ACADEMIC SUSPENSION AND STUDENT ADJUSTMENT: HOW STUDENTS MAKE MEANING OF THEIR EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The success of students in colleges and universities is a critical issue facing most institutions today. While the success rate of students, particularly at-risk students, continues to be explored by many researchers, the population of students who are academically suspended has not been well represented in the literature. This study investigated the lived experiences of college students who experienced academic difficulty, academic suspension, and re-enrollment. Themes that emerged from the analysis include, Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance, Emotional Consequences of Academic Suspension, Relational Consequences of Academic Suspension, Factors Contributing to Reinstatement, and Emergence of Changing Behaviors. The findings of this study have implications for practice regarding the ability to improve retention and persistence rates of academically suspended students. Recommendations include reframing student support services and providing continued advisement of students during academic suspension. One recommended area for future research includes investigating the role of emotive responses such as shame, anxiety, and pride in the experiences of students on academic suspension.

*Keywords:* academic, coping, dismissal, failure, suspension
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Chapter One

Introduction

Significance and Problem of Practice

Student retention is a topic of interest for higher education institutions and researchers. There is a growing awareness in the United States that college access, persistence, and completion are vital to the nation’s long-term economic health (Smith & Cumpton, 2012). President Obama has called for the U.S. to have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in the world by 2020. He has also urged that all Americans be prepared to enroll in at least one year of higher education or job training to better prepare for the 21st century economy ("Education," 2012).

Sexton (1965) reported that approximately half of all entering college students never complete the requirements for their bachelor degrees. In 2011, the national average for persistence to bachelor degree completion within five years at four-year public colleges was only 47.9% (ACT Inc., 2011) and just over 55% graduate within six years (Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, & Lang, 2010). According to the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, academic dismissal accounts for approximately 25% of all institutional departures (Spradlin et al., 2010).

All too often, the students’ failure went unaddressed until placed on academic probation, at which point the student was at risk of being suspended from school. Mathies, Gardner, and Webber-Bauer (2006) reported that the graduation rate of students who have been on academic probation was considerably lower than that for the general college population reporting that, “only 31% of the students who had earned probation (ever) graduated within 6 years or less compared to 83% of students who never earned probation” (p. 10-11). Students who are on academic probation for more than one term can face suspension from their program of study, or from the institution altogether.
Suspension due to unacceptable academic performance occurs when integration into the social or academic domain is not achieved and the student is forced to withdraw (Tinto, 1993). Institutions of higher education are increasingly committed to identifying the factors that contribute to students’ poor college adjustment in effort to increase retention rates. Retention researchers have learned that collaborative efforts between students and the institutions are not only more appropriate for college success, (Gordon, 1984) but actually necessary for it (Tinto, 1993). However, Berkovitz and O’Quin (2006) stated that “some retention researchers deliberately excluded students who were suspended or academically dismissed” choosing “to study only those students who voluntarily left college” (p. 201).

Goals

Practical

There is an ample amount of research about student experiences once they return to college from an academic suspension, but little is known how students cope while they are on suspension and what factors influence their decision to return to college. A closer investigation could produce useful information about how the decision was made, what types of information contributed to the decision, and whether participants made the decision alone or in consultation with others.

This study is intended to benefit the participants themselves by providing an opportunity for them to share, examine, and understand their experiences. The study may have implications for other students who may experience similar circumstances and for other stakeholders in the college experience. These stakeholders include, but are not limited to: college retention personnel, educational administrators, and academic advisors who are dedicated to improving students’ adjustment to college, academic success, and persistence. Ultimately, it is anticipated
that the data will produce findings that will help us advance our understanding of how to better support students rather than contribute to the improvement of practices.

**Intellectual**

The intellectual goals of this study are to gain a better understanding of how students make meaning of their academic suspension. This knowledge is essential in helping to achieve the practical goal of improving advising practices of students who have been academically suspended. Advising practices of this nature would not prove effective unless there is a thorough understanding of students’ needs and lived experiences.

Educational researchers have been consistently and copiously studying measurable variables that relate to college student success (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). Most studies involve the investigation of concrete, external, and numerical items such as student grades, academic preparation, and assessment scores also referred to as “pigeon-holing” demographic data that identifies discretely race, gender, financial standing, and family descriptions. Even student satisfaction studies generally report results from forced-choice or Likert-scale based surveys in quantified, or numerical ways (Erwin, 1991; Gay, 1996). These measures lend themselves to assessing large numbers of students and provide researchers with a starting place for closer investigation of less-researched, more sensitive topics.

**Research Question**

Due to the scarcity of academic suspension studies on the reinstatement process as well as the sensitive nature of the “failure” experience (Santa Rita, 1998), this study takes an in-depth look into the personal experience of students who have been academically suspended. Specifically, this study examined students that are enrolled in a private, selective institution who have returned to their studies after an academic suspension. With any study, research questions
need to be questions that a study can potentially answer, and questions that ask directly how to accomplish practical goals (Maxwell, 2005). The following research question should help fine tune the body of the literature and develop outcomes for assessing students’ choice of whether to return to school after an academic suspension and the factors that impacted their decision-making:

1. How do students make meaning of their academic suspension?

**Summary**

The overall social concern for college student success places pressure on institutions to encourage continued enrollment of students who have experienced academic failure (Hoell, 2006). Within the larger group of students who drop out of college, students who are involuntarily dismissed through temporary suspension as a result of unsatisfactory academic performance are unique within higher education. Because many of these students possess the intellectual ability to succeed in college, questions arise regarding the reasons for their failure as well as their likelihood to return to college once the suspension is complete.

While models of retention have assisted institutions in developing programs and processes intended to bolster student success and improve integration leading to retention, the complex factors involved in these processes leave practitioners as well as scholars with unanswered questions (McDermott, 2008). The literature indicates that the more integrated students are, the more likely they will persist. On the other hand, most colleges and universities suspend students who do not meet academic standards, thus minimizing the chance for integration. Researching the impact of suspension would inform both research and practice and perhaps allow for modifications of advising practices.

This paper provides an overview of Attribution Theory which is the framework that has
been selected to guide this study. It also presents a critical review of the literature on why students academically fail in college, what brings them back to college and the concept of meaning in the context of stress and coping. A research design section follows, which includes research questions, methodology, validity, and credibility. Additionally, the final section will include information about the protection of human subjects.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Student departure (i.e., dropout, withdrawal, attrition, etc.) from college has been studied widely over the past several decades (Spady, 1970). Over time, the term departure has developed two commonly used meanings. The first definition refers to anyone leaving a particular college or university at which he or she is registered, even if that student enrolls at another college or university. The second definition includes students who drop out of school and do not return to complete the requirements necessary to receive a degree from any institution (Spady, 1970). Put more simply, the first type of departure mentioned refers to students who leave a particular school, and the second refers to students who leave the system of higher education altogether. Grace (1957) reported a third group referred to as under-achievers and under-aspirers, “students who continue in college, but fail to optimize their abilities” (p. 36).

It is important to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary departure. Voluntary departure occurs when integration into the social or academic domain is not achieved, and the student chooses to leave the college. Involuntary departure occurs when integration into the social or academic domain is not achieved, and the student is forced to withdraw (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) referred to integration into the social and academic domains of the institution as structural and normative integration. Bray, Braxton, and Sullivan (1999) noted that, in general, students who fail to achieve social integration depart on a voluntary basis, while students who fail to achieve academic integration depart on an involuntary basis.

Many colleges and universities across the country have identified academic standards and the consequences for students falling below them. Involuntary departure or academic dismissal is one of the consequences that may occur when integration into the academic domain is not
achieved. Tinto (1993) reported that academic difficulty and academic suspension reflects a situation in which the demands of the academic system prove to be too great. Tinto (1993) explained this as “the individual either does not have the ability to meet those demands or has yet to develop and apply those skills and study habits needed to do so” (p. 116). Integration into the academic system of the institution is seen as directly linked to those forms of departure which arise from a substantial mismatch between the skills and abilities of the student and the level of academic demand from the institution (Graunke, Woosley, & Sherry, 2005).

Because many researchers examine dropouts as a whole and do not differentiate between voluntary and involuntary withdrawals, the literature focusing specifically on students suspended due to insufficient academic performance is sparse at best. The literature of particular relevance to this study includes: a) why students academically fail in college, b) coping with academic failure c) what brings them back to college, and d) success upon reinstatement.

**What it Takes to Become Successful in College**

Over the years, access to higher education has increased, broadened, and diversified through state efforts and federally funded affirmative action and disability legislation (Hoell, 2006). Hansen (1998) noted that the overall academic preparation level has declined for students entering college and that academic disengagement in college has increased among many students. However, in a study conducted by Santa Rita (1998) it was found that college student success is unrelated to academic preparation prior to college and past academic achievement in high school.

Success in college, in part, is attributed to the amount of effort one puts forth. Pace (1984) is one of the first researchers to study the connection between effort and learning in higher education. Pace defines student academic effort as investment of time and energy in
one’s own learning and development. This effort is manifested by students taking advantage of places, events, and experiences meant to foster learning. The key principle behind Pace’s work is that what a student gains from college depends greatly upon what he or she puts into college in terms of involvement and initiative. Pace (1982) writes:

The developmental and educative process from childhood to adolescence to adulthood—which is to say from elementary school to secondary school to college—is not only one of acquiring more and more knowledge but also one requiring more and more initiative (p. 35).

Beyond the personal responsibility of each student to exert academic effort, higher education institutions can also influence student effort through their policies, structures, and programs designed to promote student effort (Tinto, 1993; Museus, 2007).

A lack of direction may also be a factor (Damashek, 2003; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). For example, even academically well-prepared students may be unsure of their long-term careers or personal goals. Tinto (1993) noted that less than one-third of entering freshmen are sure of their educational and occupational goals. This uncertainty may lead a student to select a college or major that is inappropriate. Some may enroll in too many credit hours, underestimating the amount of work required to be successful. They may also lack knowledge about the relationship between course content and prerequisites or about requirements for transferring credits or degree completion. In addition, some students enroll in college not by their own initiative, but because it is a priority of a family member or someone close to them (Sage, 2010).

In addition, various personal characteristics, challenges, and life circumstances in individualized combinations may contribute to failure as well. According to Trombley (2001),
more often than not, students reported personal problems as being the reason that led to their academic suspension. Other self-reported reasons for the causes of academic suspension were listed as not having enough time, difficult classes, lack of motivation, no interest, job-related issues, lack of financial resources, and inability to purchase books (Trombley, 2001). In another report, college students identified most of their problems while enrolled as primarily motivational, organizational, emotional, and stress-related (Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2006).

**College Student Adjustment**

Tinto (1993) posited that a student’s entrance into college is considered a rite of passage where the individual must separate from the previous culture into the new culture. Tierney (1999) criticized Tinto’s theory and explained that if students were to leave behind their cultural heritage it would be *cultural suicide*. He advocates the concept of *cultural integrity*, which is the notion that students should not be required to shed their cultural heritage, but instead can successfully become acclimated to the culture of campus while remaining a part of their traditional culture (Museus, 2007). The integration of students into the academic and social subsystems of their campus is acknowledged as a critical factor in student success (Museus, 2007). The importance of cultural integrity is supported by research that found racial/ethnic minority students are likely to be more successful if they are secure in their own cultural heritage and identity (Helm, Sedlacek, & Prieto, 1998; Museus, 2007).

Upcraft and Kramer (1995) noted issues facing college entrants that include developing feelings of intellectual and academic competence, establishing and maintaining relationships, exploring identity, making major career decisions, encountering issues surrounding faith and spirituality, and developing civic engagement and personal responsibility. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) cite several studies that suggest academic self-confidence can decline
somewhere between the end of high school and the sophomore year of college, when students suffer negative feedback when encountering the more rigorous academic standards in higher education.

**Low Academic Performance**

One of the most obvious factors in academic failure is the inability to get good grades. Performance is believed to be a multiplicative function of both abilities and motivation (Pinder, 1984). Students who academically fail have long been characterized by low academic performance (Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, & Blackwell, 1984), while students in good standing have consistently and statistically held higher college grade point averages (Thomas & Andes, 1987). Students may also lack academic success strategies to be successful in college (Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2006). For example, they may fail to set short-term goals to complete assignments or readings, lack time management skills, have poor study skills, and prioritize other activities over coursework.

Many higher education institutions require students to maintain the customary minimum grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale. Students who do not maintain a 2.0 GPA are subject to academic probation (Holland, 2005). The category of academic probation is an academic warning for students whose academic performance falls below an institution's requirement for good academic standing. Depending on the institution’s policies, probation may lead to suspension within one or two semesters if the student’s GPA is not increased above the 2.0 level.

Russell (1981) investigated the common mistakes that student’s on academic probation make. Some of the mistakes listed were not utilizing available student support services such as tutoring services, counseling, and academic advising. These mistakes impact the academic
success and emotional well-being of the student. He stated that once a student enters the academic standing of probation, “a student’s entire academic future may depend on whether the next semester is academically above standards” (p. 56). An academic advisor can play an important role in the success of the probation student by helping the student reframe and reevaluate past decisions that may have impeded academic success. Russell (1981) noted that those who receive proper counseling in reference to academics will achieve higher aspirations than those who do not.

Goal Striving

Goal commitment is also noted as a key component of student success. Goal commitment typically refers to an individual’s dedication to personal, education, and career outcomes (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliott, 2002). This often reflects the individual’s willingness to work toward attaining those outcomes (Tinto, 1993). Motivational processes are central to academic effort. Such processes influence a student’s acquisition, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge. Researchers demonstrated that the particular goals people pursue on cognitive tasks help form their responses to success and failure and subsequently impact their performance (Smiley & Dweck, 1994).

Elliott and Dweck (1988) propose that there are two categories of goals that individuals possess in performance contexts, performance goals and learning goals. Performance goals, is the way in which people strive to preserve positive evaluations of their ability while also avoiding negative evaluations. Learning goals, is the way in which people try to increase their relative ability through engaging in new tasks. Their research demonstrates that individuals with performance goals emphasize the adequacy of their current ability and are especially vulnerable to a helpless response when encountering failure (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). By contrast, people
with learning goals focus on improving ability through challenges and obstacles, an attitude that promotes strategy formulation and sustained performance. Individuals who tend to self-handicap or create obstacles to success to externalize poor performance and guard self-esteem, are more likely to possess performance goals (Rhodewalt, 1994).

**Personal Attributes of Students**

The literature also identified several interpersonal attributes or characteristics which were possessed by students who academically failed out of college. These characteristics were reflected in their interpersonal lifestyles and choices. Hoell (2006) shared that academically unsuccessful students possessed personal traits such as an unwillingness to work hard, and had no goals or plans of how to achieve a goal. Some students display an internal locus of control, blaming external factors for their lack of success. Some students may also fail to assume responsibility for their own learning, believing that job interference or poor instruction caused their lack of success (Sage, 2010).

Academic self-confidence reflects a student’s evaluation of his or her ability to succeed academically (Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). This construct merges the concepts of academic self-worth and academic self-efficacy. Self-worth theory describes the struggle students face to establish a sense of self value in society through their ability to achieve (Covington, 2000). Students use levels of achievement and competency to determine their own value. Accordingly, students define success in two ways. Those that define success as becoming the best they can be are described as success-oriented. These students value hard work and stretching their current skill set to gain new skills and knowledge. In contrast, ability-oriented students value doing respectively better than others and are continually concerned with possible failure and appearing incompetent. Specifically, examining the role of self-worth within college
students, Simons and Van Rheenen (2000) suggest that “a well-developed academic identity, which is reflected in strong academic self-worth, plays a critical role in academic success” (p. 178).

Educational psychologists often make a distinction between mastery-based and performance-based academic achievement goals (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck, 1986). Students with a mastery orientation towards learning are motivated by curiosity and the desire to develop skills, master tasks, and understand new material. They tend to set their own standards for achievement, make effort attributions for success and failure, and view the making of mistakes as part of the learning process. Students with a performance orientation, on the other hand, are motivated to defend or enhance their sense of self-worth. They tend to make ability attributions for success and failure, and evaluate their ability through social comparisons with others (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005).

Self-efficacy, which is merged with the idea of self-worth, has also been related to persistence, tenacity, and achievement in educational settings (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). It is the belief that one has the ability or capacity to produce a desired outcome (Bandura & Barbaranelli, 1996). The theory posits that while knowledge and skills are necessary for success, they are not sufficient. How people judge their own abilities and how those judgments affect motivation and behavior contribute to success beyond skill level and competency. Moreover, efficacy beliefs influence the courses of action a person chooses to pursue, the amount of effort that will be expended and how long such effort will be sustained in the midst of challenges and setbacks. Self-efficacy also helps to explain coping behaviors, stress reactions, responses to failure experiences, and achievement strivings (Bandura, 1982).
Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) conducted a longitudinal study of the effects of academic self-efficacy on academic performance in first-year college students. They found that academic self-efficacy strongly correlated with performance and adjustment. Academic self-efficacy positively influenced academic success both directly and indirectly through shaping student expectations and coping mechanisms. Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, and Le (2006) conducted a meta-analysis analyzing the value of a variety of psychosocial constructs in predicting academic performance and persistence, and their analysis found academic self-efficacy to be the best predictor for both college outcomes.

**Interactions with the Campus Environment**

According to Santa Rita (1998), failure in higher education is not explained by the student attributes, but by the complex interactions between students and the learning environments they experience. Existing literature suggests “that campus environments exert an important influence on college students’ experiences and outcomes” (Museus, 2008, p. 569). Institutional “fit” is a term used loosely to describe the appropriateness or adequacy of the relationship of the student and his or her college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Institutions of higher education with open admissions standards compete in the marketplace for prospective students. In this competition for students, it is possible and even likely that students may be swayed by recruitment material to an institution that does not meet their needs for a variety of reasons. Even in what may appear to be a good match between student and college, there are many factors that can contribute to positive bond forming. Some of these factors are uncontrollable such as roommate conflict or major choice issues.

Hoell (2006) noted a research study which demonstrated that active student engagement in learning, service, learning, community involvement, and the importance of extracurricular
involvement were also keys to student success. Promoting a “web of interlocking initiatives”
Kuh (2000-2001, pp. 30-31) proposed cohesive institutional practices designed to cultivate
student success such as sending a clear and repeated messages about expectations of students,
assessing educational practices both in and outside the classroom, using good teaching practices,
intentionally tying classroom experiences outside of the classroom, and removing the artifacts of
outdated pedagogy that are obstacles to student success (Hoell, 2006).

Despite the pervasiveness of campus environments in the undergraduate experience
(Kuh, 2001-2002), their relationship to student outcomes is very difficult to comprehend and
define. First, it is difficult to operationalize environmental factors, such as physical
environments due to the wide array of environments encountered by students on college
campuses (Museus, 2007). It is also possible that much of the influence of campus environments
on student outcomes is, like other institutional characteristics, primarily indirect. Lastly, the
interaction between students and their institutions is ambiguous and complex (Kuh & Love,
2000). The values, beliefs, and assumptions, for example, that make up the fabric of a particular
campus’s culture may exclude an individual while exhibiting such subtle influences that the
individual is unaware of or unable to articulate the ways in which those cultural characteristics
have influenced his or her experience. Museus (2007) noted that “given the enormous reliance
on students’ self-reported data in higher education research, such refinement could render it
difficult to identify significant relationships between environments and student outcomes” (p.
45).

Support Services

Bolyan (2001) demonstrates that universities are facing higher rates of under prepared
students and pinpoints some of the factors that need to be considered in addressing the academic
success of students. Chen (2005) defines academic support as “an array of direct and indirect resources that socializing agents provide to facilitate students’ academic achievement, including emotional support and instrumental support” (p. 79). Students are in need of comprehensive advisement, counseling, and support services including time management, stress management, study skills, note taking skills, and other support services. Santa Rita (1998) reported on research that collected data on freshmen in a three-year longitudinal study and found that students who would eventually fail were those who had trouble coping with the college bureaucracy. Remedial courses at universities need to integrate personal and academic development into coursework and add support services such as assessment, counseling, learning centers, and advising to their repertoire of interventions. McGillin (2003) noted that those seeking to improve success rates for students “should lobby for developmental education programs that encompass academic advising, pre-college basic skills courses, tutoring, topical workshops, and develops resilient students” (p. 48).

A primary factor affecting college student satisfaction, adjustment, and retention is the quality of interaction a student has with a concerned person on campus (Habley & Morales, 1998). Higgins (2003) reported that where student support services were unavailable to students who needed them, had a greater likelihood of failure. Other research found that students who failed desired stronger structure and direction from their learning environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Academic advising was a service that was mentioned repeatedly throughout the literature. Effective academic advising is cited as a major component of the academic, social, and personal support programs necessary to help students meet their learning needs and thus enhance retention through graduation (Jelin, 2011). Where this service was unavailable or perceived to be inaccurate, students were likely not to persist (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Coping with Academic Failure

College students confront many challenges in pursuit of their educational goals (Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). One of the adjustment tasks that college students face is the development of specific academic coping skills. Much research on coping has been done in the academic environment, where there are many situations that are fraught with stresses of deadlines, knowledge acquisition, examinations, grades, demanding projects, and performance expectations. If such experiences are perceived as negative or unmanageable, it can elicit helplessness, depression, and anxiety which in turn can have adverse effects on students’ motivation and performance leaving their academic futures in jeopardy (Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000).

It has been reported that “students cope with negative events in three stages: (1) primary appraisal of the situation or realizing the threat, (2) secondary appraisal or bringing to mind the potential responses that can be made, and (3) coping or the execution of coping responses” (Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000, p. 583). Nested within this process are two specific ways of coping which are identified as problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves thoughts, action, and strategies directed toward removing or diminishing a stressful event or its impact. It tends to operate when people believe that something can be done to alter their situation. Emotion-focused coping involves thoughts, actions, and strategies directed toward the management and reduction of distressing emotions associated with a threatening event and is involved when one perceives that a stressor must simply be endured (Stuthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). Struthers, Perry, and Menec (2000) determined that “great academic success co-varied with lower course grades” (p. 581); however,
students who engaged in problem-focused coping were more likely to be motivated and perform better than students who engaged in emotion-focused coping.

Phinney and Hass (2003) investigated the process of coping in college freshmen in a qualitative study. Their results indicated that students who have perceived lack of support are more likely to report greater stress and lower academic performance and that students with successful coping skills expressed a greater sense of self-efficacy, or, “the belief in one’s ability to execute behavior that is necessary to achieve a specific outcome” (Phinney & Haas, 2003, p. 711) and did not perceive themselves to lack needed social support.

A concept that identifies the types of support that any person may need when encountering a stressful event is social support (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Social support is a concept that involves providing structure, functions, and processes of social relationships. Cassel (1976) was the first to find a relationship between social support and individual health. In Cassel’s study, the factors of social support acted as a guardian, by aiding in the coping of the effects of stress on health. Social support affects both the biological and psychological well-being of people (Cassel, 1976).

**Readmission Following Academic Suspension**

The process of returning to an institution after an academic suspension may be very stressful for a student. The student might first re-apply to the institution, which could be a very long process. After reinstatement, sometimes there are certain conditions that must be met by the student. The student may have to change his or her major, because they no longer qualify to remain in the one originally chosen, or they might lack the desire to remain in the major. Reinstated students might also be concerned with attaining a certain GPA within the first semester in order to remain at the institution. Not only might these students need to be extremely
concerned with their GPA, but they may have to participate in some type of intervention program mandated by their institution. Students also may remain on academic probation upon reinstatement until their GPA has risen to what the institution considers good academic standing.

In a qualitative study conducted by Robeson (1998), personal accounts were given from students who were reinstated after an academic suspension. There were some common characteristics amongst the personal accounts including desire to learn, searching for identity, experiencing emotional upheavals, changing perceptions of professors, and a strong family influence on motivations and decision making (Robeson, 1998). Denovchek (1992) studied predictors of persistence for academically dismissed students that were re-admitted to a large public institution over a nine-year period. Results showed that only about 25% of these students persisted to graduation or were currently enrolled at the completion of the study (Denovchek, 1992).

Himmelreich (1968) studied variables influencing the achievement of college students that were re-admitted to a large Midwestern university after an academic suspension. The criterion variable was first-semester GPA after re-admission. This study found that intellective variables such as high school rank, intelligence, and GPA at the time of suspension were not related to the criterion variable. One of the strongest predictors in this study was whether or not students changed to a different college within the university and as a result, those who changed schools had significantly higher grades (Himmelreich, 1968).

In another study, McDermott (2008) researched students who were academically suspended and their future academic success upon reinstatement. It was concluded that out of the students suspended, only 20% were able to return for two semesters following probation and then achieve good academic standing (McDermott, 2008). Those students deemed successful
had a higher GPA at the time of suspension, had declared a major before time of suspension, were never placed on academic probation before the time of suspension, participated in the appeal process, and participated in an intervention program (McDermott, 2008).

Many students who return to college from an academic suspension are oftentimes placed on academic probation and considered at-risk students. Students returning from academic suspension can take advantage of resources that may already be available at the institution. Colleges and universities often offer programs for students that are academically at risk, including reinstated students. Trombley (2001) noted that academic interventions that include strategies such as group intervention, individual advisor sessions, study skills course, goal setting classes, and interpersonal problem solving training have been shown to be successful initiatives. Other researchers have also determined that intervention through advising and academic support services with unsuccessful students could be effective (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Noel-Levitz (2009) also found that students who did well following an academic suspension, were enrolled in program with strong administrative support services.

A study by Kirk-Kuwaye and Nishida (2001) illustrated that students who are on academic probation and have a higher level of advisor involvement perform better academically and actually increase their GPAs. As a result, intervention through advising with students placed on academic probation is a growing trend and has been referred to as intrusive advising (Tovar & Simon, 2006). Intrusive advising is characterized by a high frequency of contact between the advisor and the student with the role of the advisor reaching beyond providing policy and procedural information (Gehrke & Wong, 2007). It helps the advisor and student forge a relationship which “creates a safe and encouraging space, allowing for mutual trust and student empowerment, that is intended to lead to the student’s realization of opportunities” (p. 146).
With an intrusive relationship, advisors can hold students on academic probation accountable by requiring mandatory meetings. Gehrke and Wong (2007) noted that such requirements can benefit students by identifying and developing successful behavioral patterns and habits, which can promote academic achievement.

**Conclusion**

The range of contributing variables to student failure and success remain wide and seem to vary from one study to another. Yet, while there appears to be no accurate consensus of opinion, no single isolated cause and effect, there are areas in which much of the literature agreed. When student failure is assessed, the emerging contributory factors included low academic preparation and performance, personal student characteristics, and hindering interactions with the campus environment which did not empower students toward academic success.

The door to college is open for increasing numbers of students for whom adapting to college may be a greater challenge. Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, and Atwood (2007) mentioned that the academic preparation level has declined overall for students entering college and that academic disengagement in college has increased among many students. Reinstated students from academic suspension will always exist, and it is the responsibility of higher education practitioners to provide support for them. Although it seems many types of interventions exist, it is imperative that such programs are evaluated for success. It is also important that institutions continue to seek out new approaches to help students returning from an academic suspension succeed. Suspended students should be of great concern to institutions because of the major ramifications for overall retention. Examining current policies and
practices and modifying them to further enhance students’ chances of success following an academic suspension is of great value to the individual, the institution, and to society.

As a segue to the topic for research and discussion in this proposal, the subject of academic standing, especially in relation to student academic difficulty and suspension was reviewed in the literature. Failure as connected to an individual is rarely supported in the literature. More often, failure is referenced to an institution or activity. Therefore, relevant research on college student academic failure was sparse, which indicates a need for research such as is proposed in this future study.

**Theoretical Framework**

All too often, the experience of college students embodies disappointment with grades and disengagement from desired goals. Students’ beliefs about what causes their academic failures are called attributions (Weiner, 1986). Attribution theory describes how individuals develop casual explanations for behaviors and outcomes, and how their casual explanations influence subsequent reactions (Martinko, 1995). It asserts that individuals attempt to seek out meaning when trying to determine causes of events, outcomes, and behavior (Weiner, 1974). Although there are many variations of attribution theory, the conceptual approach that will be used in this study is achievement motivation models (e.g., Weiner, 1986) which emphasize how individuals explain their own successes and failures. This conceptual framework provides the appropriate lens for this study of student attitudes and sense making of their academic suspension.

**Attribution Theory**

Research in the field of attribution theory and academic achievement suggests that a relationship exists between a student’s attributional style and achievement (Weiner, 1986).
Attribution theory is based upon casual search, the idea that individuals are constantly striving to isolate causes for events (Weiner, 1985). Substantial research on the nature of attributions in an academic setting is evident within the attribution literature (Weiner, 1974, 1984, 1985). The analyses of attributions within the framework of achievement behavior have included reasons for success or failure at some academic task. Theorists and researchers contend that attributions influence individual reactions to success and failure (Abramsom, Garber, & Seligman, 1980; Weiner, 1985; Cortes-Suarez, 2004). They also report that individuals use attributions to explain and justify their performance (Abramsom, Garber, & Seligman, 1980; Weiner, 1985; Cortes-Suarez, 2004). Since assessing student achievement continues to hold an important place in higher education, it is therefore important to understand how students respond to their academic performance. A student’s perception of whether they succeeded or failed, and an analysis of why they succeeded or failed, can have an effect on future performance.

Theorists in social psychology (Hilton, Fein, & Miller, 1993; Jones, 1990; Weiner, 1990) consider the process individuals use to make judgments about the causes of behavior, especially when something unexpected or unpleasant occurs, is quite predictable. Attribution theory addresses the question of how individuals make these judgments. When an individual makes an attribution, he or she is usually guessing about the true cause of a particular action. When applied to academic achievement, the student may be attributing success and failure to various factors.

Attribution theory is also concerned with the relationships that exist between attributions and other motivational variables. Abramson, Garber, and Seligman (1980) contend that attribution theory suggests that performance, which is consistent with the expectations of the individual, is attributed to stable causes. However, performance which is not consistent with the
expectations of the individual is attributed to stable or unstable causes. In general, it is believed that this holds true whether the performance outcome is success or failure. In the context of academic performance, it has been reported that when students do not perform well on achievement-type tasks, they make causal attributions for their lack of success (Weiner, 1986). These attributions, therefore, affect their expectations of any future performance and greatly depend on the type of attribution that is made. For example, when a student attributes failure to an internal/stable cause such as ability, it is predicted that the same outcome can be expected on future achievement-type tasks (Cortes-Suarez, 2004). On the other hand, if the student attributes failure to internal/unstable causes such as effort, the student may believe that this may change in the future, and thus does not expect failure on future tasks (Kloosterman, 1988).

**Heider’s Model of Attribution Theory.** The history of the systematic study of attributional processes can be traced back to Heider’s seminal work on interpersonal perception (Heider, 1958). In his early work on the nature of attributions Heider analyzed the perceptions people have of others and how they explain those perceptions. Heider (1958) maintained that individuals strive for prediction and understanding of daily events in order to give their lives stability and predictability. He was an advocate of a phenomenological approach to the study of human behavior. This approach assumed that, in order to understand what people will do, one has to see the world through their eyes. Specifically, how people explain the reasons for their own behavior.

Heider (1958) suggested that, in general, people are constantly seeking casual explanations for the outcomes of their behavior. Heider categorized ordinary explanations as having either personal or environmental causes. Effective personal force is composed of the attributional factors of ability and effort, while effective environmental force is composed of the
attributional factors of task difficulty and luck (Heider, 1958). He argued that each of these factors combine to result in a behavioral outcome (Heider, 1958). Heider’s studies analyzed in detail how people answer questions regarding the cause, purpose, and intent of their own actions and behaviors. His concern was with the way people handle everyday events and he concluded that events should be explained in commonsense terms (Heider, 1958). Heider’s theory served as a starting point for the field of attribution theory in social psychology (Weiner, 1985).

**Weiner’s Theory of Achievement Attributions.** The work of Weiner (1986) was influenced by Heider (1958) and has been credited with having made a major contribution to the research on attribution theory based on the concept of achievement motivation and emotion (Figure 1). Achievement motivation refers to the degree to which an individual perceives he or she can be successful at performing a complex task (e.g., such as taking a difficult exam), which runs along a continuum from high to low. In general, those with high achievement motivation believe they can complete the task while those with low achievement motivation do not (Weiner, 2000). Using Weiner’s attribution of effort as an example, those with high achievement motivation will tend to put forth more effort into completing complex tasks (Figure 2). It is believed that effort and ability are two of the primary casual factors cited in the context of achievement-related performance (Graham, 1991; Weiner, 1979).

Weiner (1986) was among the first to extend attribution theory to the domain of academic achievement. His theories have proven to be most important to the academic community since his research focused on the understanding of the causes of success and failure in an academic setting. He theorized that if one can change people’s attributions for poor performance to an unstable cause, such as low effort or bad luck, one can then raise their expectations about future performance. This led the way to studies which used intervention models based on attribution
theory. Weiner (1986) further reasoned that the basic principle of attribution theory is a person’s attempt to understand why an event occurred and to search for causes. He suggested that people are quite selective about attributions they make. He explained that people are most likely to make attributions: (a) when unusual events attract their attention, (b) when events have personal consequences, (c) when others behave in unexpected ways, and (d) when they are suspicious about the motives underlying someone else’s behavior (Weiner, 1990).

Weiner’s (1985, 1995) attribution model which is based on the concept of achievement motivation and emotion, states that when an event occurs that is perceived as unexpected, negative and/or important by a person, such as being academically suspended, a casual search takes place resulting in an explanation of the event. According to the theory, the ensuing attributions can be classified into three main casual dimensions: locus of causality, stability, and controllability. The first dimension, locus of causality can be internal or external. It is defined as the location of the cause and is the extent to which the cause of some event is perceived to be internal or external to an individual. Such internally based attributions include effort or ability, while external ones include the nature of a task or luck. The second dimension, stability, refers to our perception of how stable or unstable we believe an event to be. It refers to the nature of the cause as being either more permanent or more changeable over time (Weiner, 1985). The last dimension, controllability, refers to attributing our successes or failures to factors that we either can control or cannot control. For example, if a student believes that he or she passed an examination because of the amount of effort expended, then that student is attributing their success to a factor that he or she can control. If, on the other hand, the student was sick at the time of the exam and failed it, that student may attribute the poor performance to being sick, which is a factor that was outside of the student’s control. Table 1 presents the casual
dimensions of locus of causality, stability, and controllability, their parameters, and relationship to attributions.

Table 1

*Causal Dimensions and Their Related Attributions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causal Dimension</th>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Attributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locus of Causality</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>Ability/Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Task Difficulty/Luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Invariant</td>
<td>Task Difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changeable</td>
<td>Effort/Luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controllability</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Task Difficulty/Luck</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although Weiner’s (1984, 1986, 2000) three dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability are just as relevant to interpersonal attributions as they are to intrapersonal attributions, Weiner intended to place a greater emphasis on controllability. For example, a student might attribute their poor academic performance to factors that were outside of their control, such as a large class size or bloated curriculum. The extent to which individuals ascribe events as being caused by something internally or something externally can influence the extent to which they persevere on a task after a failure and experience negative emotions such as guilt or shame. For example, when an individual is faced with failure such as poor academic performance, they are more likely to experience guilt or shame, and are less likely to persevere, if they perceive that the failure is due to an internal source such as lack of ability as opposed to an external source such as an unreasonably difficult test.
Conclusion

As reported by Weiner and his colleagues (Weiner et al., 1972; Weiner & Kukla, 1970), students who are successful explain their academic achievement in terms of ability and effort. They tend to explain failure by lack of effort or unstable factors that are external in nature. When one attributes success to ability and effort, it brings feelings of pride and continued expectations of success. When students attribute academic failures to lack of effort, it allows them to maintain a positive view of themselves as competent students because the level of effort that they put in to a task was in their control. Students who experience failure and attribute that failure to lack of interest or to the limited time they were able to devote to the task maintain positive views of themselves as competent students by explaining that they could have been successful if they had been interested in the task and/or had spent the effort necessary for success (Weiner, 2000).

Attribution theory utilizes the constructs of achievement motivation and emotion in order to explain how individuals perceive their performance in academic contexts. However, in an overall theory of motivation, this dimension is only part of the equation. In order for motivation to exist, a force must exist that energizes an individual to act. For an individual to be energized to action or inaction there must be a change in expectancy following a success or failure at a previous achievement-related action (Weiner, 1986).

Pintrich and Schunk (1996) said humans are motivated to understand the environment and themselves. They are motivated to master their own world and make it more predictable and controllable. Humans are like scientists trying to understand why people say and do what they say and do. In their ceaseless quest for mastery of their environment, humans search for the causes of events so they are able to attribute the event to the cause. This is the heart of
attribution theory. Humans must identify a cause for everything that occurs. How they attribute success and failure is of paramount importance to motivation in education.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This study takes an in-depth look into the personal experiences of students who have been academically suspended and then reinstated. In this chapter, a brief description of qualitative inquiry and justification for the selection of qualitative research methods are offered. The methodological approach will also be discussed. Next, the methods used to select the site and the participants for data will be provided. Finally, the procedures that will be used to collect and analyze the data will be outlined. The chapter concludes with measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and quality assurance, limitations are acknowledged, and the role of the researcher is discussed.

A Qualitative Approach to Inquiry

Characteristics

The researcher conducted a qualitative study in order to describe student experiences with academic suspension. Qualitative inquiry investigates the human lived experience. “It is the life-world as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings that is the object of study” (Schwandt, 2001, p.84). Qualitative studies focus on the importance of the participant’s perspective and how it informs the personal meaning held by the participant (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods also provide flexibility in exploring an isolated subject (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). The methodological approach of a qualitative study is inquiry-based, exploring an occurrence through questions, narrative descriptions, and an analysis of emerging themes (Creswell, 2009). As such, the qualitative method provides a representation of the specific focus of the study, based on the interpretation of the lived experiences of participants (Neuman, 2003).
Rationale for the Use of Qualitative Methods

A qualitative design is appropriate and effective for the study because qualitative research allows a more holistic investigation of a phenomenon. Qualitative methods can be useful for understanding student experiences with academic suspension in several ways. First, qualitative methods allow for the exploration of a topic or concept through the use of detailed information (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods are ideal if the outcomes of an inquiry are not yet known and a goal of the research is to generate rich descriptive data. Second, the research question used to guide the design of this study was best answered using qualitative methods. Creswell (2009) noted that how and what questions are best pursued through the use of qualitative inquiry. The research question that guided this study focused on how students make meaning of their experiences with academic suspension. Finally, qualitative methods were used to study individuals embedded within their respective institution. Creswell (2009) noted that qualitative inquiry is a useful tool for understanding the experiences of individuals within their natural environments. In this study, the researcher interviewed students on their respective campus. Gaining a better understanding of the experience of students who have struggled academically and have been suspended and reinstated, adds depth to our information base in the research literature. Students who have persisted despite academic difficulty have rich stories to tell about their experience and perhaps about the psychological resources that carried them through adversity (Palmer, 2002).

Methodological Approach: Phenomenology

Given the nature of the research question coupled with the need for a full and rich understanding of the lived experience of students who were academically suspended, phenomenology forms the theoretical basis for the research design. Phenomenology is described
as the study of the shared meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). A phenomenological approach renders a complex understanding of how students make meaning of their experience with academic suspension. Important concepts of phenomenology include an emphasis on examining pure experience, an attempt to personalize the experience by making meaning of it through the filter of existing mental structures, and an accounting of how each person exists in a social world (Morse & Richards, 2002). The goal of phenomenology is to capture the lived experiences or how individuals perceive and experience a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

Phenomenology, in which the researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon from a context-specific perspective, is rooted in philosophies of social constructivism. The basic tenet of social constructivism is that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Phenomenological researchers are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved (Welman & Kruger, 1999). Phenomenology emphasizes a focus on participants’ subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. Within a phenomenological perspective, the researcher attempts to understand others’ lived experiences and how their world appears to them. Phenomenology is descriptive rather than experimental with a goal of better understanding or illuminating a process or problem (Hart, 1998). Phenomenology seeks to answer the questions, “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

The presentation of phenomenological research findings includes themes that capture the essences of the experience based on the statements, words, and expressions used by participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, interviews were conducted in which participants were asked to
respond to semi-structured, open-ended questions. Their responses to these questions served to reveal the common themes in their experiences. The data obtained through the interview process and responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed for themes and serve as the basis for the phenomenon, representing the essence of the lived experience of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). More specifically, Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological approach was utilized.

Moustakas’s Phenomenology

Clark Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental phenomenology is marked by transcendental processes of epoche, bracketing, imagination variation, and synthesis. Epoche is the setting aside, as much as possible, of judgment and understanding, and abstaining from the ordinary manner of perception in every-day life in an effort to receive new learning (Moustakas, 1994). It refers to an unbiased and open attitude of learning and so allows the researcher to investigate a phenomenological experience free of those preconceptions that can be removed from the consciousness. Each participant receives an equal and adequate opportunity to describe the experience, and the process of epoche allows the researcher to set aside personal feelings and to be open to the presented data. The research instrument, which is the guiding questions, facilitate presentation of the phenomenon as it is consciously being experienced by the participants so that the researcher receives comprehensive descriptions without bias or predetermined orientation (Moustakas, 1994).

The process of bracketing permits the researcher to bracket the research topic and question for a strict conscientious focus (Moustakas, 1994). Personal feelings and foreknowledge that present in the consciousness are bracketed thereby putting aside, as much as possible, any preconceptions and previous knowledge pertaining to the study. In doing so, the researcher is permitted to limit personal influence on the data and so describe exactly that which
has been presented from deep within the realm of each participant’s conscious expression of cognitions. The language of the manuscript is textural so that each participant’s mood, mannerisms, rhythm, and references within the experience are captured and portrayed (Moustakas, 1994).

As Moustakas (1994) conceptualizes, imaginative variation allows the researcher to describe a phenomenon in a structural manner, and in so doing, make sense of how the experience emerges. The descriptions bring to the forefront those factors that perpetuate that which is being experienced by each participant. In this study, the phenomenon is a lived experience of academic failure. Following from Moustakas’s methods and procedures for conduction of phenomenological research, the researcher investigated, through dialogue, the manner in which each participant experienced the phenomenon. The dialogue served to reveal the common themes as well as the factors that make the experience that which it is and how it is.

**Settings and Context**

The setting for the study was a private, four-year college located in the north-east Atlantic region. Full-time undergraduate enrollment at the selected institution is approximately 7,550 students, of which approximately 45% are female and 55% are male. All the participants for this study are students who were academically suspended and currently re-enrolled following the suspension. The main source of data was collected through semi-structured interviews in an environment of the participants’ choice, on the institution’s campus.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Individual interviews are common data collection methods for phenomenological researchers (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenological researchers have varying view points on whether to use unstructured interviews or semi-structured interviews. Unstructured interviews are
comprised of open-ended questions that are used in order to allow the dialogue regarding the phenomenon of interest to take any direction that is necessary in order to get a thick description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In contrast, semi-structured interviews that start with open-ended questions and are followed by probe questions can be employed to help the interviewer focus the participant to share information about their lived experience as opposed to theories or opinions that reflect on that experience (Wertz, 2005).

Wertz (2005) noted that the semi-structured approach is flexible enough to incorporate different probe questions as the interviews progress in order to gain a fuller description of the phenomenon. A semi-structured interview was adopted for this study to ensure that the interviewer could focus the participants on describing their perceptions of their experience with academic failure. A three-pronged approach was used to develop the interview questions (Seidman, 2006). The first set of questions was focused on past experience with the phenomenon of interest; the second set was focused on the present experience; and the third set of questions joined these two narratives to describe the individual’s essential experience with the phenomenon. The students in this study participated in one interview that lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded via audio tape.

Site Selection

Phenomenological studies include rich detailed descriptions of the environment in which the phenomenon being studied takes place (Moustakas, 1994). The selection of the research site and the data collected are significant elements that will help to describe the essence of the phenomenon that was experienced (Creswell, 2009). The site that was chosen for this study is an elite, highly selective, research institution. A representative from the Office of Admissions at the institution noted that a large percentage of the student population consists of highly academically
driven students (L. Glavin, personal communication, August, 20, 2012). Because many of these students possess the intellectual ability to succeed in college, questions arise regarding their academic failure and serves as the primary factor regarding the site selection.

**Participant Selection**

Patton (2002) notes that there is no rule for sample size in qualitative research and noted that “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher within the sample size” (p. 245). Unlike quantitative research in which a large sample size is desirable and random selection of participants to provide adequate sample representation is important (Hoell, 2006), Polkinghorne (1989) noted that rather than describing the characteristics of a group who have had the experience, phenomenological research intends to describe the structure of an experience and participant selection serves to cover a range of variation in order to provide richly varied descriptions of specific experiences. Therefore, five participants will be selected for this research study.

There are certain criteria that should be adhered to for participant selection. Purposeful sampling is based on the belief that one must select a sample based on what one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight into. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that the appropriate selection of a participant as an informant involves two requirements. Most importantly, the participant must have “had the experience” (p. 47) that is the topic of research. Second, the participant must have the ability to adequately and completely articulate the experience being researched.

The institution chosen for this study comprises four undergraduate schools, the College, School of Foreign Service, School of Business, and Nursing and Health Studies. The participant
recruitment process included the involvement of the four Academic Deans who each oversee one of the four undergraduate schools. The Deans are responsible for student reinstatements and therefore have access to a database of reinstated students. The Dean’s identified students that met the criteria and requested their permission to be contacted by the researcher regarding this study. Once their permission was granted, the students were solicited through a letter of invitation delivered via email from the researcher. All interview participants are previously unknown to the researcher.

Informed Consent

Creswell (2009) noted that “ethical practices involve much more than merely following a set of static guidelines, such as those provided by professional associations” (p. 88). It is important for researchers to address any ethical dilemmas they anticipate when an outline of the study is being considered. When anticipating data collection, researchers need to respect participants as well as the research site (Creswell, 2009). Christians (2000) informed that confidentiality and privacy must be assured as the primary safeguard against unwanted exposure. All personal data will need to be secured and participants’ information should only be made public behind a shield of anonymity. Seidman (2006) noted that the standard assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that participants will remain unidentified.

Before data was gathered, the participant was made aware of the nature, duration, and purpose of the study. They were also informed about the method and means by which it was to be conducted. Finally, the participants were informed of any risks and discomforts to be reasonably expected. It was during this process that the participants were informed as to what steps will be taken to protect their identity (Seidman, 2006). After being informed of the study and what it entailed, participants were required to sign an informed consent document. There is
a common misconception that the informed consent document and the informed consent process are one in the same. The informed consent document is just one important component of the informed consent process.

**Description of Institution and Participants**

ABC University is a private, selective institution that was founded in the late 1700s. The Admissions Office at this institution reported that the institution is considered highly selective due to its average applicant acceptance rate of 20% (L. Glavin, personal communication, August, 20, 2012). The institution is described as “highly selective” and ranked in the top 25 for best colleges and universities in the *U.S. News and World Report’s* 2012 edition.

This study consisted of five undergraduate students. Of those five, four were characterized as traditional students and one non-traditional. The participants represented the disciplines of Catholic Studies, History, International Business, Latin American Studies, Marketing, Sociology, and undeclared. Students who participated in this study were between sophomore and senior standing and ranged in age from twenty-one to twenty-four years. Four participants were men and one woman. Three of the participants self-identified as Caucasian, one African American, and one South Asian.

Prior to enrolling in college, two students completed high school at private college preparatory institution and three attended a public institution. The participants reported graduating from the top 10% to the top half of their high school classes. The students interviewed came from a diverse set of backgrounds with hometowns representing Bangladesh, California, Georgia, New Jersey, and Texas.

This study maintains a focus on the perceptions of the specified students who have returned to school after an academic suspension. They were studied within a phenomenological
framework in order to reveal the inner and personal experience of the outward manifestation of perseverance against adversity. It is hoped that the phenomenological method of inquiry, the type of qualitative research that lends thick and rich description from personal narratives, will add the students’ voice and experiences to the research base on college student persistence and retention.

Table 2

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Traditional vs. Non-traditional</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>High School Type</th>
<th>High School Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Drew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>Princeton, NJ</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Top 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Sam</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>SO</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 Eric</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>Houston, TX</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Top 33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 Jeff</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Top 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 Carla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Top 15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Interview data was analyzed based on Moustakas’s step by step transcendental process (Moustakas, 1994). First, the researcher bracketed the research question so that all attention was directed to the research, and it protected from surfacing suppositions as much as possible. Once all the interviews were completed, the audio tapes were carefully transcribed by the researcher. Next, the transcriptions were uploaded to MaxQDA and analyzed employing the procedures recommended by Moustakas’s (1994) to extract common themes. Coding qualitative data is a
vital process used to organize and understand the data that was collected (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Bracketing was the first step in the process. The idea of bracketing is for the researcher to become aware of the preconceptions he or she holds about the object of study and then bracket or suspend those preconceptions. This way, the researcher avoids ordinary ways of perceiving things and the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside (Moustakas, 1994). Each of the data sources were analyzed in a paragraph-by-paragraph manner where each paragraph was assessed based on its content. Next, the researcher engaged in horizontalization, which refers to regarding each statement as having equal value. At this phase, any statements that were not consistent with the research topic or question was removed from that data permitting only those statements that provided textural meaning and varying features of the experience. Next, each paragraph or related section was assigned a theme indicating the predominant theme was contained. These themes were then categorized by identifying statements that related to the topic and by grouping statements into meaningful units. Finally, the themes themselves were analyzed in order to report a textural and structural description of the lived experiences and the essence of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994).

**Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance**

Throughout the study, the researcher made efforts to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the data collected. Validity refers to whether the research investigated what it intended to investigate. In qualitative research, measures of validity are more accurately referred to as verification. In essence, the validity of phenomenological research involves the question, “does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 57).

Another consideration is that the results of qualitative research in general, and
phenomenological inquiry more specifically, are not considered to be “generalizable” to other populations as are results of large population samples that are reduced quantitatively. The results generated from qualitative inquiry should be assessed for their “verifiability.” This means that the findings of this study will be valuable to the extent that they resonate with or are consonant to reports of other students who have experienced the same phenomenon as the participants that will be interviewed in this study.

Member checking served as a useful strategy to ensure the accuracy of data. Member checking is the process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of account (Creswell, 2009). Once the transcriptions were completed, the participants were provided the opportunity to read their interview transcripts in order to confirm and clarify the data collected. The participants were also invited to a follow up meeting which allowed for the opportunity to provide additional information that came up upon review of their interview (Creswell, 2009). All documentation connected to this study was stored in a locked file cabinet in a secure location outside of the research site. The researcher is the only person who has access to this information. All interview transcripts and audio tape recordings will be destroyed seven years after the completion of the study, per IRB guidelines.

Limitations

There are a few limitations identifiable in implementing phenomenology as a research design method. Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Shaw, and Smith (2006) explain that because phenomenological approach renders the researcher an overt participant in the data collection, researcher effect can become a form of limitation. The researcher’s “demeanor, accent, dress, gender, age, and power” (p. 248) are characteristics that may bear influence on participants’ readiness to take part as well as the quality of their responses. Although the researcher must
engage in the phenomenological reduction which involves the transcendental process of epoche and bracketing, participants are not likely to be aware of such behavior and researcher effect may emerge. As Moustakas (1994) explains, the researcher cannot expect participants to adopt to the phenomenological attitude, and as such, they may have biases against the researcher’s characteristics.

In addition, the data from this study will be contingent on the participant’s willingness to answer honestly and openly during the interview process. Therefore, the validity of the study will be limited to the reliability of the information provided by the participants. In an effort to ensure openness and honesty during the interview process, attention was given to provide a comfortable and confidential atmosphere to promote open and honest answers from participants (Moustakas, 1994). In effort to provide a comfortable atmosphere, the researcher allowed participants to select the locations in which the interviews were conducted.

Finally, the data collected in this study represented students who re-enrolled at a selective, private institution following an academic suspension. Since this research was conducted at a selective institution, the results may not be transferable to a non-selective institution. However, the research method utilized in this study may prove useful for other institutions that are interested in conducting research on this segment of the student population.

**Role of the Researcher**

Moustakas (1994) posits that the “researcher and participants are to be co-researchers” (p. 110). This ultimately means that the researcher is actively searching for meaning and value in the words presented of the conscious, lived experiences of the participants. The participants are providing a description of the experience as it is present in their consciousness, and the researcher is engaging in epoche in order to understand the lived experience and the essence of
the collective lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. Similarly, without the researcher, the participants would not be able to individually or collectively represent their lived experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Consideration of the role of the researcher is important in all forms of research, but particularly critical in conducting inquiries that are qualitative (Museus, 2007). In this phenomenological investigation, the researcher was the key instrument. The researcher for this study is an educational administrator who has worked with many college students for almost ten years who have struggled with good academic standing. She has significant background in the area of counseling and providing support for at-risk students. It was important to clarify this bias prior to the study because the researcher’s background and education could influence how research findings are interpreted.

The researcher was responsible for the questions that were asked during the data collection, the transcription of the interviews, the meaning derived from the students’ responses, and the report of the study’s findings. Therefore, the researcher was responsible for reflecting and monitoring the ways her worldview and experience as an academic counselor guided questions and influenced her understanding of participants’ experiences. While the researcher has worked with many students in these circumstances, rarely has she been in the situation of “listen only” without the urgent need to provide advice, referrals, support or options. Through the phenomenological analysis process, the researcher expected to discover the psychological dimensions of their experience. The role of the researcher in this study was to provide insight into the ways in which students cope and make meaning with academic suspension. Moreover, the researcher hopes to provide conclusions about how higher education administrators may be able to use the findings to foster student success among high risk students at other institutions.
Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative and phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of college students who experienced academic difficulty, academic suspension, and re-enrollment. The data for this study were collected using personal interviews of five college students who had experienced academic suspension and subsequent reinstatement at a highly-selective, private institution. This chapter presents findings that are used to answer the research question: How do students make meaning of their academic suspension?

For an uncensored account of the experience of academic suspension, participants were asked to look inside themselves and share what was meaningful and important about their experience. They were asked to respond without limitations and were given adequate opportunity to comprehensively express their thoughts and feelings about their experience. In order to fully engage the participants, all interviews were audio-taped so that the researcher could refrain from taking notes and pay exclusive attention to each participant’s story.

The students with the exception of one, are characterized as traditional college students. Students had various experiences that contributed to their lack of academic success, and their unsuccessful academic and social integration into the university. Certain themes emerged from the interviews including: Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance, Emotional Consequences of Academic Suspension, Relational Consequences of Academic Suspension, Factors Contributing to Reinstatement, and Emergence of Changing Behaviors. Another minor theme included recommendations provided by the participants. Each theme is described in more detail in Table 3 (below), along with student stories and quotes that demonstrate the theme.
### Table 3

*Themes from Student Interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance</th>
<th>Themes and Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Integration into the College Environment</td>
<td>· Integration into the College Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Earlier life situation/experience(s)</td>
<td>· Earlier life situation/experience(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Financial difficulties</td>
<td>· Financial difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Knowledge and Use of Support Services</td>
<td>· Knowledge and Use of Support Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Reluctance to Seek Help</td>
<td>· Reluctance to Seek Help</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional Consequences of Academic Suspension</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Isolation and disconnection from the University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Sadness, embarrassment, stupidity, thoughtlessness, worthlessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>· Anxiety over how others perceived them</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relational Consequences of Academic Suspension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Peer Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· University support</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Factors Contributing to Reinstatement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Connection to the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Desire to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Meaningful advising and mentoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>· New experiences</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emergence of Changing Behaviors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Changes in academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Internal changes</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Student Recommendations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· Allow continued involvement with campus activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Clear expectations and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· Consistent follow up from member(s) of the university</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five students who completed an academic suspension and reinstated at the institution were interviewed about their thoughts and experiences surrounding their suspension. The goal was to understand how these students made sense of their experiences. Each theme is described below in more detail. All students interviewed were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

**Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance**

Each participant had a unique story for how they ended up on academic suspension. Nevertheless, within those stories several themes emerged as to why students believed they ended up on academic suspension. Regardless of their previous educational success, many students struggled to adapt and flourish in the university environment. Challenges that affect integration into the college environment, knowledge and use of support services, and their reluctance to seek help were all present in most students.

**Integration into the College Environment**

Several of the participants struggled to integrate into the college environment as a whole upon entering the university while others were able to successfully integrate into one aspect of the university, either social or academic, but not both. Carla’s academic struggles began her first semester of college with the enrollment in a *Narratives of Violence* class. During one of the in-class discussions about sexual assault, a tragic personal experience came to surface for Carla. As she explains:

Within the second week of class we had a woman from the violence or some student abuse whatever center come and give us statistics of students who had been raped. Then that was when, you know five years prior, well July 22, 2007 I was raped and I had never really dealt with it until that moment when I heard them talking about it. I was just like, I was just sick, I just threw, I just remember I ran out of class and I threw up and left my
binders there and stuff and I didn’t want anyone to know what was going on, but basically I couldn’t go to that class after that because I couldn’t face the teacher, I felt like she knew. I don’t know I felt like there were all these things and I didn’t deal with and I didn’t tell anyone because I was ashamed because I had thought it was my fault.

Several participants mentioned that integrating socially was of more importance to them.

Sam came to the university two years later than traditionally aged freshmen because while he was in high school his father was diagnosed with cancer. Sam was expected to take over the family business during his father’s illness. Two years after his diagnosis, Sam’s father expressed his deep desire for Sam to attend a university in the United States. Sam did not share the same desire as his father as he felt he had demonstrated that he could run the family business without a college degree. Despite his belief, he respected his father’s request and enrolled in the university in the Fall of 2009.

Class attendance was one of the factors that led to Sam’s academic suspension. He characterizes himself as a “smart kid,” and says he chose not to attend classes because he did not need to. He felt that going to class was a waste of his time either because he already knew what was being taught or could teach himself what he did not know. Instead, Sam felt it was more important to put time and effort in to networking and making social connections at college. It was his belief that such connections could help his family business and provide more opportunities than what he would gain in the classroom. His semester of miserable attendance led to failing grades.

When integration failed in one area, it often negatively impacted the other area. In reflecting on his experience and what may have ultimately led to his academic suspension, Drew says his social life played a significant role. At the beginning of his freshman year, he had a hard
time adjusting to the college environment and making new friends. Making strong personal
collections like he had in high school was Drew’s priority. Therefore, he put much more effort
into this activity instead of academics. He felt that missing a few assignments was not that big of
a deal as long as he continued to attend his classes. In several classes, he missed weekly
assignments and readings on a consistent basis. Due to his lack of academic focus, Drew failed
two classes in his first semester.

On paper, the academic regimen of college should not have been so challenging for
Drew. He is the elder of two children of college educated, fairly affluent parents (upper-middle
class). His father is an alumnus of the university. Throughout the interview process, Drew
discussed how his father influenced his drive to pursue the same degree he had at the same
university. He indicated that college was not a choice for him. Drew graduated from a small,
private, college-preparatory high school where he was in the top 10% of his class of 98 students.
His high school grade point average was a 3.8/4.0.

Drew expressed that he had difficulty with both the social and academic environments at
college. He mentioned that “in the beginning of school I didn’t really like the environment that I
was in. I didn’t like the kids in my hall and I didn’t like the kids I was becoming friends with.”
There were also some things he did not like about the business school and how he was learning.
Making friends was something that was important to Drew because he felt that he had such a
great group of friends in high school and desired the same in college. He took every opportunity
that presented itself in order to make friends and at times that meant sacrificing his academics.

Unlike Drew, Eric, a first-generation college student, came to the university from an
urban, Southwestern, majority African-American public high school. He also participated in a
college bridge program known as Community Scholars, which resulted in three transfer credit
hours. The Community Scholars program provides students with a unique opportunity to thrive at a highly selective institution. Scholars are carefully selected during the admissions process based on their high academic achievement, impressive co-curricular accomplishment, and a commitment to success in the face of adversity. They are often first-generation college students, and typically represent diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Like many new freshmen, Eric discovered new friends in college. Many students look forward to discovering new people, but balancing the fun social aspects with the rigorous academics can cause dissonance. Unable to purchase books due to financial constraints, Eric found himself behind in his coursework quickly. Eric bemoaned his poor academic performance because he feels he could have succeeded had his family been financially ready for his attendance at the university. He explained that his father was responsible for a large part of his financial costs and he had difficulty making payments by the required deadlines. He claims that in addition to being unable to purchase books at the start of the semester, the financial difficulties associated with paying his tuition bill led to course scheduling conflicts. This put him in a position where it was impossible to get caught up in classes. This led Eric to focus more of his time socially rather than on his academics as he explains, “Not only did I not have everything I needed to do the academic stuff, I was getting drawn into the social scene. If you don’t have your books and you really enjoy going out you’re just not going to study as much as you need to perform well.”

Similarly, connection to peers, or a lack of connection, also influenced Carla’s experience. Like Drew and Eric, she traveled far from home to attend the university. From Los Angeles, California, Carla decided to attend college out of state, hoping for a fresh start. While most participants in this study lived in the residence halls, Carla did not. Living off campus
impacted her social life. As she explains:

I was so optimistic about everything and I was like you know it wasn’t hard for me to make friends I thought, and then I come here, and they first tell me there isn’t room on campus for me to live in the dorms so I had to live off campus which initially you know I was like this is great, I don’t want to live in the dorms but then I realized it didn’t really help with like making friends because it’s hard to make friends when you don’t go to orientation and you don’t live in the dorms you know. So I managed at least I thought but then I started drinking.

In the beginning Carla felt that not living in the dorms was a good thing, but she came to realize it left her feeling disconnected and unable to successfully integrate into the social environment at the university. Instead of trying to find other ways to become involved on campus such as student clubs or other recreational activities, she turned to alcohol, which negatively impacted both her health and her academics. How this led to further disengagement with the campus environment will be discussed later.

Though the majority of students placed on academic suspension experience some measure of difficulty in adjusting to the college environment, this is by no means a universal characteristic. Unlike the other participants, Jeff acclimated to college life reasonably well. He was able to balance academics with social life as well as his athletic responsibilities. In his first three semesters he earned 2.33, 2.74, and 3.40 grade point averages respectively. He felt that he did not have any problems making friends because of his ties with his teammates. Jeff also had a close relationship with his athletic coach whom he considers a positive mentor. He also shared that he enjoyed his classes and felt he had good relationships with his professors as well.

As the challenges of being a college student compound, they become more likely to
impact learning and success. This can result in a lack of social or academic integration, which can influence student persistence in college. It is important to acknowledge that students had multiple experiences and challenges that interacted and compounded. No student had just one challenge, and the challenges should not be viewed as discrete events. Each student had multiple challenges and no challenges were exactly the same.

**Knowledge and Use of Support Services**

Several of the participants either were not aware of one or more of the various support services available to students, or were not aware of the scope of the services provided at the institution. Additionally, some students made assumptions about the type and structure of assistance offered by the various offices. For many students such services were not considered, as Jeff explains:

Um I would say before I was suspended I rarely used services such as tutoring and the career center um partly just because I was early on in my career at the University and just because I wasn’t really fully aware how helpful those services could be. When I came back to school that’s when I fully decided to take part in all the resources the University offers just as because going to the Career Center I know they are more than helpful to point me to resources that if they don’t have, they know somebody. So as I was acclimating myself and trying to get back into the swing of things, they advised me on several tips on how to kind of just take everything head on and just take it step by step and also the tutors helped me to come back and get caught up quickly and not be far behind from when I left school.

Several students expressed that they did not utilize the services of the career center because they assumed that it was too early in their academic career to be worried about job
searching and updating their resumes. However, that was the extent of their knowledge about the office. During their interviews, several students were surprised to hear that they could take a number of assessments at the career center to help them identify majors or careers that might work well with their interests and abilities.

In other instances, some students found out about services available to them when it was too late to have an impact on their success in a course. For example, Eric had fallen behind with his academics because he was financially unable to purchase his textbooks until about a month into the semester. It was not until he had already been placed on academic suspension that he found out about a scholarship program that would have assisted him in purchasing his textbooks at the beginning of the semester. He also never considered informing his faculty of his situation. Had they known, efforts could have been made to get him the class material temporarily.

While it was speculated that students were reluctant to use support services, it seems clear that some students were simply unaware of the services available to them. Each student was aware of at least one support service, but none of the students were aware of all the services. Additionally, many were unclear about the extent of the support services provided and were unclear about how services were delivered.

**Reluctance to Seek Help**

Pursuing additional support when faced with challenges indicates a strong desire to adjust when faced with challenges. This commitment is one of the key challenges to college success. Reluctance to seek help was another common theme that emerged in interviews. Students were reluctant to follow up with professors regarding their needs or concerns because they felt intimidated by the professors’ authority. Additionally, some students expressed fear of being judged by others if they sought help.
Several of the students interviewed, especially males, used language to describe a deeply ingrained, sociocultural value of independence as strength. They frequently used words such as “showing weakness,” “being judged,” “embarrassed,” and “pride.” For many students, reaching out for help on their own was an incredible obstacle to overcome.

After being placed on academic probation, Eric remained unwilling to seek the help of tutors. He was reluctant to seek help because it was a “pride issue” for him. Instead he was determined to force himself to find the time to learn everything on his own without any help. He felt that, “Even if it’s hard, if I work hard enough I can understand it.” However, this approach left Eric in a position where it was impossible to catch up and get back on track.

Carla also desperately needed a supportive resource on campus upon entering college. Carla identifies herself as a recovering alcoholic. She indicated that her problem with alcohol began in her early high school years as a coping mechanism with her parent’s divorce. She describes her parent’s divorce as devastating and the alcohol helped to ease that pain. Carla’s father noticed her alcohol dependency and did everything he could to support and help her. Towards the end of her sophomore year of high school Carla finally acknowledged her alcohol dependency and with the help of her father, enrolled in a recovery program that summer and successfully became alcohol free. However, she was in need of continued support when she came to the university. Carla expressed that she did not seek the help she needed on campus because she felt ashamed. She felt assistance should have been available and advertised on campus without having to inquire about it. As she describes:

I certainly didn’t ask for them [support meetings] but maybe making it easier for students to find these things because I certainly could have asked my dean, but again who wants to ask their dean ‘oh is there AA meetings?’ It’s just, um I mean there’s flyers around for
all these different but there’s nothing for AA and I just think that that, that it wasn’t and I’m not like trying to blame it on that at all, but I just remember that it definitely kind of, it created a little, I stopped going to as many meetings because it was difficult and whatnot and it wasn’t on campus and I didn’t know anyone that was going through the same thing I was going through. I mean I don’t think I am the only alcoholic at the school I mean maybe you know, but it just you know it’s um when people act like it doesn’t exist they want to pretend like it’s for the reputation I guess.

Carla assumed that the university did not offer the type of support meetings that she needed because they were not advertised in the same way other university sponsored support services were. This assumption led Carla to feel alone in her struggles, and she discredited the University for pretending that such issues do not exist. If she had inquired about such support she would have learned such services were available, but she was too ashamed to ask for fear of being judged. This isolation caused her to withdraw from her academic responsibilities because she felt the university was against her.

Nearly all of the students interviewed described a notable reluctance to seek help. For many, it was a deeply-ingrained mind set, which conditioned them to be independent and not ask for help. Others knew they were lost, but were either unsure of whom to request assistance or else were unable to articulate what assistance they needed.

**Emotional Consequences of Academic Suspension**

For all students, the emotional response to being placed on academic suspension was, as expected, negative. Many students expressed shame over their status; several students mentioned their varying levels of embarrassment throughout the interview process. Some of them described suspension as “humiliating,” “horrible,” “shameful,” and “upsetting.”
was also a typical response of many students in response to their status. As Drew describes, he felt extremely overwhelmed and upset when he found out he was on academic suspension:

Um [4 sec pause] I was I would say I was a little bit shocked and I had, I had not had a lot of communication um it was kind of like um something that happened that I felt happened quickly something so severe happened so quickly do you know what I mean like it it I I it just like I was saying for me it happened all of a sudden, what I felt like all of a sudden. I was very overwhelmed and upset and with that came conversations both with the university and with my parents about academic life and social life and various questions of if I was happy if I was content if I was doing the right thing if why something like this could happen etc. etc.

Most students were placed on academic probation prior to their suspension, but most did not fully understand what that meant. The students were not required to do anything as a condition of their probationary status such as mandatory meetings with their advisor. However, all advisors did reach out to the students requesting a meeting to discuss their change in academic status. During his time on academic probation, Drew was rather unresponsive to the help his advisor was attempting to offer saying, “My advisor reached out to me several times and I wasn’t always there to reach back.” Drew explained that being on academic probation, “Didn’t really scare me because it doesn’t appear on your transcript and my parents weren’t notified, so I didn’t take it as seriously as I should have.” Drew made the decision to keep his parents in the dark about his academic status because he did not want them “breathing down” his neck. As a result, Drew’s grades did not improve while he was on academic probation and he failed two additional classes. This time the consequence was a year-long academic suspension.

Jeff was also surprised when he learned that he had been placed on academic suspension
after being found in violation of the university Honor Code. It was in his second semester sophomore year that disaster struck. Jeff explained that his roommate requested to see the work that he had done for the take-home final in their Philosophy class. Thinking nothing of it, Jeff agreed and let his roommate take a look at what he had completed. A few days after turning in the assignment, the professor approached Jeff and his roommate and informed them that their papers were strikingly similar and that the case was going to be turned over to the university’s Honor Council per university policy. The Honor Council found Jeff to be in violation of the university honor code and sanctioned him to a semester long suspension. At the time, he could not comprehend how he was found responsible since he believed he was not the one who cheated. Jeff felt that he had done his roommate a favor by allowing him see the paper for ideas and believed that because his paper was copied without his knowledge, he should not have been found in violation.

One marked difference among the participants was their selection of whom they could trust with their status. One student was comfortable sharing their academic suspension with all of their friends and family. However, the majority were uncomfortable with anyone except their parents knowing. Students who flunk out of college often tell no one about their situation. It is relatively easy to keep this a secret, since a student’s grades are confidential. Most students were fearful that if their peers were to find out about their academic suspension they would lose the respect of others and suffer the negative stigma attached. Overwhelmingly, students carefully kept the information restricted. As Sam attested:

No one actually tells the truth that they’re actually academically suspended. I know a friend who said that ‘oh my parents are having a hard time so I am going to go home for a semester’ or something like that. There is a stigma attached to it, especially in schools
like [here] because everybody is so smart. So if the university would find could accommodate a way in which academically suspended students can somehow be connected to at least some of the things that connected them to the university maybe not the academic part of it, there is a much bigger story to people’s lives here at [the university] then I think they would have they would want to come back more. Once that happens, if the word gets out that you’re academically suspended then you’re not going to come back. I didn’t tell anybody, for a fact. None of my friends know I was academically suspended.

For many students, the shame of being on academic suspension was so profoundly humiliating that they limited the people with whom they shared this important challenge. As a result, many students felt alone and cut themselves off from the support of their peers or academic professionals. When Sam successfully appealed his first academic suspension, he was placed on academic probation for that semester. He referenced worries that other people, particularly faculty, thought less of him intellectually because of his academic status. As a result, Sam felt isolated from friends, other staff, and faculty who might have been helpful to him in his work towards academic recovery.

The influence of peer perception also affected Jeff’s response to his academic suspension status. Like Sam, he felt he could not tell his story to his friends without facing harsh judgment, which negatively affected his self-esteem and left him feeling disconnected from his social environment. Conversely, Eric felt comfortable sharing his academic status throughout his support system. “My friends and family know. They don’t really care.” Still, Eric’s approach was unique among students in this study. Most other students in the study allowed their academic status to affect their self-esteem, whereas Eric did not appear to; he believed that being
on academic suspension was nothing other than a temporary setback. He said, “I knew I wanted to graduate, I will graduate. I know this is where I am meant to be. There is no other place I want to spend my college experience. It’s just going to take a little longer than expected, but that doesn’t bother me. In the end I will be the first in my family to graduate from college anyway.”

**Relational Consequences of Academic Suspension**

Throughout the data collection process, students discussed the things they learned about themselves and how being on academic suspension changed their lives. Some mentioned how it affected their search for a career path and ultimately changed majors, some found that their relationships with the people in their support system changed, and others came to realize the support available from the institution. This section explores the reflections students offered about the people who helped them and their own choices about their academic priorities.

Most of the participants mentioned how the opinion of their parents and family affected their determination to reinstate and continue with their academics. Many reflected upon the initial reaction of their parents to their academic status. For most, that reaction was shock or dismay, and even anger. As Drew noted:

> My parents were in complete shock. They didn’t see it coming. I didn’t tell them when I was on academic probation because I didn’t want them to worry and I got away with it because the school didn’t notify them. I never told them when I was struggling; I always just said everything was fine. So when I had to tell them I was suspended they completely freaked out. They were so mad.

Although the parents of each participant reacted differently, many students offered how the opinions of the families affected their decisions about how they should proceed once they were off of academic suspension. Drew’s parents gave him no choice and informed him that he
“would be going back to school whether he liked it or not.” Jeff felt that his attendance at the university was essentially a contract and he needed to hold up his end of the bargain and follow through to graduation. His opinion was shaped by his father’s regret of not completing a college degree. Jeff’s commitment to school was driven by his desire to avoid repeating his father’s mistakes. Carla felt that she had let her father down and she commented several times that she wanted to “show him” that she could do this and make him proud.

Unlike the other participants, Eric’s relationship with his father was not warm, and at times bordered on hostility. He blamed his father as the reason of his suspension because he failed to pay the bills on time. Instead, Eric found support through his uncle who advocated on his behalf and provided support and encouragement during his time on academic suspension. During his academic suspension, Eric was focused on finding employment which would help him to be financially independent and allow him to pay for school without having to rely on others.

Several of the participant’s parents voiced concern of whether or not their student was happy at the institution and questioned their focus of academic study. Although Drew’s parents were adamant about him reinstating once the suspension was complete, they did take the time to explore with him whether his area of academic study was the best fit for him or not. Drew also discovered that a personal friend was invested in his academic success and he helped him explore his academic path as well. Coupled with guided conversations with his parents and friend, Drew decided to change his academic focus. Drew describes the experience as:

I mean like when I was applying to the program like I like I originally applied for I guess they call it commerce year which is like business or whatever and like I was just thinking about it and I was talking to one of my friends and um and he was like how are you doing
like blah blah blah and I was like you know I was saying some things how I felt and what
not and um he was just like well I mean this isn’t a knock on my parents like because you
asked me as well as my parents asked me so you want to do business like and I was like
well I guess so you know what I mean continue on doing business and he was like you
know like you don’t have to be a business major if you want to do business and I was like
yeah I know like blah blah blah and he was like you can do something else and you can
always get business in. I kind of just thought about that and for a couple days just really
thought about what I wanted to do and I realized like there were some things I didn’t like
about the business school and then there were some things that I didn’t like about like
just how I was learning and what I was learning. I kind of said well I’ve taken liberal arts
classes before and I haven’t really you know like thought outside the box like how to like
hadn’t taken I don’t know I just hadn’t I had just been classes and I have been this so far
and I kind of like it and I think it is a good change from the business school and um yeah
and I basically that would be how I felt. It was just something different and it was
something that I liked and I didn’t feel I don’t know I just didn’t know about all the
different business classes and I was kind of a little bit tired and in a way like maybe
psychological I was just tired about having so many conversations about business classes.

Jeff felt an extreme sense of guilt, which strained his relationship with his parents.

Because of the academic suspension, Jeff also lost his athletic scholarship and was suspended
from the football team. Jeff felt guilty that his parents, who are not well to do, were going to
have to help him pay for school when he returned from his suspension. He was also concerned
that the high tuition would force him transfer to another institution. To avoid this, Jeff worked
full-time during his time away from the university. He also applied for financial aid. Since
returning to the institution, Jeff has not returned to the football team. Instead, he continues to work part-time during the academic year and full-time during the summer in order to meet any financial obligations for his education.

While some students remarked that their parents were more involved in their academics than they thought they should be, rarely did any of them express resentment at the behavior of their families. Instead, the students found that the reactions and approaches of their parents were expected and appropriate. The parental reactions implied that the families were invested in the success of their students. Parents were concerned about their student’s ability to succeed and displayed behaviors intended to assist their student in recovering their academic standing. Students found that one of the negative consequences of an academic suspension was intrusive behavior on the part of their parents. Nevertheless, their desire to rebound from suspension for their parents’ sake was a positive motivator. Additionally, fear of peer perception clearly influenced many of the participants. However, the few that did open up to their peers found support and encouragement rather than negative judgment.

Factors Contributing to Reinstatement

The students interviewed for this study all came to a point when they felt compelled to make a decision regarding their college attendance. The decision to return to the institution seemed to be a rather logical choice for all of the participants given their strong personal desires to earn a college diploma. The participants in this study re-enrolled at the institution following their academic suspension for several reasons, including the desires to: simply learn, make something of themselves, have the satisfaction of achieving a college degree, make meaningful connections with the university, and achieve a whole host of personal growth goals.

Two participants shared that the importance of a college education became clearer as a
result of being in the world of work while on academic suspension, where they came to realize that their future earning power and job-satisfaction were limited without a college degree. This “real world” realization gave them motivation to return to college. One of the participants felt that being in an environment surrounded by people with college degrees was a motivating factor. When describing how he came to the decision to return to the institution, Sam attested:

Uh the decision was driven by where I worked. Everyone there, it’s like a lobbying firm for financial services and everyone there either went to Princeton, Harvard, one of the Vice Presidents went to Georgetown. They are just very smart people. And to be and I know that I, I actually, I’m not trying to brag, I am a pretty articulate guy I have, I read up on a lot of things, I’m knowledgeable, but it’s just that I don’t have the grades to show for it because I don’t put in the work when it comes to academics. But what I did realize is being knowledgeable and articulate isn’t really enough you need to get the degree to need to have something to show for it. That’s why I decided I have to stick it out somehow, I have to get my degree so that’s why I came back and that’s what I’m on right now.

Not only were college degrees viewed as important, but all of the students mentioned the importance of feeling like they were connected to campus as well. The students emphasized that it is important to have someone to can talk to, and someone to hold them accountable for their actions. All the participants said they felt that they made connections with others in one way or another within the university, as well as with others who were not part of the university, but had a vested interest in their academic success. The comments on connectedness fell into two categories: faculty and/or staff (university support) and family.

Students felt supported when they were made to feel important by faculty/staff. Feeling
like a university employee was available and cared about them was integral to the students’ decision to return to the university. If a staff person reached out to the student, the greatest impact was made because they felt someone was taking interest in them and that a part of the university had not given up on them. Once they felt like a staff person was on “their side,” they wanted to do what they could to come back and succeed because they did not want to disappoint the people who have helped them. Each of the participants identified a key University staff person as someone they connected with and helped them to feel like they belonged on campus. A few students noted:

I would say that the professor from the business school was very straight forward with me, was upfront, was realistic and something that I have come to realize since especially since suspension is that people don’t, um people don’t in the real world, it’s not people don’t care like people don’t care if you’re not going to do your homework like if you’re not going to hand your assignment in people don’t care like people don’t care about that like if you hand it in good, if you don’t hand it in, the world still moves on. I feel like he put a lot of life situations and things like that in realistic ways that I could understand it being realistic and I think that the religious side was questioning what I wanted to do and questioning the things the choices that I make.

Yeah ah um Ms. Cadbury and we emailed once a month at least, met twice um I think the readmission application was due on May, sometime in May and she emailed me 3 weeks before that preparing me how I should approach it, I should write out a plan, what the plan should contain I sent before submission I sent that plan to her just to have her view on it and she got back to it and revised it a little more. She really helped me with the readmission process. Before that she helped me with like a life direction process in
which, where do I want to take my life, should I come back is it worth the money to come back to the University. She was very engaged every step of the way so I can’t thank her enough for that.

Most of the participants limited who they shared their academic difficulties, very seldom sharing their difficulties with their peers. However, all of the participants were fortunate to have family in whom they could confide and look to for support. None of the students indicated that their familial support changed during their academic struggle, it just meant more to them personally because they needed words of encouragement during that time. Eric reached out to his uncle after he received the news of his academic suspension and together they met with Eric’s advisor who informed them how Eric could best set himself up in order to return to the university. After that meeting, Eric’s uncle served as an encouraging motivator for him while he was on suspension telling him how he “Thought this was a good opportunity for reform and that he knew he would be able to bounce back from this.”

**Emergence of Changing Behaviors**

After academic suspension and reflecting on their college intentions, each participant made a conscious and deliberate decision to return to college. These students reported being able to identify factors that contributed to their academic suspension and to rectify them by developing other habits more conducive to college success. While students often suggested that their feelings about being on academic suspension were negative, the emotions they articulated resulted in many positive behavioral changes. All the participants discussed at length the modifications they were making to the behaviors, and how they perceived these behaviors to be related to their academic performance. Certainly, their emotional and relational experiences impacted their choices for modification, but a variety of peripheral factors also influenced them.
This section considers the positive behavioral modifications students exhibited as a result of being on academic suspension. Furthermore, this section details the changes the students made. The changes are grouped into two sub-themes: a.) a change in academics, detailing the student’s evolving academic skills and relationships with university administrators and b.) internal changes, encompassing the longer term decisions the students considered, such as choosing a major or personally growing as a result of their experience on academic suspension. By better understanding how the emotions students express inform their behaviors, practitioners and faculty will be able to serve these students more effectively.

**Changes in Academics**

For most participants, changing their academic habits meant a shift in their priorities. Several students discovered that improved study skills and time management were key behaviors to modify. A few participants found that their success depended upon the amount of time they devoted to studying, their ability to stay organized, their time management skills, or their ability to manage distractions. In fact, quite a bit of interview time was devoted to detailed descriptions of their study tips, tricks, and schedules.

An inability to manage distractions emerged as one of the primary reasons why participants in this study felt they did poorly and were ultimately suspended. The distractions students cited ranged from spending too much time on other priorities such as partying, making friends, and work to having to deal with issues within their family or their own personal life. While there were a wide range of distractions that contributed to the students’ initial suspension from the institution, one consistent result from these distractions was a failure to attend classes on a regular basis. Several participants stated that they missed a significant number of classes due to the distractions they described. In fact, Carla noted that after the “incident” in her
Narratives of Violence class, just two weeks into the semester, she did not return to that class for the remainder of the semester. Further, many of the students noted that they seldom keep up with the work that was required for their classes prior to being suspended from the institution.

Upon returning to the institution after being reinstated, the participants were able to more effectively manage the distractions that contributed to their academic difficulties. In nearly all cases, students described how they began attending classes on a regular basis and the fact that they became more focused on school since their reinstatement. Most of the students indicated that they spent less time socializing and instead, spent more time concentrating on their academics. Several of the participants also expressed that they are more mindful about communicating with their professors. For some, their methods for addressing the distractions were more specific as Sam explains:

Yeah um I don’t live on campus anymore, too many distractions. Actually, my family is from Bethesda so I commute from home. So I come in for classes, go back home and study, go out on weekends one day a weekend or one night a weekend, I don’t go out on the week. It’s a more regiment lifestyle. So uh essentially distance, I am making it logistically harder for myself to be distracted by living in the suburbs [laugh] if you will so that’s something I’ve definitely done different. I’ve also, um Ms. Cadbury suggested this 9 to 5 student rule in which you, you know how, I used to go to work 9 to 5 so I would just get up and do the same thing, all my classes, my first class is at 1 o’clock it’s a one hour commute but I still get up a 9 o’clock, do some homework start at 12 get here and most of my classes wrap up by five so it’s like 9 to 5 schedule that I’m on and at night I eat dinner and just study a little more or watch TV so it’s essentially the routine I’ve fallen in to.
Internal Changes

Throughout the interview process, all students found themselves in the midst of personal development. Many students reflected upon the lessons being on academic suspension had taught them about themselves and their values. While the act of reflecting on their circumstances is essentially an internal behavior, these reflections were a consequence of the external influence of the institution’s suspension. It seems that the reflections described here would never have happened had students not been placed on academic suspension.

The experience of being on academic suspension impacted the self-concept of all the participants in a positive way. Jeff stated, “I’ve definitely learned a lot about myself and even though this happened I don’t think it is a bad incident for my life because I have grown from it tremendously and it has forced me to be more conscious of who I am.” It also served to increase the self-determination of both Sam and Carla. Perhaps the one who attributed the most personal gains to the experience was Drew. According to him, there were a lot of things he needed to think about and reflect upon and the time away on academic suspension allowed him to do that. As he explains:

I obviously never wanted to be in the position that I was [suspended], but I understand exactly. At the time I don’t think I did I think that I was clouded by a variety of things externally and internally of how this could happen but I’m pretty sure- it has now become crystal clear to me what I did wrong and what I needed to do to fix the things that I needed to do and before I was I just wasn’t focused. I was focused on having fun and being alone, being at college rather than I was focused on school and I regret that. And I know things at school would have been much different had I taken it much more seriously freshman year and I know that in a lot of instances kids do tend to have
freshman year struggles but there were certain things that very easily could have been prevented had I taken a more proactive approach and focused on studies even marginally even just a little bit more. The time away allowed me to really look at things, though. It allowed me to think about what I wanted to do in my professional life, academic life, and my social life as well. Now I am finally doing the things that make me happy and working towards goals I set for myself.

Perhaps most beneficial, in the long run, are the life lessons all of the participants learned as a result of being on academic suspension. Most of the participants stated that their college experience has been positive even with the academic suspension. Jeff added, “I wouldn’t be who I am now without the experience I have had.” Sam saw it as a positive experience as well. Carla echoed their positive tone stating that, “I think the time off was good for me. I meet with my psychiatrist twice a week now, I exercise, which is something I did not do and I am eating right.”

**Student Recommendations for Helping Future Students on Academic Suspension**

Many of the students who participated in this study offered suggestions for helping future students who experience an academic suspension. Most of the suggestions that are described below are responses to this final question: Is there anything else that you would like to share that we have not discussed? A common recommendation was an emphasis on allowing students on academic suspension to remain actively involved in campus activities. Students who are academically suspended are temporarily separated from the university for a time determined by the Academic Standards Committee. Furthermore, suspended students may not participate in any activities reserved for students in good standing. For some, this only seemed reasonable for students who were suspended from the University for disciplinary reasons. According to Eric, “you lose your standing in a social circle, which is hard to regain once you’re back.” Sam went
on to explain why the ability to remain part of extra-curricular activities may also help motivate suspended students to return:

I can see how it may be an issue because then you have to explain to people why you’re gone. So if the university would find could accommodate a way in which academically suspended students can somehow be connected to at least some of the things that connected them to the university maybe not the academic part of it, there is a much bigger story to people’s lives here at the university then I think they would want to come back more. Once that happens, if the word gets out that you are academically suspended then you’re not going to come back.

Sam further emphasized the need to remain able to access university resources while on academic suspension. Before he was suspended he was utilizing counseling services on campus and was prescribed ADHD medication. While suspended he attempted to continue counseling and was refused because he was no longer a registered student. He also no longer had access to the medication he needed. Not being able to utilize these resources while on suspension was devastating for Sam, particularly because it was during this time that he felt he needed them the most.

A second recommendation was the desire to see a member of the university, particularly their academic advisor, follow up with suspended students at various times during their suspension to assist them with the reinstatement process. The university included in this study requires students who are suspended to make a formal written request to be readmitted at the end of the suspension period. In that request, students must demonstrate how they used their time effectively while on academic suspension and what they have learned from it. The Academic Advisor, who determines whether or not the student has met the requirements to be reinstated,
then reviews the request. Jeff shared that he felt the requirements of what was expected of him in order to return was unclear and would have liked to receive more guidance regarding the process and what was expected of him. Jeff’s rationale for why this guidance would be helpful is below:

Umm I would think once the university makes their decision [to suspend a student] I think there’s kind of a lull period and there’s kind of like what do I do next with the student in the university? I know there are specific guidelines for what you have to accomplish before you can be reinstated, but along the process of your completing those tasks it seems like it is tough to find somebody who is there walking you through it. I know you’re becoming an adult, but it’s always nice to just have someone to talk to while you’re completing particular tasks that says, ‘okay you’re doing good on this, now you just need to complete this and then um we’ll take this to the board for reinstatement.’

This idea of being reached out to was also referenced by Drew, Sam, and Carla. However, unlike Jeff they remained in close contact with their academic advisor throughout their suspension who helped them with the reinstatement process. This communication helped them feel confident in what they needed to do in order to be reinstated. Carla mentioned that her academic advisor frequently checked up on her to see how she was doing during her suspension, which made her feel that she was still a valued member of the university community despite her academic situation. Drew also commented that his academic advisor’s willingness to follow up and communicate with him made him feel like someone actually cared about the situation he was in, which helped him to keep a positive connection with the university.
Conclusion

The findings from this study yield significant insight into the emotional and relational consequences of being on academic suspension. Academic suspension significantly impacted each of the participants behaviorally, conceptually, and experientially. For some it provided motivation to be successful. Most considered it a lesson gladly learned. For several, it has been a lesson that required repetition to sink in.

The shame of being on academic suspension was so profoundly humiliating for many students that they severely limited the number of people with whom they shared this important challenge. As a result, they felt isolated and restricted themselves from seeking the support of their peers or academic professionals. Conversely, students took enormous pride in their academic capabilities and used their experience with failure as motivation to continue with their academic careers by returning to the institution.

The relationships upon which students relied influenced their motivation as well. Parents were identified as the major persons of support outside of the college environment. Important, but less frequent, extended family members were credited who encouraged or assisted the participants during their academic suspension. Personal friends and colleagues in the workplace also contributed to the participant’s motivation.

When facing problems or issues, these students believed individual circumstances were to blame. Most admitted to being at fault about taking responsibility and were not able to seek help at the time of academic difficulty. These students experienced frustration, confusion, anxiety, and eventually shock over the consequence of their failure. Academic suspension finally forced them to face the facts they had tried to deny or ignore. Feeling isolated, the suspension forced
them to reflect on their reasons for being in college and make a different kind of commitment to
the change in habits that are necessary to succeed in school.

Chapter four sought to address the following question: *How do students make meaning of
their academic suspension?* The value of asking this question was to provide the researcher and
the reader the opportunity to understand the experiences of students who have been on academic
suspension, and have been reinstated at the institution once the suspension was complete. By
vicariously experiencing academic suspension, the reader can better understand how to assist
those who find themselves in the same or similar situations.
Chapter Five

Summary of Findings

The research question that guided this study was: How do students make meaning of their academic suspension? The research approach used was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. IPA is a research methodology concerned with the detailed examination of participants’ experience and how they make sense of that experience. It is both phenomenological and interpretive in its concern with lived experience and its recognition of analysis as a hermeneutical activity (Smith et al, 2009). Through in-depth interviews, participants offered perspectives, experiences, and recounted their academic careers. Participants also discussed what led to their academic suspension status, what affect academic suspension had on their personal self, and recommendations they had for institutions working with academically suspended students in the future.

The findings of this study are intended to provide valuable information that will serve to increase persistence among students who have been academically suspended. This chapter will include a discussion of common features and structural connections of the themes that emerged through analysis of the interviews in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review. The significance of these findings for practitioners and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

Discussion/Interpretation of the Findings

Student retention generates significant interest considering the growing awareness that college access, persistence, and completion are vital to the nation’s economic future (Smith & Cumpton, 2012). Even though college enrollment continues to increase, less than one-third of degree-seeking students graduate with a bachelor’s degree within 4 years (Southern Regional
Education Board, 2010). In fact, only 55% of first-time students earn a bachelor’s degree in 6 years (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010). While getting students into college is imperative, retaining and helping them achieve a bachelor’s degree in less than 6 years is just as crucial to the economic and social health of the Nation. Students who fail to earn a degree are more likely to face economic hardships with fewer job opportunities.

Additionally, student achievement is closely tied to student retention. Each student experiencing difficulty has a distinct set of characteristics and faces a unique web of experiences and challenges, which can impact their success in college. These experiences and challenges influence their academic and social integration into the university as well as their persistence at the institution. “Educational success requires self-regulated learning practices, sustained efforts, managing time demands and academic stress, as well as successfully navigating the social landscape” (MacCann, Fogarty, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2011, p. 60).

The phenomenological method of inquiry used in this study produced significant quantities of complex data. These data were distilled by a methodical, phenomenological process into a series of themes. The themes comprise the students’ common and collective experience of academic suspension. This study’s current investigation into the internal, lived experience of college students who have encountered academic difficulty, suspension, and reinstatement provides material that facilitates a more in-depth understanding of this phenomenon.

**Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance**

Students enter college with variable characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, academic aptitude and achievements, socioeconomic background, different commitments to the institution, and a host of idiosyncratic personality and psychosocial traits (Hoell, 2006). All of
these factors contribute to the stress of college adjustment at different times in college for students (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000). While this study focused primarily on the experience of academic suspension, it was necessary to examine the risk factors that led to the suspension, in order to allow the reader to understand the student’s perspective. A review of relevant literature suggested a variety of information as to what factors put students at academic risk. Information from previous studies was aggregated to see whether the participants exhibited similar characteristics to those found in previous studies. Some of the factors considered included academic preparation, financial difficulties, personal problems, negative interactions with the campus environment, and lack of motivation or effort (Dawson, 2006; Hansen, 1998; Holland, 2005; Pace, 1984; Santa Rita & Scranton, 2001; Trombley, 2001). In order to determine which risk factors contributed to participants’ academic decline, the researcher included factors any that were mentioned during the interviews.

The findings from this study confirm all but one of the factors mentioned above. All of the participants were capable of performing at an acceptable academic level and had sufficient academic preparation. Two students completed high school at a private, college preparatory institution and all participants reported high achievements in high school evidenced by graduating from the top 10% to the top half of their high school classes. As such, the findings from this study contradict Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt’s (2005) conclusion that one of the best predictors of academic success is academic preparation.

Additional findings from this study confirmed information from previous studies. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) concluded that one predictor of student success is motivation. Motivation is a psychological feature that moves humans to action toward a desired goal. A majority of today’s undergraduates arrive on campus highly motivated to complete their college
degree (Noel-Levitz, 2011). Pace (1982) described that what a student gains from college depends greatly upon what he or she puts into college in terms of initiative. The majority of the participants in this study mentioned that they did not put forth the amount of effort that they should or could have towards their academics. As such, these findings speak to existing literature, confirming the link between effort and achievement.

Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) suggest that it is not lack of motivation but negative adjustment factors that contribute to attrition. Lack of effort and attendance problems generally occurred when the student ran into some sort of difficulty. While students in this study were committed to a long-term educational goal of college graduation, the majority experienced some sort of personal complexities, which in turn diminished their motivation. These personal complexities included financial difficulties, substance abuse, and over emphasis on peer relationship development, among others.

Trombley (2001) identified social issues as one of the most frequently cited risk factors. Many of the participants mentioned putting forth much more effort in the social arena of college rather than academics for a variety of reasons. Also noted by several of the participants was some sort of crisis, which Holland (2005) also found to be a significant risk factor. For example, Carla was dealing with her parents’ divorce, as well as her own rape, and alcoholism. Meanwhile, Sam reported pressure to uphold the family business while his father was battling cancer. Struthers, Perry, and Menec (2000) reported that if students are faced with situations or experiences that are perceived as negative or unmanageable it can elicit helplessness, depression, and anxiety, which in turn can have adverse effects on students’ motivation and performance.

Trombley’s (2001) compiled list of common risk factors that includes many of the same responses given by the participants. Social problems were common issues with most of the
participants as was some type of crisis as mentioned by Holland (2005). Dawson (2006) mentioned that the ability to do college level work is present for most, just not the inclination. Regardless of past or current risks, these participants were capable of performing at an acceptable academic level as evidenced by their ability to be high achievers in high school, and acceptance to a highly selective institution.

The National Freshman Attitudes Report (2011) found that 95 percent of freshmen surveyed during orientation were deeply committed to educational goals; yet, according to ACT (2011) only 47.9 percent of entering college students nationwide will complete their degrees within five years. A large proportion of students fail to graduate because of adjustment or environmental factors, rather than academic ability. The adjustment factors include a mismatch between the student and course of study in addition to feelings of isolation that lead to depressed motivation (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). This theory has been confirmed by this study. Perceptions of college tend to revolve around stereotypical assumptions of exciting social experiences and reasonable academic demands. Motivation to learn, taking action to meet academics demands, and satisfaction with the institutional environment are important elements of academic adjustment. Unfulfilled expectations and mismatch between expectations and reality were factors that contributed to poor academic performance for most of the participants in this study. For instance, in a examining a few of the participants the following was observed. One participant in particular believed that his academic success was not linked to his class attendance and participation. Therefore, he did not attend many classes and expected to fare well academically. Another participant believed that no matter what difficulty he was having academically, he could recalibrate his academic standing through hard work and auto-tutorial methods rather than utilizing necessary resources.
The findings from this study support Weiner’s (2000) attribution theory, the theoretical framework used to guide this study, which explains much about the participant’s experience with failure. The extent to which individuals ascribe events as being caused by something internally or something externally can influence the extent to which they persevere on a task after failure and experience negative emotions such as guilt or shame (Weiner, 2000). If failure is attributed to an internal locus, it is perceived as controllable by the originator. As an originator, a person feels proactive rather than reactive to the environment (Hunter & Barker, 1987). When addressing failure, the majority of participants indicated a locus of internal, controllable causality related to expended effort. Effort is a controllable, internal attribute and all but one of the participants acknowledged a lack of disciplined effort, which ultimately led to their academic suspension. The assumption was that they had the ability to do well academically; they just did not for a variety of reasons.

One’s perception of causality is critical because they influence self-concept, expectations for future situations, feelings of potency, and subsequent motivation to put forth effort. While other factors may affect a person’s intent to put forth effort, perceptions of causality constitute an important stimulant to motivation (Hunter & Barker, 1987). Dweck (1986) confirmed that students who view failure as resulting from lack of ability are less likely to persist than those who believe failure stems from a lack of motivation. The latter group is more likely to increase efforts to succeed. This is confirmed by what was observed in this study where the majority of participants cited diminished effort and motivation as the reason for their failures as opposed to a lack of aptitude. This indicates that practitioners should focus more heavily on academic skills building than heaping information on to students about policies and procedures at the time of matriculation and adjustment.
Such strategies could be implemented during new student orientation programs. Many colleges and universities require students to attend new student orientation. These programs vary from campus to campus and the purpose of orientation can range from welcoming new students to registering for classes, among other options. Orientation programs can be a place for students to gain a better understanding of academic expectations. For example, having students who are willing to talk candidly about challenges they faced when learning to balance their academic and social lives could be critical to new students when they are faced with recognition that they are no longer at the top of their class and little effort is required to achieve stellar grades.

**Emotional Consequences of Academic Suspension**

This study clearly demonstrates the impact of emotions of shame, guilt, and embarrassment in students who have experienced academic suspension. Ryan and Glenn (2003) found a certain level of disappointment and despair accompanying academic failure by students who expected to be as successful in college as they had been in high school. College is a period of significant growth in an individual’s adaptive capacities in cognitive, emotional, and social domains. Erikson (1963) suggests that college years are a time of exponential growth in psychosocial functioning and the psychosocial matter of ego identity.

How people deal with failure varies. The participants in this study alternated between feeling disappointed in themselves and a sense of public embarrassment. Previous studies (Cruise, 2002; Ishler, 2004) detail the influence peers have upon academic success for students in academic difficulty. This study suggests that emotive responses to academic status may cause students to curtail their access to this important support network. Most of the participants believed keeping their academic failure hidden from peers and university support staff would protect them from shame and embarrassment, only to discover it promoted their feelings of
isolation and shame. The importance of a supportive network towards academic success has been well-documented (Astin, 1997; Ishler, 2004; Rayle & Chung, 2008; Tinto, 1993), and has found that the connection to a support system has positive influences upon persistence. In addition to providing academic strategies for future success, practitioners should implement strategies that encourage strong student-advisor relationships in hopes that trust between the two parties will be strong. It is also recommended that advisors address the psychosocial implications and refer students to professional resources on campus for emotional support and coping strategies.

**Relational Consequences of Academic Suspension**

For most of the participants, parents were identified as major sources of support outside of the college environment. Importantly, but less frequently, extended family members and friends were credited with encouragement and assistance during the students’ college careers. Many students discussed their fears of disappointing their parents, and described how their interactions with them were occupied with discussions over their study habits and emotional investment in their studies. Participants also discovered the development of newfound relationships with faculty and advisors as trusted resources. During their academic suspension, students were reluctant to share their change in academic status due to an assumed social stigma. These students feared being judged as incompetent. On the contrary, and much to their surprise, when participants chose to engage with university support staff they found that the staff responded well and provided significant useful support. All of the participants shared that their parents, family, peers, professors, and academic advisors were invested in their success, even after their academic suspension.
The current study asserts that students may choose to disengage out of shame. Because the support of peer groups, faculty, staff, and family is critical to student success, understanding the data presented in this research might influence the manner in which campus policies and administration practices evolve to be more effective for this student population. Cruise (2002) implores advisors to be empathetic to the demoralization that students on academic suspension feel and this current study supports such advice. By gaining a richer perspective of the experiences of students in academic crisis, the interventions created by administrators may be improved through practice.

**Factors Contributing to the Decision to Reinstatement**

Participants in this study often identified a university staff person as instrumental in their decision to reinstate. Cruise (2002) indicates that the influence of others upon a student in academic jeopardy is significant. Further, Habley and Morales (1998) believe that a primary factor affecting college student satisfaction, adjustment, and retention is the quality of interaction a student has with a concerned person on campus. All of the students mentioned that they felt like they had someone who had a genuine concern for their well-being and believed in their ability to succeed. This provided them added motivation to do well and continue with their education. Such feelings support Giordano’s (1997) methods of increasing resilience, which include providing a supportive and continuous relationship with at least one responsible person.

In a study on strategies for academic success, Coleman and Freedman (1996) found that unstructured and voluntary interventions are more effective in moving a student toward academic recovery. In this study, the academic advisor and other university support staff in their unofficial work with the students provided the essential support described by resiliency literature. The academic advisor acted in accordance with Steinmiller and Steinmiller (1991) by checking in
regularly with students while they were on academic suspension to help them articulate a plan for academic success. This advising approach was well received as mentioned by the participants because it indicated true caring and compassion. Because the advisor is seen as an institutional agent, this engenders a feeling of connection between the student and the institution.

**Emergence of Changing Behaviors**

Tinto (1993) suggested that a commitment to the goal of college is the most influential determinant in college persistence. This study confirmed that finding, as all five students expressed a variety of strong personal desires as motivating them to reinstate and continue towards the completion of a college degree. Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) stated, “leaving can be a positive step: students may change their goals; transfer between courses or institutions; or join the workforce. An additional positive finding is that a high proportion of withdrawers do return to higher education” (p. 186). It has been noted that for the majority of students who leave campus, the decision to remain away was temporary; that within the subsequent six years, 64 percent returned to either their original institution or a different one (ACT, 2011).

In a qualitative study conducted by Robeson (1998) the desire to learn, search for identity, experience of emotional upheavals, changes of perceptions of professors, and a strong family influence on motivations were key factors that led to the decision to return to campus. All participants in this study demonstrated a developmental shift in their maturity of thought shown in their changing behaviors. The participants expressed being able to identify factors that contributed to their academic suspension and behavior changes that were necessary to rectify them by developing other habits more conducive to their college success. As such, a separating failure may be necessary for students to rebound and be successful. Further investigation might
reveal information about when and how students are able to make that psychological pivot in order to recognize their shortcomings and change their behavior.

Implications and Recommendations

Student dismissal should be considered an important issue for higher education administrators. According to the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, academic dismissal accounts for approximately 25% of all institutional departures (Spradlin et al., 2010). Retention researchers have learned that collaborative efforts between students and the institutions are not only more appropriate for college success (Gordon, 1984), but necessary for it. The findings of this study have implications for educational stakeholders, in similar institutions, who want to increase the likelihood of student reinstatement following an academic suspension. This study has produced findings for similar colleges and universities to consider that would help reduce attrition and increase persistence among students who have been academically suspended. The recommendations have the ability to change the educational climate for the better, if implemented.

Implications for Academic Advisors

It has been suggested that advising is the most important component of higher education retention efforts (Allen & Smith, 2008; Astin, 1997; Engle & O’Brien, 2007). However, most higher education institutions are underutilizing or poorly administering advising initiatives. According to national surveys, students are often dissatisfied with advising practices. In fact, advising is often rated lowest in student satisfaction (Allen & Smith, 2008). If retaining academically suspended students is to become a priority, then strategic advising approaches should be utilized.
Several of the students in this study reported that they lacked meaningful advising experiences before their academic suspension. Conversely, two of the participants mentioned they felt they were the ones to blame for their experience. They shared that their academic advisor did reach out once via email when they were in academic jeopardy, but they chose not respond to the inquiry. The persistence on behalf of the academic advisor was not present, nor was a response regarded as mandatory. It was not until students were on academic suspension that they welcomed support from their advisors.

Resiliency and self-efficacy are qualities that come from within but it can be enhanced through personal interaction. Higher education institutions can influence student effort through their policies, structures, and programs designed to promote student effort (Tinto, 1993; Museus, 2007). This interaction may take the form of advising, mentoring, or communication. Oftentimes, educators adopt the attitude that the students are adults and therefore responsible and capable enough to meet institutional expectations. It is important to remember that not all students have the experience and skills necessary to successfully complete a task. Several participants mentioned knowing that they were lost, but were either unwilling to seek out the information or were unsure from whom to request it in order to turn their performance around.

Also, students may be reluctant to seek help because to do so would require them to admit their own deficiencies. Several researchers (Balduf, 2009; Cruise, 2006; Humphrey, 2006) found that poorly performing students are less likely than their peers to engage in using resources and services on campus that may assist them. Russell (1981) suggests that common errors committed by students in academic jeopardy include misunderstanding policies, not seeking advice from staff, and relying on friends for information. The current study asserts that students may choose to disengage out of shame. Understanding the data presented in this research might
influence the manner in which administrator practices could evolve to be more effective for this current population. The current advising system at the university included in this study should analyze their advising practices and consider making adjustments that would incorporate continued advisement of students who are on academic suspension.

The most commonly used academic advising model at this university is known as prescriptive advising. Prescriptive advising is characterized as being a more structured, quick and efficient advising method (Matheson, Moorman, & Winburn, 1997). At this university, students are typically notified who their advisor is upon their matriculation and from that point on it is the expectation that students must initiate contact with their academic advisor when needed. Also, it is not common practice for advisors to remain in frequent communication with students who are serving an academic suspension. Nevertheless, several of the participants in this study found that their advisor’s unstructured and voluntary interventions were most helpful and made the strongest impact of all the official and unofficial interventions.

One option to consider for improvement, specific to the current institution, though it may be extended to other schools if relevant, would be to increase direct communication with students on academic suspension. An essential outside intervention identified by all of the participants was the desire for individual attention. Participants wanted to know that they genuinely mattered to someone. Participants mentioned that having someone to talk to about what was expected of them while on suspension was extremely helpful. All of the students shared that they had anxiety about the reinstatement process and communication with their advisor helped clarify the process, thus making it less stressful. All of the participants also mentioned that the support and communication they received from someone at the university during their time away on academic suspension helped them remain connected to the university
and positively influenced their decision to return. Students felt like they had someone who believed in them and it encouraged them to want to continue and do well.

Enhancing the current advising model might involve professional development for advisors regarding effective advising practices, especially when working with students on academic suspension. This might involve professional development workshops regarding strengthening advising practices, especially when working with students on academic suspension. More often than not, there are prescribed start and stop timelines established when such mentoring relationships are set. However, in a study on strategies for academic success, Coleman and Freedman (1996) found that unstructured and voluntary interventions are more effective in moving a student towards academic recovery. Hunter (2002) also found that students who received frequent feedback were more likely to stay in college. While it is important to cultivate personal responsibility in students, it is also important to provide the necessary supports. Students that have been faced with academic failure need additional support in order to build confidence in their ability to persist in the face of seemingly insurmountable situations.

These research findings could help advising centers, at similar institutions, develop policies that introduce continued or intrusive advising for students that are on academic suspension. Gehrke and Wong (2007) characterize intrusive advising as a high frequency of contact between the advisor and student with the role of the advisor reaching beyond providing policy and procedural information. Institutions that use intrusive advising often identify this approach as especially valuable to retention and graduation (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010). With an intrusive relationship, advisors can hold students accountable by requiring mandatory meetings. Such requirements could benefit students by identifying and developing
successful behavioral patterns and habits, which can promote academic achievement. These results could be used to support ongoing communication and relationships with students who are experiencing academic suspension. Since advising is such an important part of student retention, strengthening advising practices should be a priority for institutions.

**Implications for Educational Practices**

The institution of study has many programs and initiatives in place to address student success efforts such as an Academic Resource Center and other support services such as tutoring, advising, counseling, and career services. These programs and services should continue to be supported and in many cases be expanded or enhanced in an effort to improve best practices.

**Assisting students with academic success strategies.** Support services such as tutoring, counseling, career services, and advising can assist students in developing strategies for academic success and help them to obtain the tools necessary to be successful in college. Because of the reluctance to seek help that several students described in their interviews, it is recommended that support services be reframed in order to be perceived as an integral part of college learning. Based on the data represented in this study, it is suggested that institutions clearly define expectations of use of such services, rather than relegating them to serve merely as a remediation for deficiency.

Another suggestion would be to implement a mandatory probationary program for assisting students who are experiencing academic difficulty before they go on academic suspension. Such a program could address challenges that participants expressed in this study such as institutional challenges, lack of communication, lack of knowledge about support services, social challenges, and especially reluctance to voluntarily seek help. Such a program could help present institutional resources differently to students. It could present them as a
positive, natural, and integral part of the college experience, rather than simply as a resource for when students are in trouble.

**Engagement opportunities.** The most important issue that the participants identified as negatively influencing their experiences was the students’ inability to participate in campus organizations while on academic suspension. The students often unexpectedly discovered that their suspension status meant participation in any school related activities were out of the equation. University policy states that suspended students may not participate in any activities reserved for students in good standing. Among the characteristics that most contribute to retention is the extent to which the student is involved in the college experience (Astin, 1997). In other words, the more students are involved in the academic and social experiences of the college or university, the more likely they are to persist towards graduation.

The implication of this finding is that similar colleges and universities should provide engagement opportunities for academically suspended students. An interesting finding from this study was the fact that most of the participants expressed a desire to continue to participate in campus organizations while they were on academic suspension. The participants also believed that this ability could increase reinstatement of students.

**Retention and the reinstatement process.** Decreasing demographics have sparked concern in viewing retention as a legitimate institutional endeavor to be vigorously pursued (Hoell, 2006). Educators who intend to affect student success may wish to reflect on the findings of this study in order to better respond to the experiences of academically suspended students and develop stronger retention programs. Students in this study lamented the lack of assistance available to negotiate their process to reinstate. Several participants shared that the university
did not clearly articulate conditions for reinstatement and they were unclear of where to turn for assistance.

Most institutions afford students the right to reinstate once their academic suspension is complete pending certain conditions. According to Bellandese (1990), the primary responsibility for hearing and deciding academic reinstatements often rests with academic standards committees, academics deans, or chief academic officers. Bellandese’s research found that approximately 43% of private colleges utilize an academic standards committee for hearing and deciding academic reinstatements. While many colleges and universities assign responsibility for hearing and deciding appeals to academic standards committees, the process by which students may appeal for reinstatement ranges from institution to institution. The process by which students petition for reinstatement at the institution of study is described below.

At the institution of study, suspended students must petition to be reinstated by first submitting a letter to their academic advisor. In this letter, the suspended student must argue the case for why he or she should be reinstated. Following the student’s initial statement, the academic advisor may ask relevant questions of the suspended student. While the Academic Standards Committee makes the decision of whether or not to suspend, the decision of whether or not to award reinstatement is handled on an individual basis by the academic advisors. Once the academic advisor feels that he or she has sufficient information and determines whether the student has made positive strides while on suspension, he or she then decides whether or not the student should be reinstated. In addition, if the decision is made to reinstate the student, the academic advisor also outlines any conditions that might be established as a requirement of the student’s reinstatement.
Currently, no policy or protocol exists at the institution to guide the academic advisors in determining standards under which to grant readmission to those returning from an academic suspension. It is the recommendation of the researcher that the university considers revising these practices and implement a policy for such a process. Based on the findings from this study, it is suggested that the university establish a formal policy, which clearly outlines conditions for reinstatement. It is also recommended that decision-making power shift to the Academic Standards Committee since they currently make suspension decisions. This would streamline and condense the decision making process.

The findings of this study provide useful information for the institution of study, as well as similar colleges and universities, to consider as they make important policy decisions. All of the participants in this study mentioned that reinstatement procedures were unclear. Specifically, the results indicated that students were confused as to what was expected of them while on academic suspension, and the sort of steps that would increase the odds of their reinstatement. It is recommended for the current institution to provide clearly defined expectations to students regarding the process to reinstate. Publishing a reinstatement policy in the university handbook, which outlines institutional policies and procedures, could do this. Universities should also designate a person or committee for students to reach out to while on academic suspension to seek guidance or assistance with questions regarding the reinstatement process.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study gives voice to the experience of academically suspended students. Given that very little research of its kind exists, the researcher suggests that replication studies should be conducted to further confirm some of the findings in other contexts. For example, the participants in this study attend the same highly selective, private institution. Also, all of the
participants are high achievers, several of who came to the institution from private, college preparatory high schools. Due to this limitation it is difficult to draw definitive, universally applicable conclusions from these student’s experiences. Future researchers may wish to replicate this study in the context of other non-private institutions and/or state schools and include students of average to below average high school achievements.

Given that one of the most interesting findings from the current study is the role of emotive responses such as shame, anxiety, and pride in the experiences of students on academic suspension, the researcher strongly recommends that future research involve the study of emotional damage related to failure. These emotions may impact students’ academic success as well as the relationships students have with their support system members and with faculty and staff on campus. It is also recommended that further research be added to the literature on academically specific coping strategies that are demonstrated to be effective for college tasks. Continued research will enable practitioners to refine intervention strategies to assist these students.

Additional research regarding the impact of being immediately reinstated following an academic suspension should be considered as well. One participant in this study, Sam, was immediately reinstated after his first suspension following a successful appeal hearing. However, the same student was subsequently suspended a second time and fulfilled his allocated time away from the university. Therefore, future researchers should explore this topic to confirm the success rates of students who are immediately reinstated and discover more of the factors affecting their success.

Finally, participants in this study represented only those who chose to reinstate following their academic suspension. Therefore, further exploration of the fate of students who chose not
to reinstate following an academic suspension is recommended. Their insights could help colleges to understand why students disappear permanently following an academic suspension. By taking a look at non-returning students higher education institutions could determine appropriate interventions to move more students into the returning pool.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, many factors contributed to the participants earning academic suspension, mirroring national literature. The primary reasons included inappropriate time management, lack of motivation, and prioritizing other activities over academics. Additional experiences that contributed to students’ overall difficulty with college adjustment included: reluctance to seek help, lack of knowledge and/or use of support services, extended absences, and personal or social challenges.

Interestingly, academic preparation was not cited as a factor contributing to academic suspension during the interviews. All of the participants shared that they felt prepared for college and this is evidenced by their acceptance in to a highly selective, private academic institution. This finding complicates the literature, which suggests that lack of academic preparedness is a strong indicator of academic failure.

Universities are primarily in the business of education, not student retention. However, this study describes the personal value students’ feel from being on campus and how efficient campuses create a student-centered environment. The emotive reactions to academic suspension are examples of the lived experience of students on academic suspension and can inform institutional policies and practices. Students’ academic, social, and psychological well-being determines their chances of degree completion. This research documents the impact that emotions such as shame, anxiety, and pride play in the behavior of students seeking to recover
their academic status. Administrators in student services and academic affairs play critical roles in the reinstatement process, confirming that effective leadership for ensuring student success is a shared responsibility (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010).

The policies and procedures related to academic suspensions and reinstatements vary from institution to institution. The data collected in this study suggests that the institution of study should closely examine the factors that contributed to the students being suspended as well as their plans for managing or eliminating these distractions if they are to be reinstated. This information could lead colleges and universities to impose additional conditions for the student’s reinstatement. Further, decision makers should streamline a unified process for reinstatement. Doing so would outline clear expectations for students as well as provide a uniform process for the institution to adhere to when evaluating reinstatement petitions.

This study attempts to provide information that will serve to increase persistence among students who have been academically suspended from a college or university. The findings of this study have broad implications and have produced several recommendations regarding the ability to improve retention and persistence rates of academically suspended students. Although, it is not always the responsibility of the university to help students in all facets of their lives, it is apparent that there are many contributors of academic success, or failure, and that the university is quite possibly the most appropriate venue to help students reach their academic potential. As the number of academic suspensions increases, it is the researcher’s hope that this study, and its results, will help improve the odds for students to choose to seek reinstatement.
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Weiner’s (1986) Attribution Theory

Appendix A

Figure 1

Weiner’s Attribution Theory

Success or Failure attributed to

External Factors
- Difficulty
- Luck

Internal Factors
- Ability
- Effort
Appendix B

Figure 2

Weiner’s (1986) Attribution Theory in Achievement Context
Appendix C

IRB Notification

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action
Modification

Date: April 24, 2013    IRB #: 12-12-12

Principal Investigator(s):    Joseph McNabb
                              Nicole Houle

Department:    Doctor of Education Program
               College of Professional Studies

Address:    20 Belvidere
            Northeastern University

Title of Project:    Academic Suspension and Student Adjustment: How Students Make Meaning of Their Experience

Modification:    Change PI from Kimberly Truong to Joseph McNabb

Participating Sites:    Georgetown University IRB Approval (IRB#2012-1291)

Informed Consent:    One (1) signed consent

DHHS Review Category:    Expedited #5

Monitoring Interval:    12 months

Approval Expiration Date:    DECEMBER 3, 2013

Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit at any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina
Director, Human Subject Research Protection
Appendix D

Email Invitation to Participate in Study

Hello,

I would like to interview you about your experiences while on academic suspension for a research study about students that have been academically suspended and returned to Georgetown. I wish to explore how students understand and navigate their experiences with academic suspension. Your participation in this study will assist me in making recommendations for how the university can better support students on suspension. Your participation will help me to suggest improvements in communication, organization, and policy.

This study will consist of one interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. I believe an interview is the best way to understand student experiences. All information gathered through the interview will be anonymous. Your identity will be protected and any information which could identify you will not be released. The duration of this study is estimated to be 6 months to one year in duration.

Please contact me if you would like to participate. You can simply reply to this e-mail or call my office at 202-687-3851 and we will arrange a convenient time to meet. Should you agree to participate, you will be compensated a $5 gift card to Starbucks for your time.

Thank you,

Nicole Houle
Assistant Dean
Undergraduate Program Office
McDonough School of Business
Georgetown University
Appendix E

Consent Form

IRB #: 2012-1291
Title: Academic Suspension and Meaning Making
Georgetown University
Consent to Participate in Research Study

INTEGRITY

STUDY TITLE: Academic Suspension and Student Adjustment: How Students Make Meaning of Their Experiences

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Nicole M. Houle
TELEPHONE: 202-687-3851

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to consider participating in this research study. Please take as much time as you need to make your decision. Feel free to discuss your decision with whomever you want, but remember that the decision to participate, or not to participate, is yours. If you decide that you want to participate, please sign and date where indicated at the end of this form.

If you have any questions, you should ask the researcher who explains this study to you.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE
This study is being done in order to examine the experience of students who were academically suspended from Georgetown University and returned once the temporary suspension expired. Once the experience has been analyzed and essential themes or structures have been identified, the findings will be compared to what is known about college student experiences that are published in current literature.

STUDY PLAN
You are being asked to take part in this study because you returned to Georgetown University after an academic suspension. About five subjects will take part in this study at Georgetown University.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will take part in one interview, which will last for 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will take place at a mutually acceptable location at Georgetown University for the interview and participant. During the interview, you will be asked questions about the experience of being a student who encountered academic difficulty in college, which led to a temporary academic suspension.

The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed in their entirety, excluding all identifying information.

You can stop participating at any time. However, if you decide to stop participating in the study, we encourage you to talk to the researcher first.

RISKS
There are very few risks associated with participating in this study. The researcher is bound by professional ethics and by law to report any evidence of danger or harm to self or others as a result of this research study. Depending upon the content the participant chooses to discuss, participation in this study may be emotionally disturbing to some individuals.

Name of IRB: Georgetown University Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: November 20, 2012
Expiration Date: November 6, 2013
IRB #: 2012-1291
Title: Academic Suspension and Meaning Making

Page 2 of 3

BENEFITS
If you agree to take part in this study, there will be no direct benefit to you. However, information gathered in this study may provide us with a better understanding of how to support students who experience academic suspension.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Every effort will be made to keep any information collected about you confidential. However, it is impossible to guarantee absolute confidentiality.

The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed in their entirety, excluding all identifying information.

To ensure confidentiality, all study participants will be asked to review a copy of their completed interview transcript and make any changes or corrections necessary for anonymity. Any or all parts of interviews may be quoted in published reports of this research.

In order to keep information about you safe, study data will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal computer which only the researcher can access.

Your name or other identifiable information will not be included in the thesis. Please note that, even if your name is not used in publication, the researcher will still be able to connect you to the information gathered about you in this study.

The Georgetown University IRB is allowed to access your study records if there is any need to review the data for any reason.

YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary at all times. You can choose not to participate at all or to leave the study at any point. If you decide not to participate or to leave the study, there will be no effect on your relationship with the researcher or any other negative consequences.

If you decide that you no longer want to take part in the interview, you are encouraged to inform the researcher of your decision. The information already obtained through your participation will not be included in the data analysis and final report for this study.

QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?
If you have questions about the study, you may contact Nicole Houle at 202-687-3851 or nnh37@georgetown.edu.

Please call the Georgetown University IRB Office at 202-687-6553 (8:30am to 5:00pm, Monday to Friday) if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

Name of IRB: Georgetown University Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: November 20, 2012
Expiration Date: November 8, 2013
STATEMENT OF PERSON OBTAINING INFORMED CONSENT
I have fully explained this study to the participant. I have discussed the study’s purpose and procedures, the possible risks and benefits, and that participation is completely voluntary. I have invited the participant to ask questions and I have given complete answers to all of the participant’s questions.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent    Date

CONSENT OF PARTICIPANT
I understand all of the information in this Informed Consent Form. I have gotten complete answers for all of my questions. I freely and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I will be audio recorded as a part of this study.

_________________________  __________________________
Participant Signature    Date

Printed Name of Participant

Once you sign this form, you will receive a copy of it to keep, and the researcher will keep another copy in your research record.

Name of IRB:  Georgetown University Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: November 20, 2012
Expiration Date: November 8, 2013
Appendix F

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself

2. Tell me about how you ended up on academic suspension?
   a. How did you feel when you first found out?
   b. Was it a surprise to be suspended?
   c. Describe how your grades differ from high school?

3. When you think about your experience with academic suspension, what words come to mind? Why?

4. Please describe your experience while on academic suspension?
   a. Describe the greatest challenge you faced while on academic suspension?

5. What does it mean to you to have been academically suspended?

6. What support or assistance do you think would have helped you while you were on academic suspension?

7. Please describe how you came to the decision to return to the institution after the suspension was complete?
   a. What factors influenced your decision to return?

8. If you met with your advisor due to poor academic performance, prior to your suspension, what do you recall discussing with him or her?
   a. How did your advisor help you plan classes?
   b. What is your assessment of the advice from your advisor?
   c. If you did not meet with your advisor due to poor academic performance, why not?
9. Please describe your experience with other university support services such as tutoring, counseling, career center, etc.?
   a. If not, why haven’t you used these services?

10. Have you done anything different since returning to improve your academic standing?
    a. Describe your current study habits?
    b. Describe how your study habits differ since being suspended?
    c. Describe how your study habits differ from when you were in high school?

11. What do you think the university could be doing differently regarding students on academic suspension?

12. Given what you have reconstructed in this interview, where do you see yourself going in the future?

13. What haven’t we discussed that you would like to talk about?