribute financially to their family or care for other family members. American higher education in the twenty-first century is dealing with a new set of students who have a new set of challenges—in order to respond to this, there must be a recognition that the old models of getting students to complete college may not work. Whereas the primary focus of the student college completion discussion to date has been on creating increased integration between students and
the institution, the higher education community must start thinking of those elements of the
college experience that are less specific to a singular institution but are more universal to all
colleges and universities. Classroom learning and the faculty who facilitate this learning are the
most glaring examples of elements central to all institutions and, as such, should be at the
forefront of the college completion conversation. While the non-academic components of a
college or university—including its dining halls, dorm rooms, student centers, and athletic
facilities—are often used as the selling points during prospective student tours and are typically
affiliated with having the proverbial successful “college experience,” faculty and the student
experience in the classroom still matter. If the ultimate determination of having a successful
college experience is earning a degree, shifting the student persistence discussion to focus on
student learning may just be what is needed.

While this research investigation of a singular case has a very narrow application to the
arena of first-year programming and can be used to document the way that one institution is
addressing the subpar college completion rates of a city, its more significant widespread
application is in pushing the higher education community to think differently about college
completion for marginalized populations. In redefining the college completion finish line as a
marker that belongs to the collective higher education community rather than to specific
institutions and in bringing the academic experience—as compared to the social experience—of
students to the forefront of the persistence discussion, the findings of this investigation are
noteworthy. The issue of college completion is at the center of attention for many
policymakers—the charge of Boston’s Mayor Thomas Menino to double the college completion
rates for City residents rings very similar to President Obama’s charge of ensuring that the U.S.
has “the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” by 2020 (Obama, 2009). Yet, if
the higher education community spends another decade focusing the lion’s share of its college completion efforts on a subset of students who continue to make up less and less of the college-bound population and developing degree completion strategies that speak only of the ways to integrate students to specific colleges and universities, these rates will never be achieved. The focus of attention must be shifted to identifying strategies and programs that, first, openly acknowledge the fact that more students from marginalized backgrounds than “traditional” students will be arriving to the starting line and, second, that prioritize faculty and student-centered teaching practices in getting students across the finish line.
Appendix A

Data Analysis in Qualitative Research

Validating the Accuracy of the information

Interpreting the Meaning of Themes/Descriptions

Interrelating Themes/Description (e.g., grounded theory, case study)

Themes
Description

Coding the Data (hand or computer)

Reading Through All Data

Organizing and Preparing Data for Analysis

Raw Data (transcripts, fieldnotes, images, etc.)

Creswell, 2009, p. 185
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Current Students:
1. Can you please describe your experience in high school? Did you encounter any particular challenges during the high school years that impacted your education and made getting into college difficult?
2. Have other members of your immediate family (parent, sibling, etc.) completed college?
3. As a senior in high school, how many colleges did you apply to? Were you accepted into any other colleges aside from Foundation Year?
4. Did you receive assistance from family members, guidance counselors, or community-based organizations during the college application process? If so, can you describe the level of assistance you received? How important was this assistance?
5. In your own assessment, do you feel that you were prepared for college coming out of high school?
6. In your own words, please describe the Foundation Year program.
7. Why did you choose to enroll in Foundation Year?
8. What is your understanding of why the Foundation Year program was created?
9. Please tell me about those parts of the Foundation Year program you enjoy the most.
10. Please tell me about those parts of the Foundation Year program you enjoy the least.
11. Which parts of the Foundation Year program do you feel are best preparing you to be successful for the rest of your college career?
12. How important do you feel that the relationships with Foundation Year faculty members are to your success in the program?
13. If you had the option to live on campus during the Foundation Year program, would you?
14. What barriers, if any, do you see preventing you from earning a college degree?
   a. Is Foundation Year assisting you with overcoming these barriers? If so, how? If not, could the program be doing something differently to address the barriers?
15. Do you feel that you would be successful in earning a college degree without Foundation Year?
16. Has the Foundation Year experience changed the way you think about college? If yes, how?
17. What are your plans after the completion of Foundation Year?
18. If you choose to leave Northeastern at the end of Foundation Year, do you think you will have a difficult time transitioning to another institution?
19. Would you recommend Foundation Year to a friend or family member?
20. Do you have any concluding thoughts about the Foundation Year program or your experience in the program that you would like to share?
Former students:

1. What institution are you currently enrolled at?
2. Can you please describe your experience in high school? Did you encounter any particular challenges during the high school years that impacted your education and made getting into college difficult?
3. Have other members of your immediate family (parent, sibling, etc.) completed college?
4. As a senior in high school, how many colleges did you apply to? Were you accepted into any other colleges aside from Foundation Year?
5. Did you receive assistance from family members, guidance counselors or community-based organizations throughout the college application process? If so, can you describe the level of assistance you received? How important was this assistance?
6. In your own assessment, do you feel that you were prepared for college coming out of high school?
7. In your own words, please describe the Foundation Year program.
8. Why did you choose to enroll in Foundation Year?
9. What is your understanding of why the Foundation Year program was created?
10. Please tell me about those parts of the Foundation Year program you enjoyed the most.
11. Please tell me about those parts of the Foundation Year program you enjoyed the least.
12. Which parts of the Foundation Year program did you feel best prepared you to be successful for the rest of your college career?
13. How important do you feel that the relationships with Foundation Year faculty members were to your success in the program?
   a. Do you have the same level of relationships with faculty members now?
14. Do you live on campus now?
   a. If yes, how important do you feel that living on campus is to the college experience?
   b. If you had the option to live on campus during the Foundation Year program, would you have elected to do so?
15. What barriers, if any, do you see preventing you from earning a college degree?
   a. Did Foundation Year assist you with overcoming these barriers? If so, how? If not, could the program be doing something differently to address the barriers?
16. Do you feel that you would be successful in earning a college degree without Foundation Year?
17. Has the Foundation Year experience changed the way you think about college? If yes, how?
18. For students no longer enrolled at Northeastern: did you have a difficult time transitioning to the institution you are currently at?
19. Would you recommend Foundation Year to a friend or family member?
20. Do you have any concluding thoughts about the Foundation Year program or your experience in the program that you would like to share?
Faculty:

1. Please explain your professional background?
   a. Do you have prior experience working with urban students or first-year college programs?
2. Please explain your role within the Foundation Year program.
3. In your own words, please describe the Foundation Year program.
   a. Do you have any thoughts on how the structure and composition of this program compares to other first-year college programs?
4. As you understand things, why was the Foundation Year program created?
5. For those working directly for the program: why did you choose to become a part of the Foundation Year program?
   a. Is the program different than from what you expected when you first took the job?
6. What is your general opinion of the reasons why residents of Boston are struggling to complete college?
   a. What do you think are the most significant factors impacting student persistence rates for urban students?
7. What parts of the Foundation Year program do you identify as being the most useful in helping students succeed in college?
8. A prevalent theme within the college student retention literature speaks to the importance of student-institution integration; findings have indicated that the more a student is integrated with an institution, particularly during the first year, the more likely he or she is to be successful in staying enrolled. The model of Foundation Year, though, calls for students to stay at Northeastern for only one year and then transition to another institution at the conclusion of the program. What are your thoughts on this model, in light of the dominant themes in the literature that call for increased student-institutional integration?
9. Are you familiar with the concepts of social and culture capital? If so, do you feel that the Foundation Year program seeks to increase the level of social and cultural capital of student participants? If yes, how?
   a. In your assessment, what are the most important social and cultural elements that students coming to Foundation Year lack?
   b. How do you balance the need for students to become part of a culture that may be different from their own vs. trying to maintain values and norms from their own culture?
10. Do you feel that the Foundation Year model is one that can be replicated in other urban areas?
11. What changes, if any, do you feel should be made to the program?
12. Do you have any concluding thoughts about the Foundation Year program and your experience working with the program that you would like to share?
Appendix C

Inventory of public and archival documents reviewed

Foundation Year website
Jobs for the Future report
Foundation Year information session presentations (years 1, 2, and 3)
Foundation Year admissions letter
Foundation Year commitment letter
Interview day materials
Foundation Year marketing brochure
Newspaper articles
Internal FAQs regarding University press release
Northeastern University course catalog
Foundation Year Strategic Planning document
Northeastern University website—Academic Plan and Mission Statement
Foundation Year interviewer feedback form
Foundation Year “admission decision process” outline
Foundation Year “admission decision factors to be considered” document
Foundation Year guidance counselor letter introducing the new program
Foundation Year interview day list of interviewer questions
Foundation Year writing rubric for writing assessment
Foundation Year student evaluation Form
Foundation Year draft mission and program statement
Interview day group discussion participant evaluation worksheet
Foundation Year course syllabi
Appendix D

Foundation Year Interviewer Feedback Form

STUDENT: ___________________  INTERVIEWER: ___________________
SCHOOL(S):  

Foundation Year Interview Feedback 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Recommendation</th>
<th>___ Enthusiastically recommend for Foundation Year</th>
<th>___ Recommend for Foundation Year</th>
<th>___ I do not recommend this student for Foundation Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Please rate the candidate and provide comments.

**Personal Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>No basis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Will utilize wraparound support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-motivation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Coping maturely with problems</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family or surrogate family supports student's goal to attend college</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Family expects student will not be able to significantly contribute to family expenses</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Student has a place to live next year that will be conducive to studies</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments:**

**Interest & Readiness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>No basis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Interest in high school academics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Interest in college academics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Time management</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Understands how a Foundation Year is different from a freshman year</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments:**

For 2011-12, student has plans in addition to or other than transferring to FIU Yes No Unclear

**Student's Plans:**
Appendix E

Scoring rubric used by faculty during group interview process

Person being evaluated ____________________________________________

Evaluator’s name___________________________ Group___________________________

For each item, circle the number that best reflects your evaluation of the participant’s contribution to the group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appeared committed to the goals of the group

Participated frequently in group deliberations

Comments were clear, relevant, and helpful

Carried out individual assignments promptly

Assumed leadership

Avoided interpersonal conflict with group members

Encouraged participation by other group members

Helped keep discussion on track

Overall contribution in comparison to other group members
Appendix F

Copy of Foundation Year Commitment Letter

Northeastern

Foundation Year Commitment Letter

Foundation Year is an innovative first-year college program. This structured and supportive program offers students rigorous academic preparation as well as wraparound support services. It is expected that all Foundation Year students will comply with the following requirements.

As a Foundation Year student, I commit to:

Academic Performance

- Attend and complete all academic quarters of Foundation Year starting with the Summer Academy (July 25, 2011 - August 26, 2011); Fall quarter (September 12 - December 9); Winter quarter (January 9 - March 30); and Spring quarter (April 9 - June 29).
- Attend and participate from 9:00am-5:00pm, Monday-Friday.
- Maintain a least a 2.00 cumulative grade point average (GPAs will be reviewed at the end of the Summer Academy and after every quarter).
- Meet with Foundation Year faculty regularly regarding academic progress. This includes formally scheduled reviews as well as meetings called by faculty members at any time.
- Participate in all components of the Foundation Year program including non-credit courses, writing tutoring, math tutoring, college and transfer advising, and internships with industry partners.

Professionalism

- Punctual attendance in all components of Foundation Year program. Absences and lateness are tabulated and affect students’ standing in the program.
- Courteous, respectful behavior and a positive attitude towards other students, staff, and faculty members on all parts of the campus.
- Communicate effectively and routinely with Foundation Year faculty, staff, and other University administrators.
- Schedule and maintain appointments as necessary or as advised by Northeastern University staff or faculty members.
- Behave in a manner consistent with the Northeastern University Student Code of Conduct institutional rules and regulations.

Maintaining good standing in Foundation Year

The policies stated above serve to provide the structure to support the academic success of Foundation Year students. Students must adhere to these policies to maintain good standing in Foundation Year. If a student is found to be in violation of a policy, the Foundation Year faculty members will provide at least one warning, some coaching, and interventions to assist the student. Students not meeting minimum requirements will be given one academic quarter of probation, which may include other stipulated conditions to ensure future Foundation Year participation. Failure to meet these conditions will result in loss of Program participation including any funding specific to standing as a Foundation Year student. Appeals or exceptions will be handled on a case by case basis.

I have read, understood, and commit to the above criteria.
Appendix G

Copy of Foundation Year end-of-the-quarter student evaluation form

Foundation Year

End of Quarter Student Evaluation

Name of Student:_________________________

Evaluator:_____________________________

Quarter: ___Summer Academy ___Fall___Winter___Spring

***Please rate student on a scale of 1-5

5= student shows clear mastery of this skill; 1= student shows no mastery of this skill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation:</th>
<th>Observations/Comments:</th>
<th>Score: 5 4 3 2 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Comes to class on time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Brings required materials to class i.e. books, writing supplies, calculator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Completes assignments on time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation:</th>
<th>Observations/Comments</th>
<th>Score: 5 4 3 2 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Body language shows engagement and focus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Follows classroom procedures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Participates in class discussions, group work, and lectures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Listens and follows directions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization:</th>
<th>Observations/Comments:</th>
<th>Score: 5 4 3 2 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Able to locate class materials and supplies with ease</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Maintains binder/notebook/journal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Proper use of planner/agenda book</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Academic Responsibility:                                                    |                        |                  |
| □ Uses available resources                                                  |                        |                  |
| to keep track of academic progress (teacher conferences, student advisor, writing group) | □ Maintains academic integrity (no cheating, plagiarism, copying) | □ Demonstrates the ability to self advocate |
| □ Thinks about actions and work produced | □ Strives to learn more about self and the assigned task | Observations/Comments: |

| Inquiry: | | |
| □ Demonstrates intellectual curiosity | □ Asks thoughtful questions | □ Seeks answers and often is able to effectively explore various sides of an argument | Observations/Comments |

| Collaboration: | | |
| □ Contributes to overall effort of a group | □ Works well with diverse individuals in a variety of settings | □ Uses effective communication skills (listening, speaking) | Observations/Comments |

| Attendance: | | |
| □ Attends class daily | □ Informs in advance of any plans to be absent and makes arrangements to make up for missed work | Observations/Comments | Score: 5 4 3 2 1


Hickson, M.G. (2002). What role does the race of professors have on the retention of students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities? *Education, 123*. 


Metco Program. (n.d). http://www.doe.mass.edu/metco/


Vaznis, J. (2008, November 18). Freshman will get an intense new program *The Boston Globe*


