Creating New Gateways to Education:
Students Get a “QuickStart” to a College Degree

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Abstract

American community colleges are struggling with issues of enrollment and retention. According to research, less than a third of community college students go on to graduate or transfer within 8 years of beginning college coursework and enrollment figures have steadily declined by 3% for each of the past 5 years. These statistics have resulted in many colleges trying to create new recruitment plans and student success initiatives to address and counter these issues, particularly focusing on at-risk and non-traditional student populations. This study centered on one such initiative: the QuickStart program at Mountain Empire Community College. It answered the following central research question: How do students and faculty perceive participation in a QuickStart program at MECC has influenced students’ decisions to enroll and their ability to succeed at the college?

Findings revealed that QuickStart positively influenced the likelihood students would enroll at the college because it helped to ease students’ fears, increase their confidence, and make them feel a sense of belonging. Upon completion of the program, students felt more prepared both to take the entrance placement exams and to begin college level coursework. This perception resulted in the majority of QuickStart students enrolling at MECC and testing into gatekeeper courses, allowing them to avoid developmental coursework. Students who enrolled at the college indicated that they would have been unlikely to even consider college if not for their participation in QuickStart. Students expressed that they valued having QuickStart faculty to lead them throughout the process of applying for college and to teach the basic skills students need to be successful. These findings offer guidance to MECC and other institutions seeking to develop new recruitment tools and a better system for preparing students for college work.

Keywords: QuickStart, retention, student success, recruitment, developmental education, bridge programs, perceptions, placement test, enrollment, open door, community college.
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Chapter I: Overview

Introduction

One of the most important services a nation can provide is a quality education to its citizens. The goal of higher education should be not just to educate the wealthy elite and further aristocracy, but rather, to use education as a tool to prevent or alleviate gross socioeconomic differences that exist between citizens. Economists such as Buchanan (2012) have noted that the greatest nations in history have been the ones that have “educated their citizenry into prosperity” because as the citizens rise in wealth, so too do the nations’ overall capacities for production and innovation. Therefore, the difficult task for any nation seeking improvement is to find a way to build a strong infrastructure to ensure all citizens—regardless of race, religion, or social class—can obtain a college degree. In the United States, community colleges play an important role in that mission.

Most community colleges serve two purposes: to equip students with a basic liberal arts education needed to help them transfer into a university and/or to provide skills training needed to strengthen the local community’s workforce. However, these colleges also serve an often overlooked function: the opportunity for many American citizens, who otherwise may have been unable to gain acceptance at a university, to earn a college degree. Whereas most universities have selective admission standards, community colleges have an “open-door” policy that pledges to educate and train any citizen who desires admittance (Miranda, 2014). The only consistent requirement for admission at a community college is that the student must have either earned a high school diploma or have completed a General Education Development (GED) program. With such admission policies and vastly cheaper annual tuition, the open door at community colleges serves as a gateway to education for the nearly 7 million students who enroll in
coursework at community colleges in this country each year, many of whom would have never been able to be accepted into or afford a university education (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014).

The American Association of Community Colleges compares their open door policy to some of the most important social movements in American history: “the open door policy has been pursued with an intensity and dedication comparable to the populist, civil rights, and feminist crusades. While more elitist institutions may define excellence as exclusion, community colleges have sought excellence in service to the many” (Shannon & Smith, 2006, p. 15). This “service to the many” is critical to the future of our nation, as it is expected that over two-thirds of this country’s jobs will require some type of college degree by 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). For this reason, President Obama and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation joined the Lumina Foundation’s push for colleges to set a goal to double the number of Americans holding a college degree by at least 2025; as a large part of that mission, community colleges were challenged to significantly improve their graduation rates in order to help meet the rising demand for a high-quality, educated workforce (Parcell, 2011).

**Statement of the Problem**

Although the goal set forth by the Lumina Foundation has been in place since 2009, the nation’s colleges, as a whole, seem to be slipping further away from achieving it with each passing year. Dyce, Albold, and Long (2013) estimate that “if the U.S. maintains its current college graduate production rate, the country will face a shortage of 16 to 23 million college-educated adults in the workforce by 2025” (p. 152). Despite recent efforts, community colleges have been largely unable to move the needle in a positive direction. In the last ten years, the number of students actually transferring or graduating from community colleges has dropped to
under 30 percent (Virginia’s Community Colleges, 2014). That means over two-thirds of the students who enroll in community colleges are getting lost somewhere along the path to graduation. Therefore, it stands to reason that if we are going to produce enough qualified workers to stimulate the American economy, we must first determine why community college students are failing to persist in the current system.

**Barriers.** One issue deals with the barriers placed in front of aspiring community college students. Most community colleges now require some type of entrance exam before a student can enroll in coursework (Bailey, 2009). These tests are meant simply to provide a placement level in core credits like English and math. If students receive a high enough score, they can be placed immediately into freshman level gatekeeper courses. If their scores fall within a certain danger zone, students are placed into a series of non-credit developmental courses designed to improve basic skills and prepare students for college level work. As Rao (2004) notes, “this is one of the hidden barriers to completing postsecondary education: the open door policy in terms of academic achievement masks the skill requirement that exists” (p. 11). In short, while it is widely believed that all students are accepted, community colleges do actually turn away some students who lack certain basic skills in reading, writing, or mathematics.

For students placed into developmental classes who are able to successfully complete the coursework, they may move on to the gatekeeper courses and proceed forward with their degree. Occasionally, however, students test so low on placement tests that they are blocked from enrolling in any type of college classes and are instead referred out to some type of adult basic education (ABE) services. In an ideal system, these students would complete the ABE program and return to retake the placement exam. However, quite often these students are getting lost in the system and never make it back to college campuses (Prince & Jenkins, 2005). This
ultimately means that students with the greatest need for education and training are receiving the least amount of support to attain a college degree. This is a major problem not just for community colleges and their student success/graduation numbers, but also because this phenomenon prevents regions with the greatest economic disadvantages from truly being able to achieve overall improvement.

Another challenge community colleges are facing focuses on the difficulty in attracting and enrolling new students. Many potential students are simply too afraid to start college coursework (Cox, 2009; Miranda, 2014). These individuals often fear they will not be “smart enough” and will simply fail out of their classes. Others refrain from enrolling because they believe that, while they may be capable of managing the academic challenges, they will not be able to juggle work, family, and personal obligations on top of attending classes and completing coursework (Cox, 2009). Given the financial commitment of paying raising tuition costs on top of purchasing textbooks, supplies, and paying for transportation, these potential students are simply choosing to spend time looking for low wage full-time jobs rather than investing in a college degree (Miranda, 2014).

**Funding.** Community colleges also have financial consequences tied to declining enrollment and retention numbers. Many community colleges obtain state funding based on the number of students they have enrolled. This reliance on Full-Time Enrollment (FTE) totals has been criticized for punishing colleges that suffer from one or two difficult semesters. In some cases, the enrollment declines might not be something the college can help. Many issues, such as lower high school graduation numbers in the local area or economic shifts, can trigger a decline in enrollment. These are issues over which colleges very often have little control; yet their funding is decreased nonetheless. With budget cuts, it becomes difficult to create
recruitment efforts to draw in new students and colleges risk falling into a dangerous cycle of being perpetually unable to regain their funding. For this reason, some researchers such as Altstadt (2012) have highlighted a shift to a performance based funding model. In these models, colleges are encouraged to set goals to improve their student retention and graduation numbers. As goals are met or progress is made, certain incentives are paid to the college. Altstadt (2012) notes that the state of Ohio, for example, awards points to community colleges when students:

- Complete a first developmental education course;
- Complete a developmental math and/or English course and subsequently enroll in a college-level math and/or English course at any public college or university;
- Earn their first 15 and 30 semester credit hours of college-level coursework at the community college;
- Earn an Associate’s degree from the community college; and
- Transfer to a four-year college or university after completing at least 15 semester credit hours. (p. 5)

Points add up over time and funds are allocated to each of the state’s community colleges based on the total number of points each campus holds. Thus, a campus with more points will receive a higher percentage of the funds available. Altstadt (2012) also points out that this type of funding model recognizes that community colleges serve academically-weak students and strives to make the funding model more “about the process and not about the outcomes” (p. 6). Yet regardless of whether a college’s funding comes from enrollment or retention and graduation rates, many colleges will still face a great number of difficulties maintaining their funding unless something is done to improve their numbers, especially since enrollment, retention, and graduation numbers still remain remarkably low nationwide. A better support system needs to
be created to help prepare community college students for placement tests while providing needed instruction on computer, math, and English basics necessary to succeed at the college level—all this in a manner that creates a risk-free environment to attract a new population of students.

**Helping Students Get a QuickStart**

In 2012, the Achieving the Dream Foundation named Zane State College—a community college located in Zanesville, Ohio—as the winner of the annual Leah Meyer Austin Institutional Student Success Leadership Award. The recognition is given to the college each year which has implemented the most innovative and successful programs to increase student success on their campus. Zane received the award because they were able to greatly decrease the gap between the success rates of students who tested into gatekeeper courses and students who placed into developmental coursework. A program they created called “QuickStart” is one primary reason for this success.

Zane State is a community and technical college in Zanesville, Ohio that annually enrolls approximately 3,200 students. Prior to the fall of 2008, Zane administrators, like administrators at many colleges around the nation, noticed a large gap between the success, persistence, and retention rates of students who placed into developmental coursework and students who placed straight into college level work. They tasked their colleagues and faculty members at Zane to provide innovative solutions to this problem and the ultimate result was the QuickStart program. According to official promotional materials, QuickStart was created to assist potential students with transitioning to college from high school or from the workforce. During the eight week program, students receive instruction on “navigating the financial aid process, learning basic computer skills, refreshing writing and math skills, exploring learning styles and career options,
completing the first year academic plan, and learning habits that will help [students] succeed inside and outside of the classroom” (Lass et al., 2014). Students who complete the full eight-week program are awarded three college credits to use upon their enrollment in a degree program at Zane State.

In the spring of 2015, Mountain Empire Community College (MECC) in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, launched their own version of the QuickStart program. After years of declining enrollment across the whole Virginia Community College System (Tyson, 2014), MECC aimed to target students who may have been considering college but were unsure whether or not to make the commitment. Like Zane College, MECC serves a rural, low-income population. For that reason, QuickStart is offered free of charge to students—there is no charge for tuition, textbooks, or supplies. If students complete the five week program, they receive a 3 credit transfer elective that can be used towards a college degree. However if they are unsuccessful in the program, there is no penalty and no failure in the course will be added to their academic records. The goal is to recruit students into the program by offering a risk-free college experience that can serve as a launching point to a future degree.

At MECC, the program is taught by four separate instructors who split time evenly over the course of six weeks. Classes begin with an orientation to the college—including a tour of the campus, overview of admission policies, and explanation of financial aid processes—and career planning activities. The second portion of the course focuses on important computer techniques such as sending and retrieving emails, using Blackboard, saving and accessing files, and using programs such as Microsoft Windows, Office, and Google Apps. The final two portions of the course feature refreshers on critical mathematics, reading, and writing basics as well as preparation for the math and English placement tests. The math and English basics are critical
for students because many students who have fears about attending college express a lack of confidence in these areas. These basic skills also directly relate to the Virginia Placement Test (VPT) which students must take before they can enroll in courses at MECC. Although most colleges offer some type of practice tests or preparation for entrance exams, students are most often given a few resources and expected to study on their own time. The QuickStart program ensures students are not only taught the basics in these subject areas but also are given the chance to utilize test prep resources during the actual class sessions. The goal of this is that students will be much more prepared to take the VPT and will earn higher placement levels in order to avoid spending extra semesters in developmental courses.

**Purpose of this Study**

The QuickStart program at MECC was created as a grant-funded initiative, scheduled to run for three cohort sessions: spring, summer, and fall of 2015. After the fall semester in 2015, MECC administrators will need to determine whether or not to make the program a permanent part of the college’s offerings and, because the grant funding will have ended in June of 2015, will need information to identify and support future funding if the program is to be continued. Since no qualitative studies have been conducted either at Zane or Mountain Empire, this research project will generate a wealth of new information as to the potential impact the program may have upon students. The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to conduct a qualitative case study of MECC’s QuickStart program in an effort to determine the shared experiences of students and faculty members. Student and faculty experiences will be analyzed and compared to program student success and retention rates in order to assist MECC administrators with future decisions about whether to continue, end, or expand the program.
Positionality Statement

Parsons (2008) calls positionality a “concept that acknowledges the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender, and other socially constructed identifiers in being” (p. 1129) and cautions that unexamined biases may lead to tainted scholarship. Nearly all qualitative research involves some form of direct interaction between researcher and participants. Quite often, the researcher has a vested stake in the outcome of the research—as is the case when studies are conducted by a researcher who is somehow a part of the program being studied. In these cases, it can become difficult to know whether the research findings were the result of a carefully constructed study or whether the researcher’s own biases led to a predetermined conclusion. To counter this issue, Merriam (2009) calls for researchers to acknowledge their positionality prior to beginning any type of research study. In doing this, readers can be given a context for understanding how the researcher might have come to certain conclusions. More importantly, the researcher can also recognize any potential biases before the study begins and make great efforts to avoid seeking out findings just to prove himself to be correct. I must, therefore, consider my own positionality in terms of my own opinions, beliefs, and background as they relate to this particular study before I begin my research.

It is important to note that considering positionality does not mean that biases and internal motivations do not exist for the research. Rather, Machi and McEvoy (2012) remind that by “rationally identifying and confronting these views, the researcher can control personal bias and opinion, committing to being open-minded, skeptical, and considerate of research data” (p. 19). Because I work at the institution that will be used as the research site, and I am a part of the program being studied, I realize that I am at risk of allowing my personal biases to impact my research. Acknowledging and understanding my positionality is one way I can effectively
construct my research project in a way that will not negatively influence my work and, rather, will help me to uncover data that will be useful for MECC in decisions whether to end, continue, or grow the QuickStart program.

I must begin with the notion that I am an educator. I chose this profession because I genuinely wanted to help students improve their lives. Many of the friends I had in elementary and middle school never even considered college as an option. Even through high school, I had friends who loudly proclaimed they were “too stupid” to get into college. Others would often say they had no interest “wasting time” in college classrooms when they could instead find quick work and good paying jobs in the mines or on the railroad. Some of these individuals did actually give college a chance, only to quickly drop out after getting frustrated by the system. They often warned others about avoiding college because it was not worth the high costs or the time lost only to end up failing out in the end. Instead, one by one they followed through on their goals and found jobs in the coal industry or a similar field. This was a great choice for them until the economic climate in our region suddenly began to shift. Many of the mines in our area have shut down within the past two years and many of my friends and family have been left without work and without hope for any other direction. Once again when I suggested higher education, most of them scoffed at the idea. Still, many felt they were not “college material” and would only end up wasting time in college classrooms when they could instead be out looking for other job opportunities.

When I made my decision to become an educator many years ago, I did so mainly because I wanted to change this perception. I wanted to help students succeed and help them realize that all individuals are capable of earning a college degree as long as they are willing to work hard enough and are determined to overcome obstacles they face along the way. As most
of these people are among the hardest working people I have ever known, there is absolutely no reason they could not be successful in college.

I see the same worries, fears, and frustrations with my own students who venture uncertainly into my classroom. For the past five years, I have served on the English faculty at MECC. I teach all levels of English including everything from freshman composition and American literature to courses with students who score lowest on entrance reading and writing exams. At the lowest level of developmental English, many of my students enter with sub-fourth grade reading and writing levels and I am tasked with readying them for college level coursework within only five short months. It stands to reason that students in the lowest level of developmental English would struggle more than students placed much higher on entrance exams. Yet I have found that students in every course struggle with insecurities, personal troubles, and a plethora of obstacles that constantly threaten their chances at an education. Like many of my friends, they are fearful that college might be a waste of time for them. That is why I have determined that we need to understand the positionalities of current and potential students if we, as educators, are ever to reach them.

I am very open with my students about my background, education, and philosophy—I share it with them on the first day of class and we have a long discussion about how we can work together—and this often leads students who feel in the minority to initially believe I could not possibly understand where they come from or what they have had to endure. I am faced each semester with the same question that Briscoe (2005) examined so thoroughly: what gives me the right to research and represent those who have been oppressed and neglected when I, myself, have never been the subject of such prejudice or hardship? Indeed, I grew up as a part of an upper-middle class family who encouraged me to pursue higher education. My mother
graduated with the highest overall grades for the RN program in the tristate area. She is an intelligent woman who constantly encourages me to do bigger and better things. My father did not attend college, but has worked for all of his life in the coal mining industry. His ability to manipulate machinery and solve problems led to a fast rise though his company. He made a comfortable life for his family thanks largely to his incredible work ethic. Because my parents are both successful, this created a desire in me to always be the best at whatever I do. As a result, I graduated at the top of my high school and college classes with straight-A averages. I had fifty college credit hours on my transcript by the time I finished high school, and thus began my college career as sophomore. I completed my undergrad at the top of my class, with highest honors, and went on to finish my master’s degree and doctorate degree with a 4.0 GPA. I was very proud of these feats because I had to work hard to achieve them. Yet most of the people I knew from childhood would claim my successes were simply because I was “different” and because I was somehow born smarter. There seems to be a common myth that some people are born to attend college while others are simply not.

Having spent countless hours teaching and assisting the so called “weakest” students on my college’s campus involved in the lowest level developmental courses, I have come to believe these students are among the hardest working individuals in academia. They are balancing classes, homework, children, full-time work schedules, personal relationships and a host of socio-economic disadvantages. These are bright students who often simply lack basic self-confidence in their abilities or are missing the essential basics in some area (such as reading, writing, mathematics, or computer technology) that are necessary for college success. They frustrate quickly and if things do not come easily, it is likely they will drop out of school (VanOra, 2012). The system, therefore, needs to adjust to fit the individual needs of these
students in a better way, seeking to engage students and keep them motivated and on the path to graduation.

That is why I acknowledge a passion for the mission of the QuickStart program. I want to see a program developed to succeed with assisting more students—many of whom would never have even attempted a single college class—to realize that college is not such a scary place. Further, I want to see a program developed to help instill the confidence and desire in students to tap into their own potentials so that they may do what they once thought was impossible: graduate from college. I recognize this bias and realize that it may be interpreted as something that may impact this current research study. Critics might claim I am predisposed to slant the evidence in such a way that will paint the QuickStart program as a success. However, that would actually be counterproductive to my real intentions. I am not biased in favor of the QuickStart program; rather, I simply want to see some type of program succeed in assisting a wide range of potential students. If the QuickStart program is broken or is not adequately meeting these needs, I want to bring this to the attention of MECC administrators so we can work to develop a different, more efficient program. It is in this way that my potential biases would simply serve to motivate me to dig deeper and uncover any flaws in the system so that they may be improved.

**Theoretical Framework**

Guiding this research study will be the liminality framework. Van Gennep (1909/2011) first coined the phrase “liminality” in his work, *Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep was looking at the stages of life from an anthropological perspective, but his system can still prove useful for understanding why students struggle with college level work or are afraid to even attempt a single college course. In stage one of Van Gennep’s system, which he calls the “Preliminal,”
individuals leave old ways behind and are forced to break away from old rules and habits. This will ultimately lead to stage three, the “postliminal,” where the individual is fully adapted to the new structure. The second stage is described as the “liminal” stage where the individual exists, hopefully only for a short time, while trying to adapt to the new structure in his or her life. Van Gennep wrote that in order for liminality to occur, there must be clear, new set of rules for the individual to transition into and there must be a guiding force to preside over the transition. Normally this second stage is not a problem and marks a transition in life. Sometimes, however, the individual can get caught in this liminal and struggle to find a place. Becoming liminal often leads to feelings of anxiety, confusion, and frustration for the individual. This phenomenon best explains what is most often happening when some students attempt and ultimately fail at transitioning to college.

Turner’s (1967) seminal work on African tribes applied Van Gennep’s concepts to research theory. Turner studied various symbols within African tribes and took particular interest in how these tribes transitioned members into adulthood. During the initiation rituals, the initiates are neither full members of the tribe nor are they outsiders; likewise, they are neither adults nor children. Instead, they are caught in a place that is “betwixt and between social statuses” and this, according to Turner, is the definition of liminal phase. This is comparable to a bride during a marriage ceremony who is, in that moment, neither married nor single. She is also in the process of leaving one family and joining another, but simultaneously is part of neither.

Similarly, new college students must make a transition as well. When students enter college classrooms for the first time, they have already left behind the constructs of high school. Many struggle to make this transition from a place where they may have had complete dependence upon teachers and parents to college, a place where they suddenly are expected to
take ownership for their own learning (Fike & Fike, 2008). These students become trapped within this transition and struggle to balance new responsibilities involved with their independence. Often when seeking to alleviate the stress or fears in their lives, the first things that are cut from their schedules are college courses. Therefore, they ultimately drop out and turn their attention to looking for work. Turner (1967) concluded his work by encouraging future researchers to study the liminal phase in new ways, for it is within these moments of in-between that “paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm” (p. 55). To date, few (if any) research studies have applied the liminality framework to first-year college students. However, by applying the liminality framework to new incoming students we can understand why they have these feelings and can better structure programs to meet their needs and alleviate these fears or worries.

**Research Question**

Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative researchers focus their studies around a single, central question. Although Creswell advocates for “what” or “how” questions in qualitative research, both Merriam (2009) and Yin (2014) state that research questions for case study research, specifically, should contain “how” and “why” instead of “what” in order to draw effective conclusions from the data. Questions which answer “what” are better studied under other methodological approaches (Yin, 2014). Taking these factors into account, the following central question will guide this doctoral thesis:

How do students and faculty perceive that participation in a QuickStart program at MECC has influenced students’ decisions to enroll and their ability to succeed at the college?
This central question will allow this study to gather qualitative data from faculty and students and will also enable the researcher to analyze and compare their experiences in order to draw conclusions about what is working and what changes need to be made to the program.

**Limitations**

This study is limited by the total number of participants and the single research site. This could not be helped as only one school in the VCCS is currently piloting a QuickStart program. The participant size was small, with 12 total participants at the time of this study. These limitations make it more difficult to draw conclusions and generalize findings to a larger sample size. However, the conclusions drawn from this study can lend to continued research on the impact QuickStart programs have upon nontraditional students as well as those individuals who recently graduated from high school but may be nervous about attending college for various reasons.

In general, the researcher brings certain biases and subjectivity to any study. These can be minimalized through the use of tools such as member checking and bracketing, but personal biases can never truly be eliminated. The researcher’s role as an instructor in the QuickStart program, as well as his role as a coworker to fellow QuickStart faculty members, could have an influence upon participants. It will therefore be important to explain the purpose for this study and to ensure that each participant feels comfortable and is not overly influenced in any way during the interview process.

**Chapter II: Literature Review**

Currently in America, community colleges are facing significant issues with decreasing enrollment numbers, as well as low student success and graduation rates nationwide. This literature review examines how these problems have developed over time and what community
colleges are doing to address them. This review is therefore divided into four sections: 1) the impact and significance of community colleges, 2) the phenomenon of decreasing college enrollment, 3) the long-term problem of low student success rates, and 4) modern implementations, including bridge programs and developmental coursework, designed to better recruit, engage, and prepare new students for college life.

**Significance of Community Colleges**

The development of the American higher education system has been well documented (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961; Brubacher & Rudy, 1968; David, 1972; Westmeyer, 1985; Lucas, 2006; Thelin, 2011). What is sometimes overlooked is how the rise of community colleges served to meet some of this nation’s most important needs. The earliest American universities followed England’s model, stressing the importance of classic Greek and Roman literature, mathematics, natural sciences, and public speaking (Fraser, 2007). These subjects formed the center of an American liberal arts education. As one Yale faculty member would famously proclaim, the goal of these early institutions was “not to teach that which is peculiar to any one of the professions, but to lay the foundation which is common to them all” (Lucas, 2006, p. 133). However, the select few actually chosen for admission in early colonial colleges were wealthy, white males. For nearly a century after the American Revolution, the model remained one of an exclusive, privileged education in the United States. With the passing of the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890, community colleges finally emerged and began to address one of the young nation’s greatest needs: providing the opportunity for higher education and vocational training to *all* citizens (Thelin, 2011).

Community colleges were first called “junior colleges” and were essentially extensions of high school study. The first of these institutions was Joliet Junior College, founded in 1901.
Colleges like Joliet were originally designed to provide a liberal arts education, laying the foundation for students to improve their grades and eventually transfer to a larger university. Then in the 1930s, junior colleges began to react to the Great Depression, launching new programs that provided specific job-skill training for a variety of professions (Beach, 2011). This was an effort to help combat high levels of unemployment ravaging the nation. It was around that time that many of these colleges began to shed the “junior” college label and instead took on the “community college” moniker as a way to stress their connection to enhancing local communities (Kasper, 2003). They began to focus on vocational training and career certifications. With lower tuition than universities and a greater emphasis on providing opportunities for quicker paths to employment, these new community colleges saw a surge in enrollment beginning in the 1940s (Beach, 2011). The community college movement had thus already begun when, in 1948, the Truman Commission called for a larger, structured system of public community colleges to be created, developed, and maintained in every state across the nation (Hutcheson, 2007).

The commission placed a great emphasis on the first two years of college instruction, believing that it was vital for all citizens to receive higher education: “Equal opportunity for all persons, to the maximum of their individual abilities and without regard to economic status, race, creed, color, sex, national origin, or ancestry is a major goal of American democracy. Only an informed, thoughtful, tolerant people can develop and maintain a free society” (Hutcheson, 2007, p. 109). In response, the United States government reinvested heavily in the development of such a system. Soon after, in the 1960s, the number of community colleges saw its greatest boom, as 497 new colleges opened their doors—more than double the combined number (412) of colleges that had opened in the 60 years prior (American Association of Community Colleges,
This growth also perfectly coincided with the decade in which the baby boomer generation was graduating from high school. Thus, community college enrollment doubled to over 2.3 million by 1970 (Kasper, 2003). Today, there are over 1,200 public community colleges serving nearly 7 million students each year (Juszkiewicz, 2015).

Hachey, Conway, and Wladis (2013) point out that “regardless of the era, community colleges have always adapted to societal demands; no other segment of U.S. higher education has been as flexible and responsive” (p. 1). Cohen and Brawer (2003) agree that the rise of the community college was, in large part, due to the prevailing attitude of the early-to-mid 1900s that higher education should solve every societal problem: “we looked to the schools for racial integration…to mitigate discrimination…to solve problems of unemployment…drug abuse, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, inequitable incomes, and other individual and societal ills that have been assigned to schools soon after the problems have been identified” (p. 2). Community colleges were thus looked upon as vehicles of change. When society needed to be educated about safety concerns, or when attitudes about inequality needed to be readjusted, community colleges became a platform from which social change could be enacted and new messages could be heard. While larger universities were forced to remain somewhat rigid in their curricula, community colleges were able to constantly adapt to the needs of local communities and society as a whole. At the same time, these colleges were also able to continually create new programs that matched graduates with openings in area businesses. In this way, these institutions were able to meet the challenge issued by the Truman Commission to create a more “informed, thoughtful, [and] tolerant people” (Hutcheson, 2007, p. 109).

As community colleges have continued to develop over time, they have not only met the needs of their local communities, but they have also contributed significantly to the local and
national economies. A report from Economic Modeling Specialists International (2014) found that the “total effect of America’s community colleges on the U.S. economy in 2012 was $809 billion, approximately equal to 5.4% of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product” (p. 8). This impact is a result of community college graduates entering the workforce, paying taxes, and using income to purchase goods. The numbers also indicate that each graduate’s impact is significantly greater than those of his/her peers without college degrees because graduates are able to parlay their education into higher paying positions. On average, community college graduates can expect to receive $4.80 in higher future income for every $1 paid for their education (EMSI, 2014). This is a huge return on investment for students and serves to illustrate the ways in which community colleges truly enhance the lives of their graduates.

The impact of community college is not felt simply by the graduates themselves; taxpayers see a large return on investment as well. According to the EMSI (2014) report, for every $1 of tax dollars spent on community colleges’ funding, the public received $6.80 in benefits in the form of new businesses and higher quality services. Having an educated population also benefits local communities in less tangible ways as well. Hout (2012) states that, on average, “college graduates find better jobs, earn more money, and suffer less unemployment than high school graduates do. They also live more stable family lives, enjoy better health, and live longer. They commit fewer crimes and participate more in civic life” (p. 379). Community colleges thereby stimulate the workforce, increase productivity, and enhance the livability of the regions they serve.

For all of these reasons, community colleges clearly serve a vital function in the United States. These institutions have experienced such great success over the past century because they are always able to adapt to the changing times. However, two primary issues have remained
largely unsolved for quite some time. New solutions need to be developed in order to address declining enrollment and low student success, graduation, and retention rates in order to protect the future of community colleges and their role in American society.

**Declining Enrollment: Missing a Target Audience**

Between 2006 and 2011, community colleges enjoyed a huge swell in enrollment numbers, gaining an unprecedented 3.2 million new enrollments in that time period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). That number was nearly twice as many new enrollments as the previous ten years had seen combined (less than 2 million). However, this record growth came to an abrupt halt in 2012. A report from the American Association of Community Colleges lists an average three percent decrease in nationwide enrollment numbers in each year from 2012 to 2015 (Juszkiewicz, 2015). Many different theories have been posited by researchers to explain this phenomenon. One common assertion is that the decline is just an expected end result of record growth—eventually the growth would have to fall back down to normal (Fain, 2014). Another claim is that rising tuition costs and the overall decline in the American economy are to blame, often forcing students to choose whether to pay for college or pay for basic living expenses (Stratton, 2014). However, these reports are focusing too heavily on issues over which community colleges have very little control. The more promising theory is that colleges are simply missing out on recruiting a large population of potential students each year (Ross & Carnes, 2012).

The ACT (2014) noted in their report that of all students who took the ACT in 2013, “87 percent aspired to attend college but only 69 percent actually enrolled. If this aspirational gap were fully closed, an additional 314,831 of the nation’s 2013 ACT-tested graduates would have enrolled in postsecondary education” (p. 3). These numbers reflect that at least 18% of students
who had hopes of attending college were lost somewhere in the process of enrolling. Therefore, it is important to determine possible causes for this gap so solutions can be devised to help guide more of this missed target audience to college campuses.

Three primary issues arise in the literature to explain why students who express interest in attending college may decide not to actually enroll—the first dealing with the struggle of students who are the first in their families to attend college. Dyce, Albold, and Long (2013) state that “statistically, early aspirations are not realized for the majority of low-income, first-generation college students, even when academic performance is comparable to their more affluent peers” (p. 163). This is often because the students’ parents have never experienced college, themselves. These parents may try to provide encouragement and genuinely want their children to succeed, but they lack the knowledge and experience necessary to provide help when needed (Lenaburg et al., 2012). Many first generation college students are unable to rely upon their parents for guidance through the college selection process, admission procedures, financial aid applications, class selection, or to model important college success skills such as proper studying habits, note taking techniques, and time management. Lacking strong parental guidance in these areas often leads to students feeling insecure and doubting their own potential for success. As a direct result, Saenz et al. (2007) found that low-income, first generation college students are more likely to have lower self-confidence about their academic abilities than students whose parents attended college. Thus, many simply elect to avoid college and try to find employment immediately after high school graduation. They want to go to college, but they are simply too afraid to try and fail. Moreover, it is unlikely that college has been viewed as a significant priority in lower-income, first generation households; instead, parents are more likely
to guide their children to obtaining employment in order to assist the family with bills and other payments (Saenz et al., 2007).

The second primary issue is not one of insufficient parental guidance, but rather, total familial resistance. London’s (1989) seminal work on first generation college students reveals students who expressed that their parents were offended, upset, and even jealous when the students shared their desire to enroll in college classes. Some students stated they felt their parents wanted to control them. Others stated their parents told them to not “waste time” in college and instead get a “real job.” The issue London highlighted is that these students are, in a sense, “challenging the role assignments that have been a part of their family values, which leads to guilt, shame, and confusion when they begin to change because of their college experiences (Darling & Smith, 2007). If the parents did not attend college, they might feel insecure about their child obtaining a greater level of education and finding better jobs than what they, as the parents, possess. Thus, they lash out at their children and sometimes attempt to sway them from attending.

A third reason aspiring students do not actually enroll in college coursework deals with financial issues. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2012), nearly half of all community college students are first-generation and nearly three out of four qualify for financial aid. The problem, however, is that many students are unaware of the scholarships and aid packages offered by community colleges (Cox, 2009). They wrongly believe they will never be able to afford college and are frightened they will be wasting what little money they have pursuing a degree they may never achieve. Cox (2009) calls this the “College Fear Factor” and states this is one of the biggest reasons many college hopefuls decide against following through with their aspirations. Combine this fear of spending their money on college classes with the
fear of many students that they will not be “good enough” or “smart enough” to succeed in college level coursework and it becomes easy to see why many students would choose to pursue the job market rather than sign up for college classes (Miranda, 2014).

Van Gennep’s (1909/2011) study of life stages may shed light on the most practical way to ensure this missed target audience of aspiring students actually makes it to college campuses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), approximately three million students currently graduate from American high schools each year. As all of these students leave behind the structures of high school and enter into the adult world, they are moving through Van Gennep’s first rite of passage: the pre-liminal. The graduation ceremony ultimately serves as a “rite of separation” where students have absorbed all the information needed from the high school phase of their lives. They are no longer children engaged in a structured K-12 system of education. Instead, they stand at a crossroad of adulthood. They may choose to immediately enter the workforce; but with limited experience, education, and training, the possibilities for employment are minimal. The other option is to attend college and learn the new structures that come with that decision. The focus of this literature review will be on individuals who have made the latter choice and will center on how well or how poorly they are able to progress from their former lives as high school students to the new responsibilities and demands on becoming college students. For many individuals, this transitional (liminal) phase is a short one. They adapt well and are smoothly incorporated into the postliminal phase by the time they complete their first college semester. For others, however, even attempting this transition is challenging and halts their pursuit of any type of college degree before it even begins.
Van Gennep (1909/2011) states that in order for an individual to properly transition through the liminal stage and into the final stage of incorporation, a guiding force must be present to show him/her the way. Without this critical element, the individual is certain to become lost. This force (in this case, educators and administrators) must guide the individual (the potential student) through the liminal and into the new structures (college) he or she will need to adapt. The guiding force then assists the individual with building the new skills, structures, and knowledge needed to complete the transition. College counselors and recruiters must target all students who express aspirations for attending college, but need to focus a great deal of extra time and attention on potential first-generation and/or low-income students in order to forge lasting connections that may draw the students to campus. Dyce, Albold, and Long (2013) agree that “the need for long-term support for students and families throughout the high school years is critical in sustaining these early aspirations and making college education a reality” (p. 163). This is why it is so important for academia to develop or identify programs that are able to more effectively recruit at-risk students, guide them to campus, address parental concerns, discuss financial aid opportunities, and assist students with transitioning through the liminal phase and into the final of Van Gennep’s phases, wherein students are finally able to enjoy the benefits of their successful incorporation into college life.

**College Readiness and Student Success**

Once students are enrolled, community colleges need to focus on increasing their chances at successfully earning a degree. Current research illustrates that low graduation and student success numbers are common problems throughout the nation’s community colleges. Barrow et al. (2012) found that “only 14 percent of students beginning at community colleges have completed an associate’s degree, and only 12 percent have completed a bachelor’s degree [within
eight years].” (p. 564). In order to improve these numbers, colleges need to examine what common factors are causing students to be unsuccessful at such large rates. For many students, the problem begins with an insufficient academic preparation.

Conley (2008) defines college readiness as “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution” (p. 24). For some students, this level of preparation may be minimal while for others it may require significant time and effort. The latter students are considered “at-risk” of dropping out and need to be well supported by the institution in which they enroll. It is important to note that where once it was assumed that students who are accepted into college are ready for college level work, recent data indicates that the reverse trend may now be true. Of the 1,845,787 high school graduates who took the ACT College Readiness Benchmark test in 2014, only 26 percent met the minimum benchmark requirements in all four areas (reading, writing, math, and science) in order to be considered college ready (ACT, 2014). These numbers indicate that, on average, only 1 in 4 high school seniors are graduating with the necessary skills needed to succeed in their first year of college coursework.

There are several factors that contribute to a student’s overall academic preparedness, but one of the primary determinants is the rigor of his/her high school curriculum (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). Engle (2007) observes that students attending weaker high schools are significantly less likely to ever attend college than their peers at stronger schools. This is one reason why students in low-income households are more likely to struggle once they enroll in college coursework. Dyce, Albold, and Long (2013) note that since income potential is directly related to the highest level of one’s academic achievement, many students from low income families have parents who did not attend college: “a head of household without a college degree is over
eight times more likely to live below the poverty line than a peer with a college degree” (p. 153). Lower incomes often lead to living in poorer communities and, consequently, the student attending low-resource high schools. This is a significant disadvantage for these students since Howell, Kurlaender, and Grodsky (2010) call the strength of students’ high school curricula the “single best predictor of college graduation” (p. 727). Research supports this claim, demonstrating that students who were in the top of their high school classes—in high schools providing college preparation programs such as dual enrollment courses, career and college counseling, and academic support—complete a four-year degree at a rate of 77 percent while those at the bottom of their classes or enrolled in weaker programs graduate at only a 37 percent rate (Howell, Kurlaender, & Grodsky, 2010).

Of course, these are not perfect determinants of college success, as many students from low resource high schools go on to complete college successfully. It is highly likely, however, that these students share common attributes that include a high level of intrinsic motivation, focus, a strong work ethic, and determination that allow them to overcome weaker academic backgrounds (Engle, 2007). For students who lack these attributes, a weak high school curriculum makes it significantly more likely that they will become trapped in the liminal stage, unable to transition effectively from the structures of high school to the responsibilities of college.

McKenna (2011) studied 52 student end-of-course self-reflections for common themes that connect attitude and motivation to course success. Many of these students expressed past failures in college courses and acknowledged that bad attitudes played a major role. Whenever classes would get “too difficult” or “too boring” these students would lose motivation and stop putting forth effort. Several others admitted that their relationships with friends, family
members, or significant others could have negative influence on academic achievement as well. They stated it was difficult to take college seriously when they allowed others in their lives to constantly question and insult their efforts on homework and study time. But when they removed the negativity from their lives and surrounded themselves with more positive influences, they were able to focus and do much better in their college courses. Students who were able to pass their classes were the ones who were able to develop and maintain positive outlooks about their chances of success and the importance of their education. Indeed, fifty-nine percent of the students studied cited “an optimistic attitude” as one of the most important traits a successful student must possess (McKenna, 2011). If students set low expectations for their success, those expectations tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Therefore it is important that the earliest coursework students encounter helps to build within them a sense of pride in their education and a positive outlook on their future.

**Programs Implemented to Improve Recruitment and Retention**

With the aforementioned barriers standing in front of the path to a college degree, at-risk students are almost guaranteed to drop out unless colleges do something to intervene early on in the process. In order to determine the best course of action, one must first examine programs that have already been created in an effort to better recruit, motivate, advise, and prepare students for college success.

**Developmental education.** One of the largest nationwide movements in recent decades seeking to help at-risk students succeed is the implementation of developmental education (Boylan, 1995). Throughout much of this nation’s history, most colleges and universities have provided some type of basic remedial courses for students struggling in areas like math, reading, and writing. But with few resources available and little professional development for educators
involved with remediation, the effectiveness varied from institution to institution. At many colleges, remedial students were crowded into classrooms, given little direction, and eventually came to feel like campus pariahs as parents, educators, and even the students themselves began to perceive remedial coursework in a negative light (McKenna, 2011). Thus, remediation understandably struggled to make a real impact on student success numbers.

In the mid-1970s, the developmental education movement emerged as a possible solution. Boylan (1995) notes that “developmental education is not a euphemism for remediation. It is a far more sophisticated concept involving a combination of theoretical approaches drawn from cognitive and developmental psychology” (p. 2). Developmental education programs combined remedial English and math classes with a stronger system of advising, counseling, and student support. Over time, these programs were expanded on most campuses in order to accommodate the rising number of students in need. Historians state that by 1995 nearly all community colleges offered developmental education while approximately 75 percent of all universities offered at least one developmental course (Parsad & Lewis, 2003; Melguizo, Bos, & Prather, 2011). Placement in these developmental courses is based upon placement tests designed to determine students’ basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Based on the results of those tests, students are placed either into college level coursework or, if the tests reveal a need for remediation in one or more areas, they may be placed into developmental courses before they are able to take the requisite college level course. Over the years, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of students testing at the developmental level.

Today, nearly 60 percent of all students take at least one developmental education course during their college career (Bailey, 2009). This number has grown by nearly 20 percent since
2003 and seems to be on the continued incline in states nationwide (Daiek et al., 2012). In California, over half of its incoming community college students are testing into developmental courses while Florida reports that over 70 percent of its community college students need some sort of developmental coursework in at least one subject area (Ignash, 2002). In Michigan, only 16 percent of high school graduates were deemed “college ready” last year (Daiek et al., 2012). Within just the past four years, some colleges, such as Baltimore City Community College in Maryland, report that well above 80 percent of their students are in need of developmental coursework in either English or math (Brown, 2011). These numbers portray a new era in education where more students are beginning their college degrees in developmental coursework than in college-level courses.

As the demand for developmental education has continued to increase, colleges have struggled to meet the needs of these students. To date, research reveals that less than a fourth of students who take at least one developmental course go on to graduate from college within eight years (Topper, 2011). Of these developmental students who do manage to transfer to a four-year university, Melguizo, Bos, and Prather (2011) add that, on average, these students required 5 years to transfer, yet they only transferred one year’s worth of successful coursework (p. 174). These statistics have led critics to question whether developmental education is effective and whether it should be abandoned. Furthermore, because developmental courses are non-credit and do not count towards a student’s degree progress, the costs associated with delivering these courses have come under examination as well.

Cost analyses have found that developmental courses cost community colleges $6,709 per FTE while the average cost of general studies courses was $6,163 per FTE (Bailey et al., 2010). This means that at most community colleges across the nation, it is ultimately cheaper to
enroll students in college level credit courses than to remediate students for multiple semesters prior to college credit coursework. Levin and Calcagno (2008) note that state legislatures, who quite often pay for the bulk of developmental coursework, “question the need to pay twice for academic preparation of the same skills” that are also taught in required gatekeeper math and English courses (p. 183). For example, a report from the Florida state legislature determined that Florida community colleges pay over $118 million per year on developmental education alone (Levin & Calcagno, 2008). That amounts to approximately 6 percent of the state’s annual education budget (Levin & Calcagno, 2008). However, it is not just the colleges or state legislatures that are suffering from heavy financial pressures as a result of developmental education. The costs for the student can also be quite high as they must not only pay for developmental credits that do not count toward their degree progress but they must also pay for the college level courses as well. This issue is compounded when the majority of students do not successfully complete the developmental sequence in their first try.

In an economic climate where budgets are already tight, many colleges are forced to cut programs that would otherwise help developmental students. Some critics of developmental education cite this heavy financial burden as a reason to completely do away with the system all together. They note the low success rates of students in these programs and argue that “the costs of remediation, for both society and student, outweigh the benefits” (Bailey et al., 2010, p. 257). Fortunately, most colleges do see developmental education as a crucial element to meeting the needs of a growing portion of their student body and refuse to listen to such criticism. However, the financial realities still loom large on college budgets. Thus, rather than investing in new technologies and researching innovative teaching methods to meet the demands of these
students, community colleges find themselves inadvertently cutting corners that may ultimately harm developmental students rather than help them learn.

One such example is the common trend of “outsourcing” developmental courses to adjunct faculty. In fact, studies suggest adjunct instruction is the overwhelming method of delivery as over 75% of developmental writing courses and 80% of developmental writing courses are taught by adjunct or part-time faculty each year (Gerlaugh et al., 2007; Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). Although adjunct faculty members are certainly knowledgeable, they often do not hold the same level of education, experience, or training as their full-time counterparts. Thus the students who need the most help are largely not being served by teachers with the most capability to help them. Bettinger, Boatman, and Long (2013) note that adjunct faculty are often temporary and therefore are less likely to be invested and motivated to go the extra mile in reaching these high-risk, high-need types of students. Also, because adjuncts are not required to maintain the same office hours or campus responsibilities as full-time faculty, students often miss a crucial advising relationship that is difficult to forge with adjunct instructors.

Developmental students are constantly at risk of vanishing from classrooms for a multitude of reasons. The burden should not fall solely on the instructor’s shoulders to recognize, diagnose, and solve student problems—many of which fall outside the instructor’s expertise. These issues range anywhere from transportation and family issues to much deeper psychological concerns. Many students forced into developmental courses consider themselves to be “college ready” and resist the suggestion they need any sort of extra practice (Bailey et al., 2010, p. 257). They therefore enter the developmental classroom with negative attitudes and many are already predisposed to fail. This is particularly true of English students who consider
themselves inadequate writers and are often too frightened to share their written work. Something needs to be done—these issues need to be caught and corrected early in the semester before the student falls too far behind. Yet current statistics indicate that only 1 in 10 developmental programs incorporate student services into the developmental curriculum (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011) and that most students are completely unaware that such services actually exist at all. Without help, developmental students are significantly more likely to withdraw or fail than typical college students (Bailey, 2009).

In an effort to find solutions to these problems, the Achieving the Dream Foundation brought together six state community college systems in 2009 to discuss their developmental education systems. These states—Connecticut, Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia—began working on plans to restructure their developmental programs across each of their community college campuses (Altstadt, 2012). The state of Florida, for example, took a radical approach in their redesign of developmental education. Building upon research that indicates students often grow frustrated as they have to spend time and money in courses that do not count towards their intended degree (Richardson, Fisk, & Okun, 1983; Levin & Calcagno, 2008; Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010), the Florida Community College System modified their policies to no longer require mandatory developmental coursework for students who demonstrate need based on entrance exam results. Instead, they added an intense focus on program advisers who will meet with each student individually and spend time explaining the advantages of taking developmental credits to prepare them for future college work. Then, starting in 2014, students are given the option of either enrolling in developmental classes or skipping straight into the college level courses. By eliminating the mandatory component of developmental education, the
Florida community college system hopes that students will listen to advisers and make the decision that best fits their individual needs and expected timeline for graduation.

It is still too early to fully judge the success of Florida’s developmental education initiative, but many colleges—including Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the state—have reported that, so far, the changes have had a negative impact. Recent reports indicate that enrollment in developmental math courses decreased by 42 percent, but student success rates in college level math also decreased from 55.7 percent to 46.8 percent (Smith, 2015). Even before the turn of the century, research conducted by Schoenecker, Bollman, and Evens (1998) provided evidence that community college students who were simply recommended to take developmental courses not only refused to take the courses, but these students were also found significantly less likely to persist from one semester to the next and generally carried much lower average GPAs. This would all seem to line up with theories from developmental education experts like Boylan (1995) who have long stated that at-risk students not only need developmental work but they must also be mandated into structured, well-supported developmental courses.

Rather than eliminating the mandatory component of the developmental system, several of the Achieving the Dream states, including Virginia and North Carolina, chose to completely revise their previous developmental education systems. The new systems include accelerated formats that will require low testing students to enroll in developmental courses while still managing to ultimately reduce the time spent within the developmental system. Virginia began their redesign with developmental math. Previous to the redesign, developmental students would take a series of comprehensive math courses that covered a wide range of topics over the course of one or two semesters. The new system broke down basic mathematic principles into nine
units: fractions, decimals and percentages, algebra basics, linear equations, graphing, exponents and polynomials, rational expressions, rational exponents, and quadratic equations. Each of these units were made into their own three-week course (called MTE 1-9, respectively). The VCCS then worked closely with McCann Associates to develop a test tailored specifically to student needs—the VPT. This new test could pinpoint in which specific areas of mathematics a student might need more work. For example, a student might test out of most areas on the VPT, including fractions and decimals, but demonstrate need for work with exponents and factoring. In this case, the student would only need to take one three-week MTE focused on exponents and factoring. Once that is completed, he/she could move on to college level math in the following semester. Thus, instead of taking a series of courses which wasted time going over areas the student already understood, the specific MTE courses allow the student to only spend three weeks targeting his/her exact area of weakness (Virginia Community Colleges, June 2011).

Virginia also applied the same goal of acceleration to developmental English. Prior to the redesign, students were placed into courses based on their COMPASS scores—a test created by ACT Incorporated to measure basic reading and writing skill levels. Students could test as ready to enter freshman composition (ENG 111), or into a tract that requires any combination of the following developmental courses:

- ENG 1 – the lowest level writing course
- ENG 3 – the highest level developmental writing course
- ENG 4 – the lowest level reading course
- ENG 5 – the highest level developmental reading course.

Developmental reading and writing courses could be taken concurrently, but students who placed in ENG 1 were required to take ENG 3 the following semester; likewise, students who place in
ENG 4 must take ENG 5. In this fashion, it was entirely possible for a student to spend anywhere from two to four semesters simply completing the developmental process. Then, and only then, could they actually advance to their degree program coursework. The result of this system was that students were clearly growing frustrated and confused before reaching the end of the developmental sequence (Virginia’s Community Colleges, June 2011, p. 15). This is a common concern of developmental educators (Boylan, 1995; Adelman, 2004; Bailey, 2009; Daiek, Dixon, & Talbert, 2012). If students are forced to take courses that do not count towards their degree, yet still cost money to attend, they are more likely to vanish from classrooms—often dropping out of college without earning any degree. Since 2011, only 40 percent of students completed the lengthy course sequence (Virginia’s Community Colleges, June 2011, p. 10) and less than 10 percent of these developmental students graduated with an associate’s degree within six years (Virginia’s Community Colleges, February 2011, p. 16).

In the spring of 2013, colleges within the VCCS launched a new developmental English course structure that combined developmental reading and writing instruction into a single semester. The VCCS again worked with McCann Associates to develop a VPT for English. Based on their scores on the VPT, students now place into one of the following combined reading/writing courses:

- ENF 1 – designed for the lowest level reading and writing abilities, 8 credits
- ENF 2 – designed for students who need extra help but at a higher level, 4 credits, or
- ENF 3 – a 2 credit course attached to freshman composition

Upon successful completion of that single developmental course, students move immediately to freshman composition. With this integrated, shortened course sequence, students spend only one semester in developmental English coursework before progressing to freshman composition, thus
greatly reducing the time required in the program. The hope is that this new system will
decrease student frustration and increase both retention and success rates.

The state of North Carolina took the same approach to redesigning both developmental
math and English across their community colleges. The only differences in the math redesign
were that North Carolina divided developmental coursework into eight, four-week DMA
courses. In English, North Carolina decided to likewise combine reading and writing instruction;
but instead of these courses taking place for a full 16 weeks, the North Carolina Community
College System created a “mini-semester” wherein students could take one developmental course
for the first eight weeks of the semester and then take a second course for the final eight weeks.
A set of sample assignments and objectives were created to guide instructors with developing the
new classes (North Carolina’s Community Colleges, 2013). Though the specifics differ, the
actual concept for both the Virginia and North Carolina Redesigns remain the same: progress
students through developmental coursework at a much faster rate while focusing attention on
their individual needs.

Research exists to support the theory of an accelerated developmental program. In 1997,
Dr. Katie Hern of Chabot College in Hayward, California conducted a study featuring a cohort of
developmental students which focused on an integrated reading and writing classroom. Hern
began with the basic assumption that “if we leave our long sequences unchanged, we will never
see meaningful progress in student completion” (Hern, 2012, p. 64). Her students were placed
into her class by taking placement tests upon entering college. Those whose skills tested one or
even two levels below freshman composition, had the option of enrolling in an accelerated
English course (an intensive reading and writing course lasting one semester) or a non-
accelerated course (a two semester structure breaking reading and writing concepts apart—
students take reading one semester and writing the next). Hern monitored the success rates of these students in not only the developmental courses, but also in their other coursework in other subjects. She continued to track this group of students for the next three years to see how many succeeded in completing college English after taking her accelerated developmental program and compared them with students enrolled in the non-accelerated version of the course. Every three years, she repeated this cycle with a new cohort of students. The goal of this process was to see if students were more successful after completing only one semester of developmental English rather than multiple semesters and to see if the integration of reading and writing concepts could benefit these students (Hern, 2011).

After over a decade of data gathering, Hern’s results were overwhelming. In the accelerated version of the course, Hern allowed students to read books and articles to be discussed in class. Her writing assignments then focused on their comprehension of the readings. By using reading concepts to bolster writing comprehension, students in the accelerated class saw great improvement in both skill areas. Indeed, over a ten year span, students who completed the accelerated developmental course were nearly two times more likely to complete college level English within three years as compared to students who took the non-accelerated track (Hern, 2011, p. 5). But Hern’s results do not merely impact English courses. Her research also studied the success rates of her accelerated developmental students and compared them to students who never took a developmental English course at all. The results show higher success rates for developmental students in all general studies courses when compared to students who never took any developmental courses at all (Hern, 2011, p. 9). Hern (2011) states that her long-term study illustrates that when students are asked to take more than one semester of developmental coursework, their “completion rates in college English are
consistently and substantially lower” (p. 14). Hern concludes that by decreasing the amount of developmental courses required, while still providing a high quality developmental education, students face decreased exit points and are much more likely to persist to graduation.

Since the accelerated programs in Virginia and North Carolina were only recently implemented, there is not enough data to truly make an evaluation on how effective they will be in the long run. However, in Virginia early numbers show that the total students enrolling in developmental courses has greatly decreased (thanks largely to the newly designed placement test) and the total students enrolling in college level coursework has greatly increased, all while freshman composition and math success numbers have remained steady at 75 percent (Virginia’s Community Colleges, 2014). So far this seems to illustrate that the redesign is progressing successfully, as more total students are completing college level coursework each semester while the overall need for developmental English and math has been reduced. Continued study will be required in the coming years to properly evaluate the strengths and weakness of these redesigned systems.

**Bridge programs.** Another way in which institutions are trying to assist students with quickly transitioning out of the liminal is through the implementation of “bridge” programs. Fittingly named, these programs help students to bridge the gap between high school and college through a series of orientation activities, college readiness classes, and academic support services. Bridge programs often vary in terms of scope, size of participants, time offered, and whether or not they are considered mandatory or optional. However, they all seek to accomplish one common goal: to assist at-risk students with transitioning to the college level without the need for developmental coursework. Bir and Myrick (2015) found that students who participate in a bridge program are 10% more likely to graduate from college. The reason for this is simple:
“both male and female students who attend a bridge are more likely to be engaged in their first year of college and are more likely to return to school after that first crucial year” (Bir & Myrick, 2015, p. 27). Douglas and Attewell (2014) agree with this estimation, noting that in their research, “students who attend bridge programs between high school and their first regular term of college have higher graduation rates than students who do not enroll…these programs are important and should be cultivated, especially in terms of recruiting students who need them the most” (p. 100, 104).

Howell, Kurlaender, & Grodsky (2010) observe that a student’s participation in a bridge program also has the ability to lower the chances that the student will need developmental coursework. This is well supported in the literature, as several research studies have shown that bridge programs can be effective for increasing the college readiness and the retention of at-risk students when offered either in a multiple week residential formats (Walpole et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2009; Gleason et al., 2010; Lenaburg et al., 2012) or in daily commuter formats (Ackerman, 1991; Moore et al., 2007; Chism et al., 2008; McCurrie, 2009; Kallison & Stader, 2012). Current research is heavily slanted towards summer bridge programs and the impact these pre-enrollment courses can have upon incoming freshmen. Douglas and Attewell (2014), for example, suggested that “non-selective colleges could improve their graduation rates if they increased the proportion of entering undergraduates attending summer bridge programs” (p. 104). Little empirical research exists on the impact of semester long bridge programs or on similar bridge-type courses that take place once the fall semester begins.

Kallison and Stader (2012) surveyed 782 individuals participating in a bridge program prior to enrolling in college courses and found that 80 percent of those students indicated an increase in confidence, stating that they felt much better prepared for college level work after
participating in the program. Through their research, they found that the most successful programs are the ones that accomplish five criteria:

1. establish and expect high standards for program students and staff and provide professional training for the staff;
2. provide personalized attention for students and establish trusting relationships with them;
3. provide adult mentors, counselors, and/or advisors;
4. facilitate peer support; and
5. provide long-term and strategically timed interventions that coincide with the timing of college-readiness steps such as curriculum choices, [entrance exam] preparation, college application and financial aid processes, and college survival skills.

The first two criteria focus on having well-trained faculty involved in classroom instruction and working to build connections between faculty, staff, and students in the program. Indeed, the basic principles of bridge programs—whether residential or daily commuter variations—work because teachers and support staff members engage students in the college environment and help them to see that they are capable of college success. This philosophy is rooted in the seminal research of both Spady (1971) and Tinto (1975), who urged colleges to involve students both academically and socially as a way to create a sense of “belonging” and greatly increase the chances a student will remain enrolled. Programs that create true engagement are the ones that allow students to feel like they are taking part of the learning process rather than having to suffer through it (McKenna, 2011). Tinto (1993) adds that all college students must be somewhat intrinsically motivated. Students lacking such motivation will likely withdraw and disappear from classrooms at the first sign of frustration or failure unless some type of intervention is in place to prevent it. Thus, a successful bridge program must engage students in the college
environment while simultaneously cultivating the type of internal motivations that will propel students to long-term success.

Modern researchers have pointed out that it is possible to nurture and create greater intrinsic motivation within students by simply helping them to gain more self-confidence in their abilities in the classroom (Moore et al., 2007; McKenna, 2011). Studies show that students who meet Strayhorn’s (2011) definition of being “at-risk” have reported lower self-confidence in their intelligence (Saenz et al., 2007), lower expectations for their grade point average and chances of graduating (Riehl, 1994; Ishitani, 2006), as well as significantly lower expectations of the highest degree they feel they can achieve (Saenz et al., 2007). When students enter with these preconceived notions, they struggle and often drop out altogether. That is why it is critical that bridge programs focus on the final three criteria outlined by Kallison and Stadler (2012). It begins with having dedicated advisors and support staff ready to provide constant contact and encouragement to students throughout the duration of the program. They build relationships with students and help guide them throughout the early processes before the students arrive in class. At that point, it is up to a team of well-trained educators to provide an orientation to college, assist with course registration and financial aid applications, important study skills like organization techniques, note taking, and time management, as well as provide basic instruction in core subject areas like English and math (Kallison & Stader, 2012). This aligns with the conclusions drawn by Moore et al. (2007) stating that “positive experiences with the [college] and academic preparation prior to beginning the freshman year have positive influences on retention and attitudes” (p. 151). In other words, when bridge programs are able to illustrate the advantages of attending college while also instilling confidence and positive attitudes within
students that they can truly be successful, colleges are able to see gains in both student success and retention (Moore, 2007).

**Implications**

From a careful study of the literature, it is clear that a greater number of at-risk students are arriving on college campuses than ever before. Certainly developmental education is an important and valuable asset to college campuses. It would not at all be appropriate to take underprepared students and force them into college level coursework with the expectation they will figure out how to succeed on their own. However, research has also shown that many students who place into developmental courses are quite often misplaced or are close to being ready for college work; they only need a quick refresher of the basics in order to succeed. The literature also revealed that students who begin their college careers in developmental courses are significantly more likely to become frustrated, confused, and ultimately drop out of college without earning any type of degree. For that reason, all efforts should be made by colleges to assist students with gaining the knowledge and remediation needed to avoid developmental coursework prior to taking college placement exams.

It is also clear from the literature that colleges are missing out on a large percentage of eligible, aspiring college students. Something is happening between high school and college that turns these individuals away from higher education. For some students, this could potentially be issues of low self-confidence or uncertainty about where to begin with the college admission processes. For others, more significant issues may be present. Either way, bridge programs do show evidence that they can support student transitions through the liminal phase and into the post-liminal phase of becoming successful college students. Still, these programs need continued study in order to truly test their effectiveness for recruiting at-risk students and
effectively assisting them with the transition to college. Several scholars lament the lack of empirical research on modern bridge programs (Perna, 2002; Cabrera et al., 2006; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). Moreover, very little literature currently exists to study the long-term impact of accelerated semester bridge programs such as the QuickStart programs at Zane and MECC. In fact, no qualitative studies have been conducted to evaluate QuickStart and that is where the current research study can most contribute to the field of higher education.

Chapter III: Methodology

Design

Qualitative data for this case study will be gathered from a series of carefully constructed surveys, interviews, and classroom observations. These are three of most effective sources for collecting qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). Surveys will allow insight into the shared experiences of the entire QuickStart program while interviews will allow for more focused, specific opinions and stories to assist in understanding what is working and what is not working from the students’ and faculty members’ perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Classroom observations will allow the researcher to witness the interaction between students and instructors. The data collected from these three strategies will assist the researcher with drawing effective conclusions as well as answer the study’s central research questions.

Tradition

An instrumental, evaluative case study approach will be used. This tradition is a more effective lens through which to view this project than phenomenology or the historical narrative approach. Merriam (2009) points out that in order for a study to be classified as a true case study, a “bounded system” is needed. A proper test for whether a system is bounded would be to determine “whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed”
The QuickStart program qualifies under this criteria since each cohort offering has a maximum enrollment of 20 students. These select students are all experiencing the same phenomenon, but phenomenology would not be appropriate to this particular study since it will not deal with a homogenous research population. The students and faculty selected will all have very different experiences and come to this topic from very different angles. They will have different backgrounds and bring diverse strengths and weaknesses to the program. Further, although “how” and “why” research questions can justify either a case study approach or a historical narrative approach, only the case study approach allows for interviews of living subjects (Yin, 2014). This leaves the case study approach as the only logical choice for this study.

Case studies are unique in that they are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). This means that case studies focus on a particular program, situation, or phenomenon, provide a rich description after data is analyzed, and produce results that serve to increase the reader’s knowledge of the program, situation, or phenomenon being studied. This is precisely the ultimate goal of this research study. The focus is on QuickStart program at MECC and the information gathered from faculty and students within this program will ultimately provide a full, rich narrative in order to educate readers as well as MECC administrators as to the successes and struggles these students are experiencing. The hope is that the results of this study will assist MECC with continuing to grow and improve the program in order to better assist a greater number of first year students before they begin regular college coursework.

Case studies are broken down into different categories by different researchers (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2014). Specifically, the style most useful to this particular case study is the “Evaluative” case study. Under this category, case studies produce information in a clear,
meaningful way from interaction with individuals who have first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon being studied. That information can then be used to evaluate the effectiveness of ineffectiveness of the program. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) conclude, case studies are the best method to report evaluations of programs such as QuickStart because the case study approach can weigh “information to produce judgement. Judging is the final and ultimate act of evaluation” (p. 375). For these reasons, an evaluative case study is specifically the most appropriate description of the research tradition.

**Participants**

The participants will include faculty, students, and administrators who have been involved with the QuickStart program. There will be three primary sources of qualitative data collection: observations, surveys, and interviews. These sources are appropriate for case studies because they produce data that helps the researcher uncover experiences of participants within the bounded system (Yin, 2013). A purposeful sampling approach will be used to obtain student survey participants. Creswell (2013) writes that this type of sampling strategy was effective in qualitative case study approaches in the sense that the researcher “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 156). For this study, all students enrolled in the QuickStart program at MECC will be purposefully chosen to participate. Surveys will take place at the conclusion of the five-week program. The general population of students enrolling in QuickStart are expected to be part of the “at-risk” population as defined by Strayhorn (2011). The surveys will attempt to determine what aspects of the QuickStart program were most beneficial for each student and whether students feel more prepared to begin college level work.
Student interviews will present more of a challenge. At the time of this study, the QuickStart program is completing its third small cohort. Student numbers have been lower than anticipated. Through three cohorts, a total of 12 students have participated. The original goal of this study was that at least 10 student volunteers would be selected who satisfy two criteria: 1) completed the QuickStart program at MECC, and 2) have never earned a college degree from any institution. However, obtaining the target number of volunteers would only be possible if nearly every student in the program agreed to participate in the study. For that reason, a more realistic expectation would be that at least 7 student volunteers will be sought for the interview process.

Three faculty members involved with teaching the courses will also be interviewed to gauge their experiences with designing and teaching the material. It will be beneficial to this study to see how faculty feel students are doing in the program and to compare those beliefs with the beliefs of the students, themselves. Finally, an administrator at MECC will be interviewed. As the original creator and supporter of the QuickStart program, she will be able to provide information on the design, importance, and long-term goals of the program from a unique perspective.

**Data Collection**

To start, permissions will be sought from MECC administrators and the MECC Institutional Review Board to gather research data on the Quickstart program at MECC’s campus. After that, data will be collected primarily through the use of classroom observations, surveys, and a series of one-on-one interviews.

**Observations.** Merriam (2009) states observations, along with interviews, are the most important data collection sources for qualitative research. Observations present potentially
greater opportunity to uncover important data since observations “represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). Creswell (2013) identifies four types of observation techniques. In this case, a “complete participant” role is most appropriate. The researcher is one of four instructors chosen to teach a section of the QuickStart program. Specifically, the researcher teaches the English portion of the course, the final section of QuickStart before the program is completed. Therefore, a relationship is fully engaged with the study participants. However, this also represents a unique opportunity for the researcher to observe classroom activity before becoming actively involved in the course. The researcher will begin each QuickStart cohort by attending at least one classroom session with each of the three other QuickStart faculty members. Notes will be taken on how students interact with faculty and what types of activities are completed. This will give a better understanding of what is being taught during class sessions and will assist in a more effective analysis of student survey and interview responses. Furthermore, the researcher’s eventual connection to the participants in this study will create a strong rapport with the individuals being observed which, in turn, will help to produce better data since it will be easier to understand the context behind survey and interview responses (Creswell, 2013).

**Surveys.** According to Creswell (2013), surveys provide an excellent opportunity for research participants to anonymously share their feelings and experiences. Surveys allow the researcher to gather larger amounts of data than would interviews, and allow for a much larger pool of participants. For this study, the researcher will be granted access to view student responses from a survey the college created to measure the strengths and weaknesses of the
program. Survey questions feature both “yes/no” prompts and open ended questions designed to illicit genuine reactions to course content and delivery (see Appendix D).

At the conclusion of each QuickStart cohort, students submit survey responses using MECC’s online survey tracking system: Qualtrics. This system is used by many academic institutions and fortune 500 corporations (such as Coca-Cola and Disney) to track and manage survey data. Because the QuickStart courses are conducted in computer labs, students are able to complete the survey at that time with little to no inconvenience. Students are informed by the survey administrator that it is impossible to trace answers back to their identities, and that they will remain completely anonymous during this stage. Confidentiality is important to students because some may be hesitant leaving negative or critical feedback about the course for fear the teacher will penalize them. In the interest of preventing students from growing tired and skipping questions, the survey includes only ten carefully chosen questions (Yin, 2014). The survey concludes by thanking students for their participation.

**Interviews.** To meet the nature of qualitative research, student volunteers will be selected from the survey pool to participate in one semi-structured interview based on a series of guiding questions. Approximately 7 students will be sought for the interview stage. This number is appropriate for qualitative research and allows the researcher to focus on gaining much more in-depth responses from students (Creswell, 2013). Rubin & Rubin (2012) noted that semi-structured interview questions allow the researcher to focus in on certain experiences and to guide the participant without influencing his or her answers. Further, Merriam (2009) remarked that semi-structured interviews allow for the predetermination of questions, while also giving the interviewer the flexibility to ask improvisational follow-up questions as needed to elicit more meaningful responses from participants.
Student volunteers will respond to recruitment emails sent to them by the researcher after they complete the QuickStart program (see Appendix B). Each will be scheduled for an interview at a place and time that best fits and is most convenient for his or her schedule (Yin, 2014). Faculty will also be interviewed by using the same semi-structured process. The three other faculty members involved in the program (aside from the researcher, himself) will participate in a single interview with the researcher. Finally, the administrator—the person initially responsible for creating and leading the program—will be interviewed as well in order to gain deeper insight into the creation, development, and long-term goals of QuickStart. For each interview, a responsive technique will be utilized as conceptualized by Rubin and Rubin (2012). In this style, “questioning styles reflect the personality of the researcher, adapt to the varying relationships between researcher and conversational partner, and change as the purpose of the interview evolves” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 15). This method of interviewing will assist with focusing and modifying each semi-structured interview to best obtain the perspectives of both students and educators involved in the program.

Data Storage

It is of vital importance that all data gathered during observations, surveys, and interviews be kept confidential and secure at all times (Merriam, 2009). Survey responses collected through Qualtrics will be collected and provided to the researcher by MECC’s data collection manager. Only those involved directly with the QuickStart program (the four faculty, the administrator and the data manager) will have access to this information. Observational notes will be first recorded in a notebook and then typed up into Word documents. The notes will then be checked twice to ensure all relevant information was properly transferred to Word before the notes are shredded. The Word documents will be saved on the researcher’s personal computer and password protected. Backup copies, for which Creswell (2013) strongly
advocates, will also be saved on a password protected cloud server available only to the researcher. All emails made between participants and the researcher will be deleted permanently after the study is completed.

Each interview will be recorded using the voice memo feature on both an iPhone and an iPad. Two devices will be utilized in case one suffers equipment failure during the interview. Both the iPhone and the iPad are protected by a unique pin number known only to the researcher. Interviews will then be transcribed by the researcher; the transcriptions will be coded with a pseudonym and kept on a password protected computer hard drive. Only the researcher will know the true identity of research participants. Any hardcopy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office. All information gathered will be used solely for the purposes of this doctoral thesis study and will be kept for a period of five years.

Data Analysis

When interviews serve as the primary source of data collection, a strong plan for data analysis and coding is needed to make sense of what is gathered. Merriam (2009) admits that the large amount of data generated in qualitative case studies can be overwhelming and difficult to manage unless the researcher develops a strategy in advance. With that in mind, Creswell (2013) suggests using a direct interpretation approach to data analysis. To do this, each interview or survey will be individually examined without comparing data to other interviews or surveys. A coding analysis technique would then be applied to develop common themes from the texts. There are many different coding methods, but this study would best benefit from an evaluation coding approach.

According to Saladaña (2013), evaluation coding is useful in qualitative studies in order to determine participants’ “judgments about the merit, worth, or significance of programs or
policy” (p. 119). Patton (2002) was one of the innovators of the evaluation coding method which involves the “systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (p. 10). As evaluation coding is most useful to qualitative research seeking to study the effectiveness of policies, individuals, or programs, it is a perfect fit for this present study. Therefore, following the process of direct interpretation, each interview transcript will be analyzed and coded through the process of evaluation coding.

Each transcript copy will be printed the corresponding codes will be written in each line’s margin as Saladaña (2013) suggests. All codes will be combined into what Merriam (2009) and Yin (2014) call the “case study database.” This database will allow the researcher to come back and reference individual codes even after later steps are taken. Once each transcript is coded and a database is created, the data will be compared, combining them as appropriate in order to narrow down codes into 5-7 manageable categories (Creswell, 2013). This will help to identify the most common strengths and weaknesses of the QuickStart course being identified by participants. Saladaña (2013) further states that evaluation coding should lead to data that can “describe, compare, and predict” (p. 119). This data can be used to describe the quality of the program and to predict what changes (if any) need to be made and how they can best be implemented for the long term growth and success of the program (Saladaña, 2013).

**Trustworthiness**

Perhaps the second most important step for any research study, behind only ensuring human participants are treated properly and ethically, is for the researcher to ensure his or her results are trustworthy. Creswell (2013) notes that many researchers use various terms to define trustworthiness in qualitative research. Most use four basic categories: internal validity, external
validity, reliability, and objectivity (Creswell, 2013, p. 246). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed alternative terms for these same concepts: credibility (rather than internal validity), applicability (rather than external validity), dependability (rather than reliability) and confirmability (rather than objectivity). This researcher proposes that a mixture of these categories would better describe the four necessary tests for establishing and proving trustworthiness. Qualitative research studies should therefore demonstrate credibility, applicability, reliability, and objectivity.

**Credibility.** To be credible, qualitative research results should exhibit a “truth value” wherein it is clear the researcher’s findings and analysis accurately portray the experiences participants were trying to convey (Creswell, 2013). Thus, to establish the first criteria, member checks, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) call the “most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314), will be used. Interviews will be transcribed and participants asked to read over those transcriptions to verify their words were accurately documented. Participants will also be allowed to look over coding and analysis to confirm meaning. This process will occur continually so that each participant has the ability to get his or her intended messages across and ensure errors are corrected prior to the final draft.

**Applicability.** To be applicable, researchers should show that their work may be utilized in multiple, practical ways. The success of students in the QuickStart program could prove to be absolutely critical to all aspects of college and university functions at MECC. First, QuickStart can serve as a recruitment tool, bringing uncertain students to college who otherwise might never have attempted coursework. This greatly increases the college’s visibility and access in the community and works to increase enrollment. Data collected from this study will be useful to MECC administrators as they consider whether or not to continue or grow the program.
Secondly, QuickStart is a student success initiative. The program was originally created with the hypothesis that most students who first enrolled in the program would either be students who have been out of college for a long time and need a refresher on the basics or students who are likely to struggle in intro-level college courses. The QuickStart coursework seeks to prepare these students to enter college with more confidence, knowledge, and experience. It is possible that the program could prevent students from needing to spend time in developmental English or math courses. Research suggests that when students are initially placed into developmental courses to begin their college careers, they are more likely to drop out before earning any type of degree (Boylan, 1995; Bailey, 2009; Daiek, Dixon, & Talbert, 2012). Therefore, by ensuring students are more prepared to test as “college ready” on the math and English exams and by providing needed orientations to the campus and experience with pivotal technology such as Blackboard, Word, and email accounts, QuickStart has the ability to increase the likelihood of success for students who complete the program. Finally, the QuickStart program at MECC is applicable because it can provide a model that can be replicated at other institutions across the nation.

**Reliability.** To be reliable, studies should show evidence that research findings can be replicated using a similar population and method. This criterion will be developed by utilizing triangulation. Triangulation involves “locating evidence to document a code of theme in different sources of data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Surveys, observations, and one-on-one interviews with QuickStart students and faculty members will be analyzed and interpreted in order to compare the resulting categories and draw more effective and dependable conclusions. The use of triangulation in addition to member checking is an excellent way to determine reliability in research. Cho and Trent (2006) agree that “the coupling of these two concepts
pursues a possibility that there is an absolute, perceived existence of validity in its own right” (p. 328). From these methods, this study will be able to produce a rich, reliable description of the experiences students and faculty are facing within the program.

**Objectivity.** One of the most challenging criteria to meet is that of objectivity which questions whether the researcher’s conclusions are driven by participants’ data or by the researcher’s own biases. Because the researcher works at the research site, teaches the research participants, and has a vested interest in both the success of the students and the program, bias must be constantly evaluated and avoided. The purpose of this study is *not* to prove QuickStart is a valuable program. It is also *not* to prove that the faculty involved are doing a good job. The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not the QuickStart program is a viable tool for assisting our students with the transition to college. The research, therefore, must collect and analyze the data in order to give MECC administrators the best information possible when they consider whether to continue, end, or grow the program. For this reason, I will acknowledge my position in my research, which is also called “bracketing” (Merriam, 2009). I understand that my close connection to these students may influence my research if steps are not taken to prevent researcher bias. I must engage students, gain their trust, and find a way to get them to open up and be truthful in their surveys and interviews, but I must do so in a way that does not unfairly guide my work to certain predetermined conclusions. The role of a researcher should be to observe and study without influencing the outcome of the research. However, the researcher should also be motivated to use the data he or she uncovers in order to enact some type of positive change, constantly reflecting upon his or her positionality.

Creswell (2013) outlined eight strategies for adding validity and trustworthiness to any research study. He recommended that researchers “engage in at least two of them in any given
study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 253). By following the procedures outlined in the sections above, following Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) model, five of the eight Creswell strategies will be employed in this study: prolonged engagement with research participants, triangulation, bracketing, providing rich description, and member checking.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Protecting the confidentiality and confidence of study participants should be at the forefront of every researcher’s mind. In qualitative research, it is even more important that participants feel comfortable fully sharing their thoughts and opinions. Because of this, Yin (2014) recommends five steps for protecting human research subjects: 1) seek approval from institutional review boards (IRB), 2) gain informed consent from all study participants, 3) make efforts to prevent any form of deception when working with human subjects and to be aware of potential vulnerable populations, 4) protect confidentiality and privacy for all subjects, and 5) obtain participants equitably so no one is unfairly excluded from study.

The first step that will be taken to protect human subjects is to obtain permissions from the IRB at Northeastern and Mountain Empire (Appendix A). Yin (2014) calls this step the “most imperative step before proceeding with case study” research (p. 78). Permission from the vice president and/or president of MECC will also be obtained. At the time of the study, each participant will be notified of his or her privacy rights as well as the fact that continued participation is voluntary, and then he/she will be given a consent form explaining these rights in more detail (see Appendix C). This will complete the second step Yin (2014) described.

Yin’s (2014) third step for protecting human subjects involves risks and potentially vulnerable populations. Indeed, because this study involves students and faculty members at MECC being interviewed in order to obtain their true thoughts on the newly launched QuickStart
program, this presents several potential risks. Rubin and Rubin (2012) remind that the IRB is “very concerned about protecting vulnerable populations – individuals who may not understand or be able to give informed consent or those who may not be in a position to refuse to participate” (p. 91). Student participants will be given surveys to complete and could feel pressured by their instructors, or by the researcher’s presence in the room, to give positive responses. These students could feel their grades in the program are in jeopardy. However, the survey administrator explains to students that their responses are completely anonymous and cannot be traced back to their identities. Instructors of the course will have no access to the results until after grades are processed and therefore the data gathered by surveys and interviews with participants will have no way of impacting student grades in the courses.

Additionally, there may be concerns from faculty as well. According to the IRB, employees may be considered a vulnerable population if they fear their participation in the study may have negative consequences or repercussions from their supervisors (Penslar, 2007). With only three faculty members being interviewed in this study, it may not be difficult to determine which faculty member gave certain comments during the interviews. These faculty members may fear their supervisors or college administrators will easily be able to determine who said what even when comments are kept confidential. This might lead some faculty members to fear repercussions if they voice negative opinions on the program. For this reason, each faculty member will be given the option to refuse participation and will be informed that not only will all comments be recorded under a pseudonym, but they will also be used only to improve the QuickStart program in future offerings. These faculty members all work well with their immediate supervisors and the vice-president of the college (who is in charge of the QuickStart
initiative) so it is quite likely that faculty will not have any concerns about participating in this study. Still, their possible concerns should be taken into account at the beginning.

Interview participants must feel completely at ease in order to share what is really happening (Yin, 2014). All interview subjects will be given a pseudonym to ensure information gathered during the course of this study will be kept confidential at all times and they will be informed they may refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time they begin to feel uncomfortable. Care will also be given during interviews to remove any names or specifics in each participant’s answers that could lead to identification. Further information on how information gathered from students and faculty will be protected is presented in the “Data Storage” section of this chapter.

Ultimately, although both students and faculty in this study could constitute a vulnerable population, the IRB reminds that the use of a vulnerable population can be permitted if “the research is likely to benefit the subject directly” (Penslar, 2007, p. 12). The data recorded during this research study will be used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the newly launched QuickStart program. All results will be shared with MECC administrators and QuickStart faculty in an effort to further improve courses and student success. These uses directly benefit research participants in this study.

In the methods listed above, the researcher will protect all student participants using the steps outlined by Yin (2014). Approval from institutional review boards will be gained, informed consent from all study participants will be obtained, protection will be given to potentially vulnerable populations, and confidentiality and privacy for all subjects will be ensured. The remaining piece of Yin’s process involves taking great efforts to obtain participants equitably so no one is unfairly excluded from study. The purposeful sampling
approach outlined previously in this chapter ensures that all students enrolled in the QuickStart course will have an equal chance to volunteer for interviews and participate in this research study.

Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

Introduction

The guiding central research question for this case study can be broken down into two parts: faculty perceptions and student perceptions in regard to the new QuickStart program at MECC. The goal of this study was to determine how both of these groups of participants believe the QuickStart program prepares students for placement test success and increases their overall readiness for college level work. To that aim, this chapter is broken down into three sections. The first provides information about the research site, giving the context through which QuickStart was created. The second utilizes faculty and administrator interviews to create a detailed account of QuickStart’s creation, development, and recruitment of students. Finally, the third section of this chapter discusses common themes that emerged from student interviews and surveys in order to give insight to their shared experiences in the program, exploring how this data relates to the researcher’s central research question.

Research Site

This study took place at Mountain Empire Community College (MECC) in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. This site was chosen because it is the only college within the VCCS that is currently piloting a QuickStart program. MECC has an annual enrollment of approximately 4,000 students and is one of twenty-three colleges within the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). The college serves four counties and one city in the region, primarily competing for students with one other area community college and three main universities in the
state. Table 1 features information taken from MECC’s homepage in regard to the number of students from the service region enrolled in Virginia institutions of higher education during the 2014-2015 academic year:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Service Region Data</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Attending College</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>County 1</td>
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<td>County 2</td>
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<td>County 4</td>
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<td>County 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service Region</td>
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Approximately 3,779 students in MECC’s service region attended college in the state of Virginia this past year. MECC enrolled a vast majority (66%) of these students, making it the largest percentage based provider of higher education for local students in the area. According to information provided by the research site, their student population is predominately white (96%), female (60%), and between the ages of 18-35 (57%) with an average student age of 25. Nearly all program placed students (over 80%) receive financial aid in order to attend classes. This student population is representative of the college’s service region which is considered a high poverty zone by the U.S. Census Bureau. According to the census data, the median income in the state of Virginia is $63,907 while the median income in MECC’s service region is $35,723. Over 22% of the total service area population lives in extreme poverty.

In an effort to address the struggles of MECC’s service region and other similar regions in the state, the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education recently launched a
program called the “Rural Horseshoe Initiative” in an attempt to highlight and combat the challenges facing a large portion of the state. Figure 1 depicts the horseshoe region in the state of Virginia and each of the numbered circles represent one of the state’s community colleges:

Figure 1. A depiction of the so-called “rural horseshoe” in the state of Virginia

If the areas comprising the rural horseshoe were to become their own state, they would rank 50th in the nation in terms of the percentage of citizens with a college education (this includes areas served by 13 of the state’s 23 community colleges). By contrast, if the regions outside the horseshoe were to become their own state, they would rank 2nd in the nation (Virginia’s Community Colleges, 2015). This disparity has led many to use the term “two Virginias.” Indeed, in the eastern part of the state, most individuals are highly educated and live well above the poverty line. In the regions depicted by the horseshoe, one in four adults has less than a high school education. Nearly a third of the region’s households do not make enough money to cover basic daily expenses. Another third are not employed (Virginia’s Community Colleges, 2015). Fourteen of the state’s twenty-three community colleges fall within the highlighted areas. The Rural Horseshoe Initiative seeks to raise and spend an additional $21 million in funding for colleges that fall within the horseshoe in order assist with the creation of new programs to target the specific needs of the colleges’ local communities, to provide incentives for GED students to
attend college, and to create “coach” positions on college campuses to assist students throughout the college process. It will obviously take time to see the impact of the horseshoe initiative, but the move certainly illustrates the dire economic and educational situation in many parts of Virginia.

In addition to low socio-economic conditions, MECC also faces growing issues with enrollment. MECC’s attendance has followed the nationwide trend of decline over the past five years. Table 2 reflects the total headcount and FTEs since 2010:

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<td></td>
<td>HC</td>
<td>FTEs</td>
<td>HC</td>
<td>FTEs</td>
<td>HC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College totals</td>
<td>4,442</td>
<td>2,252</td>
<td>4,429</td>
<td>2,104</td>
<td>4,125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since 2010, MECC has endured a drop in total headcount of over 18% and loss of more than five hundred FTEs. On a positive note, MECC does feature a slightly higher graduation rate (29%) than the state average (21%). However, these numbers are still not satisfactory to change the economic conditions of the region. Faced with severe area poverty and these diminishing FTE numbers, MECC has been forced to look into and develop innovative solutions to address these issues. In the next section of this chapter, faculty and administrator interviews will be used to highlight the creation, development, and design of one such new initiative: the QuickStart program.

Inception of QuickStart
One MECC administrator responsible for organizing the creation efforts of QuickStart and who obtained the grant funding to support the program’s launch was first interviewed in an effort to understand more about the original reason for development and mission of the program. Three faculty members involved in the creation, development, and instruction of the QuickStart program were also interviewed in order to share their unique perspectives on their participation in program development and their interactions with the students it serves.

**Program origin.** The administrator noted that the QuickStart program was first conceptualized during a meeting with faculty in 2014. In that meeting, the administrator said she “asked everyone to try and think of ideas of how to reach non-traditional students for recruitment.” After one faculty member suggested offering a free computer course for older students, several other faculty members added that computers were not the only issues needing to be addressed. As the administrator recalled:

> After considering all of the discussion, it just seemed logical that we try to address as many of the issues as possible with one effort. Some of those mentioned were basic computer skills, and refreshers needed in reading, writing and math for those who had been out of school for a while. The group we would be targeting would also probably need help with study skills and might even need to know what their career options were. After putting all of that together on paper, and talking it through with several faculty and staff, it just seemed like the perfect way for someone to get a “quick start” to college.

The potential new program would target any students who had expressed interest in the college but who had not yet followed up by enrolling. This idea for a “QuickStart to college” floated around for a while before it finally began to truly take form. But before the program could be fully fleshed out, the issue of funding (particularly during a year of extremely tight budgets)
needed to be addressed. So the administrator developed a grant proposal and submitted it to the Virginia Community College System in October of 2014. She was pleased to receive funding through a Chancellor’s Initiative Fund (CIF) Award. She highlighted the process:

Within just a few weeks of identifying the needs and compiling the ideas into the QuickStart concept, the Chancellor’s Innovation Fund grant opportunity was announced. Realizing that the College would have costs associated with course materials, the development of the course, and the faculty costs for instruction, the timing for the grant request was ideal. This also gave us a very tight deadline in which to fully develop and implement the program.

While the grant was only to cover start-up costs through 2015, the administrator noted that, if the QuickStart program proves to be successful for students, she “is committed to seeing us continue to serve this segment of our population and will continue to fund it through the regular operating budget of the Vice President’s office.” However, for this to happen, it must be determined whether the current structure of the program is effectively recruiting and educating this particular student population.

Course development. Shortly after receiving the grant, the administrator moved quickly to identify faculty and staff who could lead coursework creation and develop a strong program to effectively recruit and instruct students who had previously been uncertain (and who still might be uncertain) about attending college. She explained:

The faculty and staff who worked to develop the program were intentionally chosen because of their knowledge, personal attributes and dedication to their students. After
identifying the topics to be covered, it really was not hard to select those who I thought would help make the program successful.

The administrator specifically sought and recruited four individuals: a career counselor who specializes in teaching the student orientation course at MECC, a computer and technology professor, an English professor, and a math instructor. The administrator noted that because the future of the program would be heavily dictated by the quality of faculty and staff chosen to lead the program, she was careful to select individuals who could work well together for the betterment of students:

The personalities of all four of these chosen individuals complement one another and I have had nothing but good feedback from their students. Students trust them and are able to talk with them openly without feeling intimidated. I felt that this was one of the most important aspects of the QuickStart program and knew the faculty and staff chosen would help to determine whether the students and the program were successful or not.

The administrator contacted her selected faculty and requested an informational meeting where she could explain the goals of the QuickStart program. She then tasked the four selected instructors with building a six week course that would most effectively recruit and prepare nontraditional students for college level work. The administrator recalled that initial meeting:

I believe I first called the group together to talk about the idea, and even though this was something beyond their already busy schedules, each one was willing to give it a try. Their “can-do” attitudes really made this possible.
One faculty member said of the first meeting, “I wasn’t sure what to expect at first. We had a lot to do and a short time to do it. But it all came together quite well. I was happy to help.”

Another faculty member stated:

When I was asked to be a part of this program, I didn’t even hesitate. It was exactly the type of program we were missing here at MECC. I saw instantly how it could be used to draw in students who otherwise might never attempt college and move to see them become successful.

A third faculty member agreed, calling it a privilege and an honor to be part of the QuickStart program because “we are making real differences in the lives of these students.” It took the faculty members a series of weekly meetings to develop the course content and decide upon a presentation that would benefit students.

**Course design.** During one of the final meetings, the faculty team decided how the QuickStart course schedule should be divided among them. After much discussion, it was decided that the first section of QuickStart would be offered from 2-3:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays for a six week period. One faculty member noted of this process:

We wanted to give each faculty member time with the students. We knew it was going to be hard to fit everything we wanted to teach them into limited sessions, but we have confidence in our faculty that we can all use the time effectively. We just had to figure out how much exact time we could spend on each subject.

The team decided that students should spend the first week of the course with the career counselor. During an interview with this counselor, she pointed out that there are actually three
distinct elements to her portion of the course and each are important to potential students. The first involves a detailed orientation to the college. The career counselor stated:

Students are given a tour of campus to view each building, given information on the types of courses taught, resources and offices available in that building with specific notations at the testing center, the Learning Center and tutoring labs, the library and offices of support.

Grounding students in their surroundings at the college is an important step in helping them feel welcome. As one QuickStart faculty member explained, “If students feel like they know our college well, they can feel comfortable to come back and begin classes after QuickStart ends.”

The orientation also includes information about important college procedures and instruction on how to apply for admission and sign up for financial aid. Students are given an opportunity to log into and explore important systems such as their Student Information portal and Blackboard.

After the college orientation, the career counselor stated that students are taught the basic skills necessary for success in any college course:

We cover information on study skills, differences between high school expectations and college expectations are discussed. Basic college information including meanings of acronyms and words used at a college are also explained such as FAFSA, FERPA, GPA, Advisor, Pre-Requisite, Co-Requisite and so on.

Finally, the career counselor explained the “Career Choice” portion of the course:

Students are given a personality test and discuss why it is important to know your personality type and how that plays a role in career choice. Students utilize the Virginia Education Wizard system to take Career Assessments including Interest, Values, and
Skills Inventories. We then compare results and choose a few career options they are given to further research. The students are asked the educational level, salary information and to decide if there is a program offered at MECC to assist them in reaching their career goal. Students are also asked to write a paragraph describing what they know about their career of choice and what they still need to learn before declaring that as their final career choice.

Although this seems like a lot of activities to complete during the first week of the course, each task is carefully chosen and explicitly explained so that students understand how what they are learning is important. Students are given enough time to complete work during each class period so that homework is kept to a minimum. After this first week is completed, students have started the process of acquiring a comfort level with the college campus, developing important study skills needed for college success, and matching their skills to possible careers and majors at MECC.

Students spend weeks two and three of the program receiving instruction on computer skills and technology. They begin with more in-depth lessons on using Blackboard and checking student email. The professor for information technology who teaches this portion of the course explained the activities students undertake:

Students use and critique various computer operating systems, create well-structured Word documents, develop Excel Workbooks and create effective PowerPoint presentations. They also use Cloud Computing services to manage and store files they create during the course.
Additionally, students learn about online programs like Google Drive, Google+, and various web browsers. They interact with and use basic computer tools and functions like the magnifier, clipboard, zip files, and the snipping tool. The faculty member stated that his biggest wish for students is that they increase their confidence using computers and, overall, learn that technology is not something to be feared. Instead, technology can be used to help them pursue and achieve a better future.

The final three weeks of the program are split evenly between math and English. These sections of the QuickStart program are difficult to teach. It is understandably impossible to fit everything that a student needs to know about these subjects into one and a half weeks of coursework. Therefore, the instructors of these sections had to take creative approaches to maximize student learning and prepare students to take the math and English placement tests. In the math portion of the program, the instructor focused heavily on introducing free practice materials to students. He gave them web addresses and showed students how to use sites like the Khan Academy to brush up on math basics and prepare for the VPT.

The English section used a different approach. Rather than offering instruction on how to use online resources, the English instructor chose to focus on reviewing the basics of grammar, structure, and the most important and useful writing lessons. Handouts were created by the instructor and given to students on the first day of class. One example of these created resources is “The Brief Grammar Handbook.” Created by the QuickStart English instructor, it is an easy reference guide that gives basic rules about punctuation, capitalization, fragments, run-ons, and commonly confused words in an easy to follow, simplified style. The grammar book also features simple examples so students can see certain grammar rules in practice. This handbook is reviewed on the first day and students are encouraged to take it home, review it in more detail,
and return to the next class ready to ask questions. This, along with other helpful handouts and resources, is provided to students to help prepare them to take the English VPT.

Another common issue for first-time college students is that many do not know how to actually put together a college level paper. Things like basic formatting and paragraph structure are foreign concepts. For this reason, the very first formal assignment requires students to write about their personal lives. This allows students to write freely without worrying about finding research or arguing a point. They simply talk about themselves in a way they tend to enjoy while focusing on making sure they write in the correct format and set up their papers to actually look like a college level essay.

**Recruitment.** Once the program was created and the faculty members were ready to teach, students needed to be recruited to join the program. One faculty member spoke to the original target audience and how this population of students was selected:

The original population of students invited to take advantage of the program included those individuals who had applied to the college, but had not taken further action to begin the college experience. This group included both traditional and nontraditional students.

Once these students were identified, informative postcards were created and mailed to their home addresses. Students with phone numbers on record were also called to give them direct information about the program. In both of these methods, information was provided in regard to the purpose, timeline, and cost of the QuickStart program as well as MECC contact information to sign up or get more information if interested. Next, the service area needed to be informed about the opportunities QuickStart provided. A faculty member noted that this first began by getting the word out to local media:
A press release into the local newspapers was published detailing the program to the community. We added a page to our website to outline the program and added the information to the MECC Channel and have communicated with local businesses.

QuickStart representatives then began visiting area high schools and career fairs to provide information to a wider community population.

At the end of the QuickStart program, all students completed an electronic survey about the program. One question on that survey asked students how they first learned about the program. Table 3 illustrates their responses:

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How students heard about QuickStart</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Visit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone Call</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postcard</td>
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</table>

This data is important as MECC attempts to grow QuickStart. As with any new program, it is important for MECC to understand what method generates the most student response. The responses in Table 3 show that all four methods had at least some respect with recruiting students for the program. However, in-person visits from MECC staff members appear to have the most impact. That is certainly understandable, as potential students could gain information and ask questions immediately without having to take any additional steps. Direct postcard mailings were also highly effective, likely because students were able to use them as a reminder to call
and inquire about signing up. These seem to be the most productive avenues for MECC to invest in moving forward.

Although recruitment efforts have been steady, the actual number of students recruited has been lower than expected. Three sections of QuickStart have been offered at MECC to date—one in the spring, one in summer, and one in the fall of 2015. One cohort contained three students, a second had a total of four students, and the third attracted five students. However, as with any new program, low numbers can be expected from early cohorts. One faculty member summarized these struggles:

The difficult part is that we are trying to actually recruit people who ordinarily would never even attempt to come to college. It’s a hard sell to change their minds like that and get them to give us a shot. It takes time. But we are making progress.

Indeed, as the group continues to make progress, the QuickStart faculty members are focused on providing quality instruction for any students who choose to attend. New recruiting efforts have also extended to more creative avenues. As one faculty member explained:

We are contacting Adult Basic Education centers to reach out to those completing their GED. We have also communicated with the Department of Social Services, local mental health agencies, and high school guidance counselors to provide the information to students not committed to beginning college following their high school graduation. We added the information to our in-service notes so that our faculty and staff will be aware of the program and the opportunity it provides to students. We also plan to add the information to the graduation program to reach the individuals supporting their family and friends as they graduate.
The faculty member added that there was reason to believe these efforts would result in a more fruitful recruitment of students for the next QuickStart cohorts which will be offered in the spring of 2016.

**Perceptions of the QuickStart Program**

To understand the shared experiences of students and faculty in the QuickStart program, the researcher gathered data from student surveys and conducted interviews with three faculty, one administrator, and seven students. The student participants had a range of backgrounds, struggles, and all offered unique perspectives about their experiences in the QuickStart program. This data was gathered in an effort to answer the central research question of this study:

> How do students and faculty perceive that participation in a QuickStart program at a community college in the Southeastern United States has influenced students’ decisions to enroll and their ability to succeed at the college?

It is important to determine if students truly believe that they are more likely to succeed in college after their completion of the program and whether or not this belief leads them to enroll at MECC at a high rate. All twelve students who have completed QuickStart in 2015 also completed an end-of-class survey so that all of their voices are represented in this study. Seven also responded to email recruitments and agreed to participate in the interview process. Of the seven student participants, four were female. Three were male. Three were traditional students who had just graduated high school within six months of entering the QuickStart program. The other four had been away from school for an average of twenty years. All seven were white—indicative of the student population and lack of diversity on MECC’s campus. Five identified as living below the poverty level while the other two students would be classified as middle-class. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. After all faculty,
administrator, and student interviews were completed, the researcher then coded all transcripts, looking for common themes that emerged. Table 4 illustrates the seven major themes uncovered during the interview process.

Table 4  
*Themes from interviews*

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<th>Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>The “Big Scary Monster”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Great Expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Age Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidance “Through the Fire”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Needed Changes</td>
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**The “Big Scary Monster.”** Before exploring whether students felt more prepared to enter college after completing QuickStart, it is important to analyze what factors previously prevented them from enrolling. One of the more common descriptors students used to describe their feelings towards college prior to enrolling in QuickStart was some variation of the word “monster.” Lark is a nineteen-year-old student who recently graduated from high school. Although she had always wanted to attend college, she chose not to apply to any college or universities before or immediately after her high school graduation. The simple reason for this delay was fear: “I was terrified. I felt this mansion of emotions, mostly that I wouldn’t be ready for college or adulthood.” Soon after graduation, Lark attended a career fair at MECC with absolutely no idea what she wanted to do with her life. While walking around looking at potential future employers, Lark met a career counselor at MECC: “She’s the reason I’m here now. Because of her, I tried QuickStart and because of QuickStart I decided to enroll in college this semester.” When she arrived at QuickStart on the first day, she began to feel more at ease:
It helped me get comfortable. It wasn’t so scary because it eased you into college, how to study, and all that. College wasn’t some big scary monster after all. I looked around and said…you know…I think I can do this!

With her fears subsiding, Lark was able to complete the QuickStart program and enroll at MECC as a full-time student the following semester.

Another student, Matt, echoed Lark’s sentiments: “Everyone I knew always thought college was this big scary place. How was I to know different?” Matt had been away from school for more than a decade. After his high school graduation, he and his friends decided to find work wherever they could find it. Matt noted:

College was supposed to be a place where only book nerds and people wanting to be doctors went. All my friends went to work right after high school. It was part-time work at first, but after a while I worked my way into a pretty decent career working with my hands. Things were pretty good. Then a few of my buddies started getting laid off. Recession, they said. But all I knew was good people were losing work.

That is when Matt saw the advertisement in the newspaper about QuickStart and decided to give it a try. Matt stated:

I had been thinking about trying college for a while. But it’s hard when you’re working full-time. Plus, you’re kind of worried you won’t be able to do it and you’ll just be wasting time. But when I saw that ad, I figured it was worth a shot. I felt at ease the entire time in the program right from the first day. I had it all blown up in my head like college was some kind of monster that would chew me up and spit me out. But QuickStart made me realize I could tame the beast.
Matt completed the program and said he intends to enroll at least part-time at MECC, hopefully, in the upcoming year. His work schedule continues to make the idea of coming to school full-time seem overwhelming. “But at least now,” he added, “I feel like I’d have a good shot at getting that degree once I got started. The idea of college, by itself, is no longer scary.”

Chris is a recent graduate from high school. He also shared the viewpoint of college as the big scary monster:

To be honest, I didn’t want anything to do with college. It was like a scary creature from those movies, you know, the ones where the villagers know the creature is lurking out there but just try to hide and avoid it so they can go on with their lives. That was me. I was pretty convinced I wanted to hide from and avoid college for the rest of my life.

Then one day Chris, like Lark, decided to attend a career fair on MECC’s campus. He was hoping it would provide him with some guidance or direction in his life. Instead of finding a job, he met one of MECC’s career counselors who told him about QuickStart:

She told me it was a no-lose situation. I could try it out, pay nothing, and drop out anytime I wanted. I figured it had to be better than working minimum wage for the rest of my life. Best decision ever.

Chris enrolled at MECC the following semester. Although personal issues resulted in him having to withdraw from his classes, Chris is confident he’ll be back to school soon.

Faculty pointed out how programs like QuickStart can make college seem less scary. One faculty member stated that many of his students in other classes are afraid to talk in class because they think professors will yell at them if they get the wrong answer. “It’s like they are afraid of me at first,” he said. “At least QuickStart lets them see faculty aren’t to be feared and
really care about their success.” Another faculty member stated that because students get to experience multiple teachers in this format and interact with each other in a more casual environment, they are more likely to grow comfortable in the classroom: “[QuickStart] provides a variety of teaching styles they would encounter during their college experience and lets students support each other as they begin their educational journey.” Faculty also communicated that because students know they can try QuickStart for free and have no obligations to actually enroll in college coursework, they are able to enter the QuickStart classroom with less stress and more of an open mind about what they will be asked to do. As they see that faculty care about their success and are willing to help them, and that other students are facing the same struggles and worries, these students begin to see that college is not some “big scary monster” and instead a college degree can actually be attainable.

Meeting great expectations. A second common theme that emerged during data collection was the idea that colleges had certain expectations for students but students were not quite sure what those expectations actually were. This type of fear is not of college as a big scary monster. Instead, it is simply a fear of the unknown. One faculty member stated:

Some of the biggest fears I have discussed with the students have been the fear of the unknown, not knowing what to expect from college, how to meet the requirements of college student, and even completing basic paperwork to begin the process.

Ginger’s interview strongly demonstrated this theme. She is a mother of three who has been out of school for over twenty years. She has never enrolled in college and, instead, found success running her own business. But when she saw the advertisement in the local newspaper about QuickStart, she decided she needed to start thinking more about her future. She also realized she
wanted to continue to become an even stronger role model for her children. The only issue was that she was concerned about attempting college at this point in her life. As she related:

> I just didn’t know what to expect. My youngest child was about to graduate high school and I realized I wanted to model that college was important. But I was a bit nervous coming into the program just because I didn’t know what to expect from college at all.

The words “what to expect” came up several times throughout the course of Ginger’s interview. It was clear that discovering the expectations of college professors and administrators was a primary concern for her. She stressed that QuickStart helped her get a feel for the campus, college professors, assignments, and other basic processes like how to study and how to think like a college student. This helped her to realize what was expected of her as a college student and to see that she had the ability to meet those expectations. She stated: “It got easier as the class went on. I liked the different teachers and we got to spend time with each subject. I felt like I knew what to expect by the end and that helped a lot.” As one QuickStart faculty member pointed out, this was one of the primary goals when the program was first dreamed up:

> The idea behind the program was always to create a free pre-enrollment course that would provide under-prepared and nontraditional students with an opportunity to prepare for the Virginia Placement Test, gain study skills, review basic computer skills, literacy skills, explore career options, and become familiar with the expectations associated with college-level work.

These are all important functions of the program, but the last part of that statement is critical to encouraging this student population to attend college. QuickStart faculty indicate that a lot of
first-time college students may know where they stand when it comes to their math, reading, or writing skills, but other college expectations remain a mystery.

Sam’s interview reflected this principle, as he often expressed a desire to learn what would be expected of him as a college student. He is a recent high school graduate who says he was successful with high school academics. However, that did not help ease the stress about signing up for college coursework. He explained:

I did pretty well in high school. I knew what to do. Around graduation, though, everyone thinks they can give you advice about college. But it just seemed like everyone was saying something different. Some counselors and teachers in high school would say college professors were going to be these heartless devils who would kick you out of class just for being a few minutes late. They were, like, super strict and made you do every assignment or you’d get kicked out. Other people said professors didn’t care if you came to class or not. Either you learned or you didn’t and it was up to you. They got paid either way. This is all ridiculously confusing. I know that every professor is probably different, but it’s scary, man. You don’t know what to expect or who to believe.

QuickStart helped to show Sam that college professors were not always heartless robots just waiting to kick you out of class; nor were they the nonchalant, uninterested lecture machines just trying to earn a paycheck. When asked how his perceptions changed after joining the QuickStart program, Sam stated:

Yeah, it was all different. I liked how all of the professors in QuickStart were super nice and all seemed to really care about my learning. But it was also good how they held us accountable and made sure we turned in work and showed up to class. I knew I could
talk to them if I had a problem but I also knew I had to put in effort to do the work. It was good to see their expectations up front and to see what I had to do to be successful.

Sam credits QuickStart for giving him the push he needed to get enrolled in college classes and pursue his degree. He enrolled in courses the following semester and has successfully passed all his classes with high grades. “I’m not sure I’d be here without QuickStart,” he added. “With the way the economy is going, I probably would have just settled to work in fast food the rest of my life or something. Now I see I can have a career—a good one.”

Cindy is a nontraditional student who, like Ginger, has been away from school for over twenty years. But unlike Ginger, Cindy attempted college immediately after graduation from high school in the early 1990s. “I actually came to MECC,” she noted. “But I had no clue what I was doing. I was young and stupid, then. I had some personal issues come up and ended up dropping out. I got a full-time job and never made it back until now.” It is interesting to note that “young and stupid” is precisely how Ginger also described herself after she made the decision to forgo college after her high school graduation. Both Cindy and Ginger have found success in the workforce and have been able to provide for their families. But both also realize the important role college needs to play in their futures. “You can’t get anywhere without a degree these days,” Ginger observed. “I need to be looking ahead.” Cindy voiced similar thoughts:

I read a book when I was in high school called *Great Expectations* and I loved it. Our teacher back then, what feels like forever ago, said something about how the title represented the main character’s big plans for his future and how they kept changing over time. That has always stuck with me. I think it describes my life. I always have these big plans, but I never really know how I’m going to accomplish them. Then one day I
realized college was the place I needed to start. The problem was that I knew they’d have certain expectations about what I should already know and what skills I should already have at this point in my life. I wasn’t sure if I could meet those expectations.  
The anxiety and fear both Ginger and Cindy describe seems to be a common one for nontraditional students. They worry that they have forgotten all the important information necessary for college level success. They believe colleges will therefore have unreasonable expectations for them starting out and will require work to be completed that is far too advanced. That is likely why the words “it helped refresh my memory” on a certain subject came up several times during student surveys. By helping students to see that the college’s expectations are not so scary and by providing basic skills and information refreshers, students are able to enter college with more confidence that they can be successful. These fears of expectations also aligned with a third theme that arose during interviews: the concept of age.

**The age factor.** Several students discussed their age and how it impacted their choice to enroll in college. Ginger mentioned this issue early in her interview: “At my age, I was afraid of being out of place. Most of the time when you think of college, you think of young people right out of high school. I thought QuickStart would be a good place for me to start and get the hang of it all.” However, when she came to the first day of classes, she was caught off guard a bit by her classmates. She recounted, “I was surprised to see the age of the other students. I expected them to be older, like me. But several were right out of high school.” Ginger was quick to point out that this surprise was not a bad thing. Rather, she just expected that, since QuickStart was a program designed for people unsure about attending college, it would attract mostly older students who needed to regain lost knowledge before starting college coursework.
QuickStart was originally created with nontraditional students in mind—in other words, it was a program seeking to recruit and assist individuals in the community who had been out of school for a long time and had never earned a college degree. However, as QuickStart launched, a mixture of nontraditional and traditional students (those right out of high school) enrolled in the program. One faculty member noted that there is a difference in how students of different age groups struggle with college:

For nontraditional students returning to college as an “older student” and being able to juggle the obligations of work, home, school with life to maintain a healthy balance has been a concern. For traditional students, not knowing what they want to major in, or having the discipline needed for college as it is different than high school are concerns. Nontraditional students also worry that they may be too far behind to do well in college or may have forgotten important skills needed for entry level coursework. Traditional students in this student population are often trying to decide if college is a good fit or if they should, instead, be looking for employment.

As one of the younger students in class, Chris addressed this issue during his interview. He stated he was “trying to figure all this stuff out” and wanted to see “if college was right” for him. When he arrived on the first day of the program, he was happy to see his classmates:

It was good to see I wasn’t the only person just out of high school there. Don’t get me wrong, it was also nice having the older people in class. It helped really give a lot of different voices and experiences to the room.

Chris added that a lot of his high school classmates also did not go straight to college. Some are currently working as waiters or bartenders in the area. Several students noted this pressure to get
a job after high school. “It’s just what you did,” Matt stated. “You graduated and you found a job to make money.” Cindy added that it was a matter of “how you survive in the world and, in my day, people weren’t so adamant that college was a big deal. Until you had a job, you weren’t successful. So most of us got jobs quickly after high school.”

When asked why he decided to enroll in QuickStart, Chris noted that he needed just as much of a refresher course as those who had been away from school for some time:

For me, I don’t think I took high school as seriously as I should have. No one really talks about it, but there is kind of this unwritten law that we all know teachers have to follow. They have to pass us. It was pretty rare to hear about someone failing or getting held back. Even the meanest, worst students kept passing right on along. So after a while I think you just stop trying your hardest unless you’re just naturally motivated or something. I know everyone thinks, like, it’s only old people who need to be reminded, but I literally just graduated and it was very helpful to me, too.”

Chris concluded that everyone, regardless of age, could use a refresher before the rigor of college classes begin. Otherwise, “by the time you realize you forgot everything and need to go back and learn the basics, you’re in too deep and you’re failing.”

Alexis is another nontraditional student who joined the QuickStart program. She expressed that she has been out of school for 20 years and, like Cindy, did attempt college immediately after graduating high school. “I came to MECC right after graduation,” Alexis said. “I just came because my parents wanted me to go. But I had absolutely no desire to be there. That’s my own doing. My own fault. I just quit. I didn’t want to be there at all.” With time, however, she has developed a new appreciation for education: “As I got older, then I’ve seen
how important education really is.” That is why she decided she needed to return to college, but like many of her fellow classmates, she had nagging fears about joining the program. She first worried that she would start the program and be unable to finish because of health or transportation issues. She also feared that her age would cause her to be too far behind everyone else at the college. “I think older people feel that way a lot,” she added, “like they are too far behind now to do well.” Her biggest concern dealt directly with this concept of being underprepared, as she was afraid her lack of computer skills would prevent her from being successful in the modern age of education. She explained:

I call myself computer illiterate. I hate that because I want to learn but I’ve never had anyone to take the time to show me. So where I volunteer at, I had mentioned I wish they had a computer class for idiots or whatever. The next day I saw it in the paper for QuickStart and it mentioned computer basics. I thought: how ironic! So that’s when I pursued calling about it and signing up for it.

This touches upon another important age-barrier issue. Many older students come to college and are quickly asked to use Blackboard, check email, and submit assignments online. But many of these individuals, especially in MECC’s rural service area, do not have access to computers and have no experience with them. Ginger also brought up this point:

Computers weren’t even used in my day back in high school. So I’ve had to teach myself just about everything with computers so I can run my business. But that’s different than what goes into college. You’ve got to know how to write essays and use the computer for those types of activities.
Matt agreed: “I graduated in the 90s. That doesn’t seem like all that long ago, but it was a different world back then.” Their fears of being left behind the younger students were unnecessary, as it turns out.

The first days within the QuickStart program served to calm the fears of the older students. Matt detailed his reaction to his first computer interactions:

I was actually surprised that the younger students in the class seemed to be having the same problems as I did when it came to technology. I guess I thought they’d be like, you know, miles ahead of me and would give me a weird look every time the teacher had to come help me with simple stuff. But as soon as he helped me, he had to go help them, too. None of us really knew what to do until he explained it.

Cindy, too, remarked on how interesting it was to see that everyone in the class needed to learn the basics, not just the older students. When asked why she thought this turned out to be the case, she expounded:

Well, I hate to say it, but people just don’t have much around here. A lot of my neighbors don’t even have computers. I’ve got family who have barely even touched a computer. So even if kids get on Facebook on their smartphone or whatever, it’s not the same if they don’t have a computer in the house. It wouldn’t surprise me if most of the students here at the college came in not really knowing what to do when a teacher said to use Word or use Blackboard.

Alexis noted that seeing that her fellow classmates were struggling with the same issues in class helped her tremendously: “The fear just eased off. I felt comfortable.” In this way, both traditional and non-traditional students were relieved to see the struggles and the successes of
their classmates. Age can without question impact how students view themselves as they enter college, but these interview responses seem to suggest that programs like QuickStart have the potential to greatly help alleviate many of those fears before actual college coursework begins.

**Money.** As with most things in life, money seemed to be a primary concern of students in regard to both the QuickStart program and college in general. QuickStart is offered free of charge to the student. Upon completion, he or she is given three transferable credits (credited as SDV 108) to apply to a degree at MECC. The MECC administrator in charge of the QuickStart program stated that “offering the class for free was important to try to reach those who may be interested because any cost would be a deterrent.” Faculty agreed with this statement with one stating that “the primary objective was to introduce new students to college courses while eliminating all financial costs associated with their studies.”

Indeed, for several students, the fact that the program was offered free of charge was a major motivating factor for giving the course a try. Sam stated that he “probably wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t free” because “it let me check things out without worrying about spending my money.” Matt concurred, stating, “I wanted to give college a try but I didn’t want to have to pay for something I wasn’t sure I would enjoy.” Lark commented not only was the free program a great benefit, but it also helped that students were given “a bunch of free stuff” like pens, flash drives, college prep guides, and other helpful resources. Sam added that QuickStart faculty also went beyond providing free college instruction:

It helped that they showed us how to sign up for classes and how to apply for financial aid. Before that, I had no idea that I could get money to go to school. So that really was a big help. I couldn’t afford to pay for a single credit, let alone a full course load.
Other students, particularly older students who were more established in the workforce, seemed to be less concerned with the cost of the program. Ginger stated, “Money really wasn’t an issue because I could have afforded to pay for the class. I run my own business and have a career, so that really wasn’t a concern.” However, she also added that, although she could pay for college credits out of pocket, she was also careful about how she spent her hard earned money. Thus, having a free QuickStart to college was “enticing” and helped make the decision to enroll much easier. Cindy agreed with that, saying, “I’m sure I could have paid for class. But I would have needed to stop and think about it for a while. I don’t just throw away money. The fact that it was free made it a win-win situation. It was a no-brainer.” Matt shared similar thoughts:

I mean, yeah, I could have paid for classes. I still have a good job. I’m just here trying to better myself. It’s just that I probably never would have just agreed to shell out the cash for a college class until I knew for sure college was for me and that I could handle it all.

It was good to get this experience in a risk-free environment.

It seems most students, regardless of age or income, were at least encouraged to join the program because of the free program credits. For this reason, it appears the administrator was correct when she pushed to provide 3 credits of college experience to students while making QuickStart completely free for all participants.

Finally, several students also mentioned that they benefited by being able to see the long-term financial benefits of getting a college degree. Matt stated, “The truth is that I’m trying to decide if it’s better to just go get a job or spend two to four years getting a college degree. It’s good to see the value now.” This decision was fresh on the minds of many other students in the program as well. Cindy added, “I liked getting to sit down and look at careers so we could see how much potential income we could be making after college. Especially for those of us who
already are holding down jobs, it helps us make decisions.” Specifically, students were trying to decide if they should spend time attending classes instead of using that spare time to earn more money in part-time or full-time work. But when these students were able to see that the long-term benefits of a college degree include earning much higher salaries and greater lifetime earnings, they began to see the time investment as worthwhile. “Seeing those dollar signs means college actually does pay off,” Sam noted. “I give up some possible money right now but, hey, I just got to keep my eye on the prize and realize my job with a degree is going to make up for it all in the end.”

**Guidance “Through the Fire.”** In terms of feeling more prepared for college, several students expressed the importance of having someone to provide them with guidance through the process of becoming a college student. Cindy noted that she doubts she would have made it through it all without QuickStart:

> It’s a bit overwhelming. There are so many forms to fill out and so many different offices to visit to take everything. It helps to have people guiding you through all the fire. I would have gotten lost and burned so many times! So I’m very thankful to QuickStart for helping me and being so patient with all my questions.

Faculty likewise expressed their desire to provide guidance. One faculty mentioned that “our goal has to be to help these students realize they can succeed in college. To do that, we have to take it step by step and give them encouragement along the way.”

Sam had several friends who enrolled at MECC. He mentioned five by name and stated that three of them had since dropped out of college. One was doing “fine” and the other was still struggling. He shared:
They said you just go into the whole thing blind. You have no idea what you’re doing.

[Name redacted] told me that his teachers all expected him to check email and get assignments from Blackboard. But he had never heard of Blackboard and even though he had a personal email account, the one the school wanted you to use was way different. He didn’t really know where to go to find that stuff. They have that [student orientation] class thing here that helps some. But I think that, like, only takes place over three days or something. It’s hard to get used to everything in that time before classes start. I think the way we did it, over six weeks, was so much better.

Alexis agreed with this: “I felt like everyone guided me through the process really well. I was able to get through it and take the VPT and place into ENG 111.” Guiding students to the college, showing them how to navigate around campus, complete forms and applications, and take the placement tests is extremely helpful to QuickStart students. Most other students arrive on campus are forced to suddenly rely upon themselves after years of parental guidance and hand holding at the high school level. When all that is taken away, they struggle and suddenly become overwhelmed. QuickStart serves as a bridge between high school to college or from the real-world back into college that assists students with getting over their fears and getting back to just learning again.

Lark expressed that it was also important for her to have quality, engaging faculty to help guide her through important course material. She stated, “It seems they got the best teachers at MECC in each subject. I enjoyed each section and each teacher increased my interest and made it stimulating. They were all a big help to me.” Cindy, who recently completed her first full semester of college coursework, agreed:
They take their time with you. I can now say from experience that those first college classes are like a trial by fire. You are just thrown into the middle of things and you have to figure out what you are doing fairly quickly. Having gone through QuickStart really made the difference for me. I knew exactly what to do from day one and I could really hit the ground running while some of my classmates were still struggling to make sense of things.

Knowing that faculty and staff at MECC were there to support them, students were able to grow a confidence about their abilities and their chances of success.

Confidence. The issue of student confidence came up often during data collection and directly ties into this study’s central research question. One faculty member summarized this nicely, stating: “The greatest benefit to students when they take the QuickStart course is to increase their confidence and encourage them to start a better future.” QuickStart seeks to increase student confidence in two areas: 1) in helping students feel more ready to take the Virginia Placement Test, and 2) in helping students feel more prepared for college level work. The first area of these two areas became a priority in response to research by the Virginia Communtiy College System which revealed that students statewide are entering college unprepared to take the placement tests (February 2011). Therefore, an extraordinary number of these students are placing into developmental education courses to start their college career. As a direct result of these findings, one primary objective for the QuickStart program was to provide instruction and practice materials that would assist students with preparing to take the VPT. One of the first measures to test the success of that objective is student responses on the end-of-course survey. One question asked students whether they felt their participation in QuickStart made them feel more prepared to take the VPT. Table 5 illustrates a largely affirmative response:
All but two of the 12 student participants stated that they did feel more prepared to take the VPT after completing the QuickStart program than before they began. Unfortunately, there is no way to tell from the survey why ten students felt more prepared while two others did not. That is one possible necessary addition to the survey. It would be useful to have students provide a short answer as to why they do or do not feel more prepared for testing.

Student interviews were wholly positive when they were asked this same question. All seven participants stated they felt the program prepared them for the VPT. The success numbers seem to reflect this as well. Out of the 12 students who completed QuickStart, eight elected to take the VPT (five of these were interview participants). All eight of these students were able to test out of one or more developmental math courses and they all tested straight into freshman composition (ENG 111). One student actually took the VPT twice. The first time, he took the test prior to QuickStart and tested below the floor, resulting in a “Needs Adult Basic Ed” score which would have blocked the student from enrolling in college coursework. After he completed the program, he retook the test and scored straight into ENG 111 and was able to enroll in
coursework at MECC. That amazing turnaround is likely due to the confidence boost he received, the resources provided to him, and the work he was able to complete during QuickStart. One faculty member mentioned the test scores specifically:

I was happy to see the placement score results. On day one I heard from students how nervous they were and how they felt they weren’t ‘good test takers.’ So to hear from students during class that they are starting to get more confident and to see the positive results, to me, seems to prove something we are doing is working.

The administrator concurred, stating, “It’s amazing what this program could do if we could reach all those who didn’t test well or were afraid to test at all! I suspect that many of those who apply and don't follow through to enrollment are dissuaded by the test.” The five interviewed students who took the VPT and placed into ENG 111 gave credit to QuickStart for their success on the test. One student stated that it helped greatly to see what was actually on the test and what to expect. Another noted she had always been a “poor test taker” and would have never thought to review practice materials prior to taking the placement test if not for her participation in QuickStart. It is important to note that the MECC Testing Center does provide VPT practice resources to students and materials are posted on the MECC website. However, survey and interview responses with these students, when combined with the VCCS’s own data about poor student test scores statewide, suggest that a large population of first-time college students are missing these resources. Therefore, the best way to ensure new students score well on the VPT and avoid spending time in developmental coursework is to require VPT practice work as part of a pre-entry program like QuickStart.

The second area in which QuickStart seeks to increase student confidence is in their perception of their abilities to be successful in college level coursework. The first test of this can
be found in the survey results. One survey question asked whether the student felt his/her completion of the QuickStart program made the student feel more prepared for college level work. Table 6 portrays the overwhelmingly positive response.

Table 6
*Student responses to whether they feel more prepared for college work*

![Bar Chart Showing 12 Yes Responses](image)

All twelve students responded that the program was beneficial in preparing them to enroll in college classes. This was arguably the most important question on the survey for determining how students truly felt about the program, and it was obvious that students found some value in their participation in QuickStart. Another question on the survey allowed students to anonymously offer any additional comments about the program or post any final notes to their instructors. Because this question was optional, not all students chose to complete it. Table 7 contains all responses given for that question:

Table 7
*Students’ additional comments*
I would like to thank everyone involved in making this program available to someone like myself who has been out of school for 27 years and had often thought about going to college but was unsure where to start or felt I was maybe too old to begin. I felt that all the instructors made it seem as though age was not a factor and a college degree was attainable. Thanks again.

Thank you!

I really enjoyed the program. I would highly recommend it.

It was a good course. 10/10. Would do it again!

All of the teachers were very helpful and it was a great experience. I was scared before I came because it had been so long since I had been in school. This really helped and everyone made me feel welcome. I have friends who came here and were lost the first semester. If they had taken this course like me, they would have had an easier time. I think everyone should have to take this class before starting college.

The biggest takeaway of this question is that students seem genuinely appreciative of the program’s impact upon their lives. One student stated that he/she felt nervous about college because of his/her age, but QuickStart made the student realize that it was not too late to obtain a degree. Another student also stated he/she was “scared” prior to enrolling in the course, but now felt comfortable and recommended that all students should take the program prior to beginning college coursework. These responses are indicative of an increased confidence level in these students as they now seem to believe a college degree is now a possibility.

All seven students mentioned their confidence levels during the interview process as well. Matt spoke about his change in mindset from the start of the program to the end: “I was pretty sure I’d end up flunking out if I tried to come to college. I had just been out of school way too long. But the whole QuickStart thing made me think differently.” Alexis added:

I was nervous at first starting something new. But as I got into the class and got to know the professors and other people in the class everyone was really nice. Previously, when I
had attempted to go before QuickStart, I felt I didn’t know what to do. But after QuickStart, I felt more ready. I wasn’t so far behind, I guess.

Cindy described her previous failures and how those related to her mindset prior to entering QuickStart:

When you try something like college and fail as I did, you’re not exactly thrilled about the idea of trying again. Your confidence gets rattled. It’s like…what if I fail again? I’ll be a two time dropout and I totally couldn’t handle that. I’d go crazy. But QuickStart gave me a chance to give college a shot again without risking the whole dropping out thing. I could just try it, see how I did, and then decide what to do. I kind of got cocky after the program like: This stuff isn’t so bad. I can do this! So now I’m proud to say I’m back in college and doing well because of the program.

Alexis seemed to echo Cindy’s sentiments. She concluded her interview by stating she hoped the QuickStart program would continue to grow and offered advice for students who might be considering the program in the future:

Especially if you have been out of school for a while, it’s like refreshment because you kind of don’t remember most of the stuff. But then you get brushed up on it and you don’t feel so far behind anymore. You’re much more confident to pursue college.

Lark likewise had advice to share with students considering QuickStart: “Try it. No harm. It’s free. They help guide you. See if you like it. See if college is the right fit for you.” Ginger agreed: “It is worth the time. You get information you need and get to decide your feelings about whether college is right for you.” Sam added that “QuickStart is the best decision anyone can ever make. You really feel more ready for college. I think every student should have to take
it before starting other classes.” In this way, it seems to be that students feel they are more prepared for college level work once they complete the QuickStart program.

**Needed changes.** Finally, it is important to ask students where the program can make improvements in the future. The first measure for this can be found from survey data. The final question of the end-of-course survey asked students to write a short answer response for their suggestions to improve QuickStart. Table 8 details their responses:

Table 8

*Student suggestions for improvement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-To most improve this class is to have longer classes of Math and English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Make it longer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Math was still a bit frustrating, although I understand why Vadim didn't try and teach us math and only gave us the resources to teach ourselves with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Maybe two more weeks? One more in math and one in English. But it is hard to improve a great course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Change nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-No, actually this class is a great class. All the teachers were nice and they took their time with all the questions we had and it felt like they actually wanted us to succeed in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-More time with the English guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-A little more time on each subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Really nothing. I can’t find any issues with the program. It was really well planned out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The only way I would feel this program would be improved is that, maybe longer class period. It was kind of difficult to cover the most material in that short of time, but we did it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-I wasn't sure what to expect from this course but I feel I have received very valuable information from all the instructors. The only thing I feel that would improve the course is the make the amount of time longer or the number of days more. I really enjoyed the learning I received and would have liked to have a little longer with each subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Nothing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses above are indicative of the short six week time frame. Each student who made a suggestion for improvement (other than saying no change was needed) requested that the
program be made longer and certain subjects, like math and English, have more class time. This is interesting because faculty had expressed a fear that having a program that was too long might discourage some students from participating. Six weeks was thought to be a perfect compromise between having just enough time for students to experience college and gain some knowledge while also being short enough as not to exclude many students from participating. It is a positive that students seem to enjoy the program and wish to remain in it longer rather than wishing it would end sooner.

Student interviews also included this suggestion. Lark recommend lengthening the total time of the program: “It might help to add at least a full week to the program so we can spend more time on certain subjects.” Specifically, she mentioned the math and English portions needing to be longer so that more material could be covered at a slower pace. Sam, Alexis, Ginger, and Matt also mentioned this possible change and this seems to be well supported by several survey responses as well. Ginger and Alexis suggested expanding the course schedule to also include sitting in on real class lectures from other MECC faculty and seeking a few professors from the career areas to come and speak to the class about their programs. Matt stated, “Really, I just enjoyed the classes and would have liked it if they went longer. I think if you can get students into the class to see what it is like, they won’t mind if the class is extended by one or two weeks.” Getting the students into the class is precisely the problem, however. As mentioned previously, QuickStart developers debated the overall length of the program during the creation phase. One faculty member remarked that he worried extending the class more weeks would discourage students from attending because they would get hung up on the total number of weeks. The faculty member explained:
We didn’t want it to be too long, but also we knew what we needed to fit into the program. I know we can’t cover a full semester in just six weeks, but we thought we could draw in more students and provide them with the most important basic knowledge before they took the placement test and enrolled in classes.

The idea here is that by offering a short six week schedule, more students are likely to believe it is possible to finish the program without a long-term commitment. However, since students continue to request more class time on the end-of-course surveys, it seems this is an issue that should at least be put in consideration for strengthening the program. It could be worthwhile to experiment by offering longer sessions to see if this actually discouraged students from attending. If not, and students seemed to be engaged the entire time, it could prove to be an effective program modification.

Another suggestion for change dealt with the number of students enrolled in each class. Whereas some students like Lark had mentioned that the small class size was effective in making the program seem less intimidating, Ginger stated that there needed to be more students enrolled in each program offering before the coursework should begin. She explained:

In a lot of college classes you might have 20, 30, or more students in a room. It would help not only to make it feel more like a typical college class but it would also be good for discussions. It helps to get more opinions and helps with group projects. I know that because of the smaller class size, [the teachers] were able to walk around the room and help each one of us individually when we had questions, but is that what a typical class will be like in college?
Indeed, obtaining larger classes for each QuickStart offering has been discussed many times by administrators and faculty. It is one of the primary challenges they face with recruiting students in the local area. This very issue was actually mentioned by one of the QuickStart faculty members during interviews. The faculty member stated, “We are working to get the enrollment numbers up. We’d like to have more than ten, at least, in every session to help with class activities. It’s just that as a new program, we are working hard still to get the word out to the community that these courses are available for free to them.” The MECC administrator agreed with this sentiment and the need for increased communication about the program, acknowledging that “we certainly need to increase the awareness of the program on-campus, as well as in the communities we serve.” Another faculty member stated that part of the issue was not only getting the word out to the communities, but also convincing students who had previously not considered college to give the QuickStart program a try:

It’s hard in our area. But I think it’s hard everywhere. When you are trying to do what we are trying to do here—that is, reach students who otherwise never would step foot on our campuses and sell them that our program is worth the time commitment—it’s going to take some time to find the way to best accomplish that feat. But if nothing else, I think word of mouth will eventually win out here. Successful students will tell their friends and family who will tell other friends and family. QuickStart students will graduate college and word will keep spreading.

Getting the word out in the most effective means is understandably a major concern and something that QuickStart administrators and faculty will continue to study and further develop if the program continues into 2016 and beyond. But everyone involved in the program seems
highly confident that the program is on a successful trajectory to see increases in the years to come.

Another potential change for the program centers on the current testing procedures. As Ginger stated:

That’s the thing. I know they mentioned we could come in and take the test after the program was over. But I needed to find the time to come. When I knew I had to come every week for class, I was able to set that time aside. But after it was over, it wasn’t a priority. I just felt like we were left on our own and that’s how students get lost again. I think students need to be forced to take the placement tests as part of the program and then, maybe, someone can help them set up their class schedules right after the tests are over.

Currently, QuickStart ends after six weeks. But there is an optional week scheduled in for students to come during the same time and days as the classes met. The idea behind this concept is that students can still show up to take the test, and can immediately meet with an advisor about signing up for appropriate classes. Because the students would already be accustomed to meeting during classes, they would be able to show up at the same times and simply complete the VPT rather than sit in on a class. However, Ginger’s contention is that students are easily ignoring this option because it is not required to actually complete the program. Therefore, if students know they do not have to show up, they are likely to get busy with work, family, and social events and forget to make time for testing and schedule making. She is not the only student to have this theory.
Of the seven students who agreed to participate in interviews, only Ginger and Matt never took the placement test and never enrolled at MECC. Because Matt’s interview occurred after Ginger’s, he was asked whether adding a week of required testing and schedule making would have made it more likely he would have signed up for classes. His answer was insightful:

I think it would have [made a difference]. Actually, now that I think about it, it would probably be good to have one final week of classes where we meet with the career coach lady again and make sure we got any and all paperwork done right then and there. We take care of our application, all our financial aid, get it all turned in, maybe have some people from those offices up there. We went over some of that in her part of class early on, but I don’t know if everyone turned something in or not. Plus, it would be better to do that at the end of class, after we have experienced everything and have a better idea if we want to attend here or not, instead of at the very beginning. We could, like, spend another day of class that last week taking those placement tests and making schedules. I think that’s the best way to make sure everyone shows back up. Once you have a class schedule, it becomes real. Plus it doesn’t leave us to have to do anything on our own later.

Ginger and Matt bring up several good points. It could be effective to require students to come to the college in order to complete testing before they can receive credit for completing the QuickStart program. Conversely, there could be a concern here that such required practices would coerce students into signing up for classes against their will. However, students could easily submit the application for enrollment and take the placement tests as Matt suggested. When it came time to set up a schedule, students would then have the option to immediately create a class schedule after the VPT is complete or, if they are still uncertain about attending
college, they could choose to return another day and meet with an advisor at that time. At the very least, they would have an active application and have math and English placement scores on file, thereby making the class schedule creation process much easier.

**Other Strengths**

The data gathered in this study demonstrates that both faculty members and the students believe that the QuickStart program helps students to feel more prepared for college level work. This ultimately leads to a high percentage of student participants choosing to enroll at MECC. Students learned they could overcome issues of age, poverty, lack of preparation, and even fear when it came to earning a college degree. They also took something positive from each of the four sections of QuickStart. On the survey, there were questions that asked students to name their favorite parts of each section. Table 9 lists student responses to the first section of class--the orientation and career sessions:

Table 9

*Student’s favorite part of the Orientation/Career coursework.*
Without question, the biggest takeaway for students in this section was the campus tour organized at the start of the course. Many students arrive on campus without a true sense of direction. They walk into unfamiliar buildings and just ask for directions. That is why at the beginning of QuickStart, students are taken on a detailed, guided walking tour of campus. They see where classes are held, where important offices are located such as Student Services, Enrollment, Financial Aid, the Testing Center, and the MECC Bookstore. One half of the QuickStart students mentioned the tour as the most useful part of the course, with some reporting having less stress and anxiety worrying about how to find important points on campus. This obviously made students feel more comfortable and thus more likely to enroll at MECC.

Table 10 contains a list of student responses to the survey question about their favorite part of that section of QuickStart:
Table 10

*Students’ favorite part of the computer technology coursework.*

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- All the tools in Microsoft word was a useful skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Learning about Google Drive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Basically learning all the formats and short cuts involving the keyboard was very beneficial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How to create a compressed folder, use snipping tool and several shortcuts on the computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- I feel that the most useful computer skills program was the English and math.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Learning to use different apps on the computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pretty much everything I learned a lot of new ways to use a computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It refreshed my memory in computers. I can’t wait to have his class in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How to use Blackboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Email, Blackboard, looking at two screens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The whole class pretty much. The email portion of the class was very useful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The snipping tool and knowledge of email and just the overall technology had me at a loss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So everything with the computer was helpful. I can see most students getting lost without this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>type of basic introduction to this stuff. Everyone should have to take it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comment by one student that most students are “getting lost” is important for this section of the course. At the community college level, many students are non-traditional and have difficulty adjusting to computer programs and applications required for classes. Even something as simple as checking one’s email can be difficult for some students who may not have much experience with email prior to enrolling in classes. Likewise, some students enroll in online classes at MECC without any experience using Blackboard. This often leads to confusion as students struggle to not only learn the course material but also figure out how to navigate the Blackboard site, locate assignments, and figure out how to submit documents to the professor. Survey responses indicate that students were appreciative that they were learning these basics now before they enrolled in college classes. There were also functional tools demonstrated such as the snipping tool, compressed folders, and viewing two windows on the same screen.
Students referenced these tools by name in the survey with one student even noting he/she was eager to come to MECC and take this professor’s full class. Having students look forward to future college coursework is a major positive in this section.

The math portion of the course focused on providing a series of online sources to help students review their knowledge of math and prepare to take the math portion of the VPT. Table 11 lists student responses about their favorite part of the math coursework in QuickStart:

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ favorite part of math coursework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-The Khan Academy was helpful so I can practice math online for free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Math practice quizzes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The Math section was helpful to me, it really refreshed my mathematics and made me realize all the math I forgot and already knew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The websites he gave us to go on and take practice math tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-I think that the most useful math lesson is the algebraic equations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Khan Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Help me remember some basic math skills. I still feel like I need to learn a bit more for the test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The teacher wasn’t here on the first day so I don’t care about math anyway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The open website Math.com is a great website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Websites to practice math skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Vadim gave some very good resources to study for the math portion of the test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-This let me know where I stood in math and gave me great study programs on the computer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The instructor’s decision to focus on providing online open resources for students to brush up on basic math skills and prepare for the VPT appears to be successful. The vast majority of survey responses mentioned these open resource websites as a very positive takeaway from this part of
the program. It seems clear students valued these resources and found the instruction on how to use them to be effective.

The final portion of the program focused on reading and writing basics. Table 12 reflects student responses in regard to their favorite part of the English coursework:

Table 12

*Students’ favorite part of the English coursework.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorite part</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Grammar Book</td>
<td>was a big, big help. As was all of this part of class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handouts like the grammar book and he was patient and took time to show us</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The grammar guidebook was very good, and the lesson on how to format works cited pages was very important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This let me know I could write a paper and set it up on the computer and find resources for papers. The grammar book, very helpful in both writing and reading. It has been a long time, so this all would be hard for me to do without this class. Loved the teacher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The works cited was really helpful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving a grammar booklet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The English portion was helpful as well. It structured my writing involving the correct grammatical techniques, proper using and correct working and proper punctuation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to write a paper and cite sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the most useful English lessons is the essays</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First assignment that taught us how to write and format college level essays. Also the grammar book was great</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He taught us more about proper English and he worked with us in a way that the high school teachers didn’t</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helped get my memory back about English skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With one half of the total QuickStart students specifically mentioning the grammar book, it is clear the resource is proving effective. Students also commented that they enjoyed working closely with the instructor to brush up on basic reading and writing skills. Some students mentioned the works cited on their survey responses as well. For that assignment, students are
given resources to assist with locating, using, and citing sources for a college level research paper. The goal is to take away some of the mystery and confusion about research and provide students with both the tools and the confidence needed to create quality, scholarly essays like the ones assigned in freshman composition. By combining these lessons with introductions to grammar, composition, and reading skills such as main idea identification and active reading techniques, students are able to get a feel for what a college level English course will require in a clear, condensed manner. Afterwards, they take their handouts and their resources with them to prepare for the VPT.

Students had good things to say about each section of the program on exit surveys. However, one of the greatest measurements of success is whether students would recommend their friends sign up for the program. This question was asked to students as part of the survey. Table 13 illustrates their responses:

Table 13

| Student Responses to whether they would recommend QuickStart to a Friend |
| No |
| Yes | 12 |

All twelve students indicated the affirmative. This 100% response rate is the same as with the question of whether students feel the program is beneficial for helping them feel more prepared
to begin college level work. Taken together, these two questions seem to clearly demonstrate that students are finding the experience to be worthwhile.

The faculty interviewed also expressed that they received an overall positive reaction from students throughout the QuickStart program. One faculty member shared:

I feel the students are receptive to the material covered in class. For the most part the students have participated and during certain portions of the material have seemed excited to learn and grasp the concepts given.

Another faculty member agreed: “Students were very interested and excited about starting classes at MECC. They were very pleased with their ability to complete all assignments throughout the semester.” Faculty indicated that there were never behavioral issues in the class and that most were excited about the opportunity QuickStart afforded them. Another faculty added, “There were a few who you could just tell were not sure they wanted to be here. But they did their work and we didn’t really have any problems. I hope we changed their minds in a positive way.” This researcher’s own observations support these viewpoints. Students were friendly, engaged, and often energetic when assignments were made. As the one faculty member pointed out, there would occasionally be one or two students who would seem frustrated sitting in class or would groan when an assignment was made. However, this is to be expected with any college class and would particularly be expected given that this student population draws from individuals who were previously uncertain they wanted to attend college. When class was exciting and fun, students were all obviously engaged. During class discussions, students shared opinions willingly and were respectful of others. It is just that when it came time to give in-class work, a few students were less than pleased. The particularly important thing to note in this instance is that anytime a student displayed unhappiness or frustration, the instructor always
went to that individual and worked one-on-one to ensure the student had a clear direction and focus. This kept everyone moving forward and able to complete assignments in a timely manner.

Challenges

The QuickStart faculty also noted a few difficulties students experienced while participating in the program. The first issue dealt with work scheduling conflicts. One faculty member stated, “The biggest obstacle students are facing in the course is how to take time off work to be able to make it to class on time.” Especially with non-traditional students, the issue became how to balance a full-time job with coming to college. For the short QuickStart program, it was less of a concern. But faculty did state they were a bit worried about these students should they decide to keep their job while trying to attend school full-time in the future. A second issue centered on childcare dilemmas, as there were a few stay-at-home mothers in the program whose full time jobs were to take care of their children during the day. One faculty noted, “We have some students who have no one to watch their small children. They do not want to bring the children to class and possibly distract other students, but they also cannot afford to hire a babysitter.” This conundrum is also representative of typical students at MECC. “I see it a lot here in my classes,” the faculty member added. “It’s a big thing on this campus.” Finally, students also seemed to have some struggles with finding a ride to the college. As one faculty member explained:

I know of at least four students who mentioned transportation issues to me. We do not have a regular public transit system here. There is a small bus that runs for a few hours a day, but that service can be expensive and doesn’t always go where students need to be
picked up. So I think a lot of students in this area, without the means to afford transportation, struggle to come to class on a weekly basis.

These three issues—work scheduling, childcare, and transportation—are certainly not new or unique to MECC. However, they are issues the college seeks to address soon by offering night classes for working individuals, coordinating closely with area transportation companies, and by considering proposals to possibly add childcare services on campus. Outside of these issues, QuickStart faculty were eager to point out that they strongly believe in the mission of the program and believe it will greatly enhance the lives of student participants. One faculty stated: I believe this program has already made a difference in several students. The design of this course allows students to have an encounter with four instructors that use different teaching techniques and styles. Information is provided about resources available to them as students at the college and opportunities they will have.” Another added:

This can be a game changer. Overtime, we’ll start to see new students coming to MECC, immediately doing well, and ultimately graduating. I think this could be a big part of the future of the college if we can continue to grow and develop the program.

Each of the faculty members and the administrator interviewed stated they have heard positive reactions from students and the community about the program and look forward to seeing QuickStart continue to grow in 2016 and beyond. The administrator described the ideal end results of this program:

We can reach those who may have otherwise never had the opportunities the College has to offer. I’m not sure there are any milestones or criteria more important than seeing a
student begin to believe in themselves. However, the ultimate reward would be to see a student who began in the QuickStart program earn a college degree.

With the program launching in the spring of 2015, it is possible the first cohort of QuickStart students could graduate in the spring of 2017. One faculty member spoke glowingly about that possibility:

There will be something special in the air on that day. I imagine all of the faculty, staff, and administrators involved with the QuickStart program will feel a bit like proud mommas and daddies at that extra special graduation ceremony. And why not? We will be seeing students graduating who, without the QuickStart program, would have never even given college a try. But at that moment, there they will be, walking across the stage to earn a degree they never even dreamed of obtaining.

The administrator concluded the interview by stating that “if this program changes just one life in a positive way, it has been a success. In my opinion, it has done that for every participant and everyone involved in any way.”

**Summary of Research Results**

The results in this chapter were obtained through an analysis of student survey responses as well as one-on-one interviews with QuickStart faculty and students. It became clear that there are several positives the QuickStart program has to offer as well as several areas in which improvements can be made. The most common themes that arose across multiple student interviews were: 1) student fears of college as some kind of “big scary monster,” 2) identifying the expectations of colleges and how could students meet them, 3) how age impacts a student’s decision to enroll at college, 4) the role money plays in college decisions, 5) the importance of
having strong guidance through the process, and 6) changes that needed to be made to the
QuickStart program. Chapter four presented these themes and the words of students and faculty
within QuickStart. Chapter five will provide discussion on these findings and demonstrate how
this research can be applied to practice in order to help create a stronger culture of learning at the
college level.

Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Less than a third of American community college students go on to graduate or transfer
within eight years of beginning college coursework (Topper, 2011). Some research studies have
placed that number as low as 14% (Barrow et al., 2012). One contributing factor to this is the
open door policy that community colleges employ, agreeing to take nearly any student who
applies for admission. Because only 1 in 4 high school seniors are graduating with the skills
required for college level work (ACT, 2014), they are quickly placed into developmental
courses, getting frustrated in the system, and failing courses—all these issues most often result in
the students dropping out altogether. Other research confirms that a vast majority of new
students are beginning their college careers in at least one developmental course (Bailey, 2009;
Daiek et al., 2012; Ignash, 2002; Brown, 2011) and, as a result, these students are significantly
less likely to graduate than their peers (Melguizo, Bos, & Prather, 2011; Topper, 2011; Bailey et
al., 2010; Levin & Calcagno, 2008). These factors have led many institutions to seek out student
success initiatives that may offer some hope of elevating retention and graduation figures.

In addition to these concerns, the past five years have also seen a three percent decline
each year in the enrollment numbers at community colleges nationwide (Juszkiewicz, 2015).
This is particularly problematic since a large percentage of the operating budget for community
colleges comes annually from state funding that is tied to enrollment. Even if the new budget model passes in the coming years, changing the funding model from enrollment to student success statistics, the ultimate issue remains as community colleges are also struggling with low graduation and retention numbers. Therefore, the problems explored by this study involve how community colleges, in particular, can recruit new populations of students while ensuring these students are prepared for college level work once they arrive on campus.

Revisiting the Research Question

Through the presentation of research findings in chapter 4, it became clear that a student’s confidence level has a direct impact upon the likelihood the student will earn a college degree. Students who feel more prepared for college are naturally more likely to not only enroll in a college degree program but also persist and succeed in their coursework. For this reason, it is important to revisit the primary research question posed at the beginning of this study:

How do students and faculty perceive that participation in a QuickStart program at MECC has influenced students’ decisions to enroll and their ability to succeed at the college?

Observations, surveys, and interviews with three faculty, one MECC administrator, and QuickStart students served as the source of data for this study. This chapter presents a discussion of the conclusions drawn from this data as they relate to this central question.

Summary of Findings

This study collected data from student surveys, student interviews, faculty interviews, and an interview with an administrator at MECC. Seven primary themes emerged as to how these individuals perceived both college in general and their participation in the QuickStart program. These themes were discussed in chapter 4 and illustrated by table 4:
Table 4  
*Themes from student interviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The “Big Scary Monster”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Great Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age Factor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance “Through the Fire”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed Changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of these themes reveal that, even with limited data, the first year of the QuickStart program at MECC has proven to be successful in both encouraging previously uncertain students to enroll at the college and also preparing them to succeed on the VPT and enroll at the college. Each of the major themes highlighted in table 4 also revealed something about the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

**The big scary monster.** Students revealed how college seemed frightening prior to joining QuickStart. One student pointed out how he felt a bit like college was an angry creature that would chew him up and spit him back out. Others used terms of “monster” or “beast” to describe their fear of college. But this is largely just a fear of the unknown. Students worry they are too young, too old, too dumb, too technologically challenged, or too nervous to ever earn a college degree. They are told horror stories of friends or family members flunking out to spend a lifetime in regret and squalor. Or they see movies where angry professors kick a student out of class on the first day and the greedy college business offices laugh as they keep the student’s hard earned money paid for those credits. Under these circumstances, college eventually transforms away from being an institution designed to help students succeed and into some type of snarling monster waiting to devour the hopes and dreams of anyone silly enough to walk through its doors. The “college just isn’t right for me” argument allows this fear to continue.
Programs like QuickStart and others that try to reach out into the community and de-villainize the educational system are of vital importance if we are going to come anywhere close to the goals set forth by President Obama and the Lumina Foundation (Parcell, 2011).

**Meeting great expectations.** The counter to the “big scary monster” fear is to provide students with a dose of reality. Yes, college will be difficult. There are certain things college professors will expect. But if students are prepared, put in effort, and demonstrate their willingness to work hard and complete assignments, the truth is that most college professors will bend over backwards to help students achieve success. However, students must be willing to do the work and seek out help when needed. Because they are no longer sheltered by high school teachers, counselors, or their parents, students must also learn to be accountable and self-motivated to attend class and turn in assignments on time while studying for exams. QuickStart students indicated that they found great value in how the program shared these great expectations with them and, most importantly, gave them the tools and knowledge to meet the challenges head on.

**The age factor.** Although originally created to attract non-traditional students, QuickStart drew a good mixture of students from all age groups. Some had just graduated from high school. Others had been out of school for twenty or more years. The older students indicated they were afraid to come back to school because they felt they would be so far behind younger students. They felt they had forgotten all the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college gatekeeper courses like math and English and felt their lack of computer skills could be a major barrier. Two of these nontraditional students had tried college previously and dropped out prior to joining the QuickStart program. They shared how QuickStart made them feel more comfortable and more confident in their abilities so that they could return to school and succeed.
Younger students revealed that they, too, felt they needed some brushing up on basic college skills. They were not confident their high school experiences had prepared them adequately for college work. Through this program, students were able to see that students of all ages struggle and have fears when it comes to college. As they worked together during QuickStart, they learned that age should not be a barrier to obtaining a college degree.

**Money.** It came as no surprise that the “free” label in QuickStart advertisements was a primary motivator for giving the program a try. Some students stated they could have paid for the course out of pocket but these were older students already established in positions of full-time employment. None of the younger students interviewed mentioned anything about a willingness to pay out of pocket expenses. Uniformly, all students interviewed stated that the fact QuickStart was provided free of charge helped to solidify their decision to attend.

**Guidance through the fire.** Starting college can be a big change in anyone’s life, regardless of age, financial situation, or skill level. Perhaps the greatest use for QuickStart is as a bridge between high school and college or between the working world and college (for nontraditional students). Students stated they enjoyed having QuickStart faculty guide them through campus tours, admission and financial aid applications, placement testing, and learning what skills were necessary to begin college coursework. Faculty worked closely with students to ensure they became comfortable with these tasks before the program concluded. This guidance universally helped ease initial fears about the college experience.

**Confidence.** Student responses indicated a participant-wide increase in student confidence. All twelve QuickStart participants indicated on the survey that they felt more prepared to begin college level coursework. The seven students who participated in the interview process reiterated how QuickStart made them feel like they had what it took to be
successful in college. Several indicated their nervousness had become a barrier and that they needed to feel they could succeed before they took steps to actually enroll at the college. QuickStart gave them refreshers in reading, math, writing, and computer basics. This seemed to have given them more confidence that they could do well in future coursework as evidenced by the fact that all eight students who took the VPT were able to test into ENG 111 upon completion of the program. Many students attested to the fact that QuickStart made them feel more ready for the VPT and more comfortable with the idea of beginning college level work.

**Needed changes.** A few changes were suggested by students during interviews. Some students suggested that completing the placement test should be a mandatory part of the QuickStart program. Afterwards, students would meet immediately with advisers to create a course schedule. Several students also recommended expanding the program for two or three weeks in order to fit in the required placement test as well as more instruction time in math and English. Because QuickStart features a small class size, it was also requested that students be able to sit in on another college class to get the sense of how lectures with large class sizes would be conducted. A few students also stated it would be a good idea to have faculty from other career areas to speak to the class or, perhaps, have former students who completed the QuickStart program to come in and talk about how it assisted them with the transition to college.

**Conclusions**

Based on these facts and the data presented in chapter 4 of this study, three primary conclusions can be drawn from the research findings. The first conclusion to be drawn from this study is that QuickStart may continue to struggle recruiting large numbers of students for each cohort, but the program does have the ability to reach a population of previously underserved and under-recruited students. The targeted population for recruitment to QuickStart was students
who had indicated an interest in college (by submitting an enrollment application, financial aid
application, or a general information request) but who had, for whatever reason, not followed
through with enrollment. Many of these students are employed, have families, and/or struggle
with financial and transportation issues. Others have preconceived ideas about their inability to
succeed in college or tend to hold animosity towards the idea of ever attending. To successfully
draw these students to the program, recruiters must find a way to help students overcome these
issues.

As a study from Gulf Coast Community College (2011) points out, it can be difficult to
recruit at-risk students because the students’ time and energy are already pulled in so many other
directions. It is difficult to convince them to take away what little free time they may have to
attend college classes every week. The faculty and administrators behind QuickStart at MECC
have certainly found that to be true in the early stages of the program. With a total of only 12
students from the first three cohorts, student numbers have fallen far below the program’s
projected totals in the first year. However, the program continues to grow and there is evidence
that the community is beginning to take note of the program. On the program’s exit survey, all
12 participants noted they would recommend the program to a friend. During interviews, several
students specifically mentioned they had friends or family who were considering joining the
program. As word of mouth begins to spread news of what QuickStart has to offer, the small
close-knit communities in MECC’s service region will create opportunities for reaching those
individuals who may have never thought college was possible.

The key is to not only inform students about this free opportunity, but also to include a
detailed, clear description of how a college degree can change their lives for the better. Only
then will students see that it is worth the time and energy it takes to juggle family, work, and
school for a short time in order to provide long-lasting benefits for their families. There is clearly a strong need for QuickStart in the area. In a region where so many are unemployed, uneducated, and living in severe poverty while they struggle to take care of their loved ones, the free QuickStart program could be exactly what they need to start the path towards a better life.

The second conclusion drawn from the findings of this study is that QuickStart has the potential to decrease stress and anxiety that most students feel before deciding to enroll in college. In turn, students are more likely to follow through with enrollment and succeed in early coursework. New studies suggest that fear, anxiety, and stress are rapidly growing concerns in the academic community. Hoffman (2015) interviewed Dan Jones, the director of counseling and psychological services at Appalachian State University, who stated that colleges are currently seeing an influx of this issue:

Because of escalating pressures during high school, students arrive at college preloaded with stress. Accustomed to extreme parental oversight, many seem unable to steer themselves. And with parents so accessible, students have had less incentive to develop life skills. A lot are coming to school who don’t have the resilience of previous generations. They can’t tolerate discomfort or having to struggle. A primary symptom is worrying, and they don’t have the ability to soothe themselves.

Hoffman (2015) states that students are now seeking counseling for anxiety so often that many campus mental health centers are overwhelmed. In one such example, University of Central Florida “has seen sharp increases in the number of clients: 15.2 percent over last year alone. The center has grown so rapidly that some supply closets have been converted to therapists’ offices” (Hoffman, 2015, p. 2). Most of this anxiety, as Dr. Jones noted, comes from students struggling to adapt to college requirements. Whether they were sheltered by controlling parents or guided
too closely by high school officials, these students arrive on college campuses with a sense of overwhelming loss and no idea how to make it on their own. Others feel unprepared for college level work and believe they will quickly fail out of school, disappointing their loved ones and wasting their time and money on college coursework (Hoffman, 2015). It is therefore critical that colleges create programs that guide students throughout the early college process. QuickStart has the ability to meet that requirement. Through this program, students are able to experience college in a risk-free environment. If they then choose to apply to college, QuickStart faculty work closely with them to take the placement test, sign up for classes, and obtain financial aid. The program also provides the basic instruction needed to help students feel more comfortable entering college coursework for the first time.

As a direct result, QuickStart students reported feeling less stressed and significantly much more at ease with making the decision to enroll at the college. This is evidenced by the fact that eight of the twelve QuickStart participants enrolled in coursework immediately following their completion of the program, and two have expressed a desire to enroll in the near future. This means that for at least 10 of the 12 students (83%), QuickStart was effective in making college an attractive possibility.

The third conclusion drawn from this research study relates directly to the second conclusion: QuickStart students feel more prepared to enter college than before they started the program. Students experience less stress and anxiety because they know they are prepared to begin college coursework. Nicholson et al. (2013) found that students with higher levels of confidence in their abilities to succeed were far more likely to have “improved achievement, more effort, task persistence, motivation, and self-regulation” (p. 287). However, students must also take responsibility for their own success and hold realistic expectations about their
competence. For instance, a student might have confidence that because he earned straight A’s in high school, he would naturally earn the same high marks in college with very little effort. This student would very likely be disappointed in his final grades unless he learned to dedicate more time to his college studies.

This is why it is important for students to understand the expectations of college coursework right at the very beginning of their college careers and learn how to study and prepare to meet those expectations. As several students indicated during the interview process, QuickStart assists students with precisely these tasks. Students are able to experience college classes and are taught how to study, prioritize their time, and balance time constraints while witnessing firsthand what college professors expect from their students. On the exit survey, all 12 participants indicated QuickStart helped them feel ready to take college courses. Likewise, all seven interview participants were confident when responding to the question of whether they felt more prepared to enter college with several repeatedly stating it was because they now “knew what to expect.” This is the appropriate and productive form of student confidence that Nicholson et al. (2013) described in their study and predicts that these students are much more prepared to succeed once they enroll in college coursework.

**Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The Liminality theory was chosen to help frame and guide this study. Although Van Gennep (1909/2011) applied his theory of Liminality to his work in anthropology, the framework is also uniquely suited to help explain why many students struggle in college coursework or choose not to enroll at all. Table 14 illustrates how the concept of Liminality compares to a student’s transition from high school to college:
### Table 14

**Comparing Liminality to College Transition: Liminal Transition Theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Van Gennep’s Liminality</th>
<th>Student Transition to College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Pre-Liminal”</td>
<td>Departure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Individual leaves old ways behind</td>
<td>--Student graduates high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Must break from old rules and habits</td>
<td>--Must adapt to college expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Surrender old identity</td>
<td>--Unsure about success and future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Liminal”</td>
<td>Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Begins adapting to new ways</td>
<td>--Attempts to adapt to college structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--For this short time, the individual is neither part of the old system or the new system and thus has no structure</td>
<td>--Struggles to forget the old ways of how things were done in high school and with how to become self-sufficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Undergoes rite of passage to become accepted in new place in society.</td>
<td>--Without proper guidance, the student becomes lost as he/she struggles to transition, become frustrated with the process, and often drops out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Process presided over by guiding force to help with transition.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Post-Liminal”</td>
<td>Arrival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Individual now has full rights and privileges that come with his or her new place in society.</td>
<td>--Some students are able to transition to become college students while others are trapped in the transition phase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--No additional actions are required to prove the individual’s belonging in the new structure.</td>
<td>--Need to catch students when they first transition into the liminal phase or else they will not persist.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this theory, which this researcher has called the “Liminal Transition Theory,” students begin thinking about college while they are still within the structures of a previous system. For traditional students, this might be the high school environment. For non-traditional students, this might be the workforce. Students must learn how to transition away from these systems and learn to function within the structures and rules of college. In this sense, students are following a similar process as when individuals leave the Van Gennep’s “pre-liminal” phase and move into the liminal. In that middle stage transitional, just as within the liminal, new college students must begin to adapt to being a college student. They are now responsible for their own success.
For some students, this transition is simple and they quickly move into the post-liminal stage. However, many students are currently getting lost in the liminal. They are unable to move forward in the process for various reasons. Some may struggle with becoming so quickly independent. Whereas parents often ensure their children get out of bed and get homework completed or teachers and guidance counselors constantly remind students to submit work and study for tests, many new college students struggle when they suddenly have to rely upon themselves to study, complete work, and get to class. When they arrive on campus, some students are then overwhelmed by all the responsibilities and work required of them. They often do not realize they need to prepare for the placement tests and show up on campus to take them on a whim. The resulting test scores place these students into developmental coursework. Some students are upset by this, feeling that “developmental” means “dumb” or “slow.” They may attempt to complete the developmental coursework, but many drop out at the first signs of difficulty or when their frustrations grow too large.

If students do test into college level coursework, they go into classes where they are too embarrassed to ask what they deem as “stupid” or “too basic” questions. As a result, they struggle in their classes and do not seek additional help. If they fail, they take it as a sign they are “not meant” for college and drop out to seek work where they are at least earning a paycheck. In this sense, the transition—or liminal stage—proves to be a barrier to many students. The question becomes how to tear down this barrier and assist students with moving through the liminal into the post-liminal stage as described by Van Gennep.

The answer can be found in the QuickStart model. The QuickStart program serves as the transitional stage that allows more individuals to successfully move from the pre-liminal (high school student or part-time employee) into the post-liminal (college student) stage. Strong
guiding forces (QuickStart faculty) are there to assist students with each step in the process in a risk-free, safe environment that calms students’ anxiety, fears, and frustrations. The program also helps students prepare for the placement exams so they are more likely to test into, and be ready for, college level coursework. By avoiding developmental courses, these students are less likely to feel they are wasting time and money on courses that do not count towards their college degrees. They are also more likely to gain a confidence boost by seeing their efforts in QuickStart pay off with a high VPT score. The liminal stage can be a scary void for many students. QuickStart fills the gaps to ensure no student gets trapped or left behind. Instead, students are much more likely to successfully transition into the post-liminal stage and move one step closer to graduation.

Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

The findings in this study align well with several areas of current research. Chapter 2 presented four factors from the literature that may help explain why some students are entering college unprepared for college level work or choosing to skip college altogether: 1) a lack of strong academic preparation in high school, 2) a lack of self-confidence in their own knowledge and skills, 3) issues relating to being the first in their families to attend college, and 4) socioeconomic disadvantages associated with living below the poverty line.

Lack of preparation. Five out of the seven interview participants indicated that they felt their high school experiences did not prepare them for college. This lack of preparation is one of the main reasons these students indicated nervousness about enrolling in college, with several students indicating this made them hesitant to even apply. They felt they did not want to waste time and money on something at which they would ultimately fail. This supports the conclusions drawn by Howell, Kurlaender, and Grodsky (2010) and others (Engle, 2007; Dyce, Albold, &
Long, 2013; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011) that the students graduating from weaker high school curricula are significantly less likely to ever attend college than their peers at stronger high schools. The key for academic institutions is to target these fears and find ways to assist students with gaining refreshers on needed college level skills like reading, writing, math, and computer technology while also offering additional resources that students can use to close the gap

**Lack of confidence.** A second factor the literature revealed as contributing to why students struggle in their first semester of college was the students’ own lack of confidence. When students enter college doubting their abilities or believing they will fail, this often results in self-fulfilling prophecies. In short, students fail because they already believe they are going to fail. As a result, they do not put in enough effort to learn new material or to make up for knowledge deficiencies and they do not seek out additional help from faculty or staff. Research also suggests that students who lack confidence about their academic abilities have likely experienced failure or frustrations in their high school coursework (McKenna, 2011). This was reflected in the current study. All seven interview participants cited a lack of self-confidence or nervousness about college as a primary reason they had not yet attempted or completed college coursework prior to QuickStart. Five stated they had struggled in the past with either high school work or past failed attempts at college coursework and all five admitted these failures made them concerned that future failure was likely. QuickStart works because students are able to see the struggles and successes of their classmates and, in turn, learn not to fear their own unique struggles but to appreciate their individual successes. As Bir and Myrick (2015) point out, “For students to feel that they belong in college…they must see people like themselves succeeding in college” (p. 28). Thus, in order to best assist students with transitioning to college,
institutions need to provide ways for students to work together and gain confidence prior to enrolling in a full-semester of coursework.

**First generation.** ACT (2014) data reveals that more than 300,000 high school graduates each year desire to go to college but, for various reasons, never actually enroll. Even larger numbers graduate high school each year with no intention of ever attending (Dyce, Albold, and Long, 2013). One possible contributor to these statistics deals with students who are the first in their families to go to college. Of the seven students who participated in the interview process, six revealed their parents had no college degree. Research indicates that first-generation students are less likely to attend college because, in most cases, getting a college degree has not been made a priority. Because their parents entered the workforce immediately after high school graduation, many first generation students feel pressured to follow the same path (Saenz et al., 2007). Some are even shamed by their parents for even raising the possibility of going to college (Darling & Smith, 2007). It is possible that parents may feel insecure about their children obtaining higher education than they have themselves. This discourages college attendance and encourages an early entrance into the workforce.

Four of the QuickStart interview participants felt this pressure when they graduated from high school. They got married and/or started full time jobs because, as one student put it, “that was just what you were supposed to do.” Two of these students have supportive parents who simply did not know how to help their children get to college; these parents were just as confused about college and what it had to offer as many first time students who step onto campus. The other two expressed that their parents were not very encouraging of their college desires and were actually, often, disparaging whenever college was mentioned. That is why, for each of these four students, it took an average of twenty years for them to realize the value of an
education. QuickStart gave these students the support they needed and the encouragement necessary to show that college could be a positive change in their lives.

**Low income.** As Cox (2009) points out, financial struggles can lead to quite a bit of fear and anxiety for potential new college students. Of the seven students who participated in the interview process, five were from low income backgrounds. They expressed difficulties with money growing up and how that translated into fewer opportunities. Also, because they lived in low income communities, they were forced to attend poorer high schools with fewer resources. One student mentioned that her high school could not even afford to provide basic textbooks to their students and, instead, requested parents or teachers to contribute. However, her parents were unable to do so and the teacher was quite underpaid. Thus, she ended up sharing a book with a friend which made completing homework assignments each evening a challenge.

These students also indicated that their parents were unable to afford tutors when they struggled in class. Several students indicated they had to work part-time jobs while in school to afford gas money or help their parents with bills. This naturally created even fewer study opportunities. All these issues not only led students to be underprepared by underfunded schools, but led these students to feel the need to immediately start work full-time after high school graduation. They then fear spending hard-earned money on college classes they will ultimately fail. Free college preparation programs such as QuickStart allow these students to give college a chance in a risk-free environment while also learning about important government funding and scholarship opportunities that may help them afford a college education.

**QuickStart’s function.** The literature review in chapter 4 illustrated the large amount of research on bridge programs and similar early intervention strategies. Therefore, one criticism of this study could be that QuickStart is just another bridge type program, adding to the already
large existing body of research. Yet QuickStart is not a traditional type of bridge program. Research reveals that summer residential programs are by far the most common types of bridge programs offered. These work well for larger universities, but for community colleges the summer model is all but impossible to carry out. Semester-long programs are the current alternative, but at the community college level this delivery method is not attractive to most students. Community college students often have full-time jobs or families to provide for on a daily basis, and it is difficult for them to commit to a lengthy period of time—especially just to try out a college class when they are already hesitant. QuickStart’s accelerated model and emphasis on the basic information that community college students are most interested in learning provides the best method for attracting and obtaining enrollment from these students.

It could also be said that programs like dual enrollment already help to serve as a bridge between high school and college, since students are able to complete college coursework (and in some cases, even earn an associate’s degree) while still in high school. In this sense, it could be viewed that QuickStart is not entirely necessary. However, the students that QuickStart seeks to target are unlikely to take advantage of dual enrollment or college preparatory programs while in high school. More often, they take regular classes with their minds set on graduating and obtaining employment. The students who joined QuickStart in 2015 discussed their struggles in high school and how they needed to be convinced college was a viable option. Therefore, QuickStart fills the gap where these students normally slip through the cracks in a cost-free, risk-free environment that builds confidence and basic skills necessary for college success.

Implications for Practice

The most immediate use for this research will be at the study site. MECC could use the information uncovered during this study to make adjustments to the QuickStart program and
decide how to most effectively spend resources in the future. The data in this study also sheds light on what is working in QuickStart and provides the necessary evidence for MECC administrators to justify continuing and expanding the program.

Other academic institutions could also benefit from this study by using this data to begin their own bridge variant programs. Colleges must seek new ways to recruit and prepare students for college level work before they arrive on campus to take classes. To date, 12 students have completed the QuickStart program at MECC. All participants indicated on exit surveys that they found QuickStart to be beneficial in helping them feel more prepared for college level work and would recommend the program to a friend. Additionally, each of the seven interview participants indicated they would have hesitated to come to college if not for the program. These results, while drawing from a small sample size, indicate that QuickStart has the capacity to help students feel prepared for college and increase their chances of success. This model could easily be adopted or adapted by other institutions in order to create customized student success initiatives for their own student populations.

**Limitations**

The researcher’s role in the QuickStart program created certain limitations. The researcher is employed by the study site and was involved in the creation, development, and instruction of the program. For this reason, the researcher had to constantly consider his own biases and reflect upon the ultimate goal of this study. Because the purpose of this research is to determine the effectiveness of QuickStart in order to learn what is working for students and offer suggestions for improvement as necessary, the researcher focused on using a critical eye towards all data gathered. If the program was not working, it would be both ineffective and highly
unethical to slant research in a positive way. If anything, the researcher was constantly looking for issues within the data to expose and offer analysis for ways to improve those weaknesses.

Additionally, anytime a qualitative research study is conducted at one research site with a small pool of participants, there are obvious limitations. It can be difficult to know for certain if the trends and themes presented in the study will continue with future students. However, this issue could not be avoided. Currently, MECC is the only college within the VCCS piloting a QuickStart program and, because the program is in its first year of implementation, the participant size is naturally limited. When there are only a maximum pool of 12 students to draw from for interviews, the risk is that there will not be enough volunteers to conduct a true case study. Fortunately, the majority of students were eager to participate and offered detailed accounts of their experiences. This small pool of participants opens the door for additional research to be conducted in the future.

Further Research

One way in which the researcher plans to conduct future research is to again study the program after more cohorts have been completed. This will allow for a much larger student population. The survey and interview responses of this increased pool will allow for additional analysis and comparison to current data. This will allow for greater accuracy in generalizing the study findings to MECC’s overall student population.

It would also be useful to compare data from other research sites. Zane State would be an excellent choice for comparison. Other colleges around the nation may have programs that are somewhat like QuickStart; however, the Zane model matches up well with the model offered at MECC. Zane State has also offered QuickStart cohorts since 2008. This provides a much larger
pool of potential research participants and would assist with drawing effective conclusions over a prolonged period of time.

Finally, if QuickStart continues to have difficulty recruiting a large number of student participants, it could be worthwhile to attempt to reach out to some of those students who are electing not to give the program a try and see if they would provide some insight into their rationale. Such a study could offer valuable insights into why at-risk students are so hesitant to try college (even when a free QuickStart program is offered without risk to the student) and may uncover new strategies for more effectively targeting recruitment efforts in the future.
References


http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/history/Pages/ccgrowth.aspx


http://www.aacc.nche.edu/About/Documents/USA_AGG_MainReport_Final_021114.pdf


Appendix A: Site Approval

June 17, 2015

Mr. Derek Whisman
Assistant Professor of English
Godwin Hall Rm. 115
dwhisman@mecc.edu

Re: MECC IRB Review # 2015-004 – Creating New Gateways to Education: Students Get a “Quick Start” to a College Education

Dear Mr. Whisman,

I am happy to confirm that the conditions set forth in your preliminary approval letter (dated 6-11-15) have been satisfied, and your research has been granted final approval. The committee has determined that the revised documents that you submitted on June 15th sufficiently address our concerns. We simply request that you add a line at the bottom of the consent forms for participants to sign and date.

As a reminder, MECC IRB approvals are effective for one year. Therefore, this approval will expire on June 11, 2016. If you extend any part of your research, including data analysis, to continue beyond this date, you will need to apply for a renewal review by April 11, 2016. This approval is contingent upon your agreement to provide the IRB with a copy of your final research report, when it is complete.

Please note that any changes in the purpose or design of this project may have an impact on the criteria upon which this determination was made, and may require additional review by the IRB. If changes in the purpose or design of this project become necessary, please contact me to discuss possible impacts on the project's IRB compliance status.

Congratulations on the approval of your research. Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Nikki Morrison
MECC IRB Manager
Greetings,

My name is Derek Whisman and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University working with Dr. Sara Ewell. We are conducting a research study about the QuickStart program at Mountain Empire Community College. I am emailing to ask if you would like to participate in an interview about your experience in QuickStart. The interview will take no more than one hour and can be conducted at a location, date, and time that is most convenient to you. Participation is completely voluntary and your answers will be anonymous.

If you are interested, please reply to this email and let me know where and when you would like to meet in order to conduct the interview.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at this email address (whisman.d@husky.neu.edu) or Dr. Sara Ewell (s.ewell@neu.edu).

Thank you for your time.

Derek Whisman
Derek Whisman
Doctoral Student
Northeastern University
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, Department of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Sara Ewell, principal investigator. Derek Whisman, student researcher.

Title of Project: “Creating New Gateways to Education: Getting a ‘QuickStart’ to College.”

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being invited to participate in this study because you recently completed the QuickStart program at Mountain Empire Community College.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to gather opinion on the QuickStart program from individuals involved in creating, teaching, or participating in the program.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in one interview session with the researcher. Questions will focus on your experiences in the QuickStart program as well as about your basic background information in order to gain a deeper understanding of what brought you to the program and what concerns (if any) you may have about entering college next semester.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

If you choose to participate in the interview process, the researcher will ask you to select a location as well as the day and time that best fits your schedule. The interview will last between 30 minutes to one hour.
**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

Because the interview can last a maximum of one hour, some minor discomforts could occur (such as fatigue). However, if at any point you need to take a break for any reason, you may ask the researcher and you will be granted the time you need.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

Aside from monetary compensation, there are no direct personal benefits from participating in this study. However, the information collected from your interview answers can be used to improve QuickStart at MECC. These changes will have a direct impact on how future students (possibly some of your friends or relatives) experience the courses. It may ultimately determine whether the courses are offered in the future. The information obtained in this study may also help other colleges and universities with developing their own student success initiatives. This is your opportunity to make a true impact and have your voice be heard.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Any information you provide will be kept completely anonymous. You will be assigned a pseudonym. There will be no way for anyone to match your answers to your identity, so please feel free to answer honestly and fairly. No personal information will be collected for identity purposes.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Derek Whisman, the person mainly responsible for the research, at whisman.d@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell, the Principal Investigator, at s.ewell@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
Will I be paid for my participation?

You will be given a $10 gift certificate to Walmart as soon as you complete the study/survey/etc.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

You will not encounter any costs during participation in this study.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                  Date

______________________________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent                  Date

______________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D: Survey Questions

1. How did you hear about the QuickStart program?

2. Do you feel the QuickStart program was beneficial?

3. Do you feel prepared to take the Virginia Placement Test after completing this program?

4. What was the most useful Computer Skills lesson?

5. What was the most useful Orientation/career lesson?

6. What was the most useful math lesson?

7. What was the most useful English lesson?

8. Would you recommend the QuickStart program to a friend?

9. What do you feel we could do to improve the course?

10. Do you have any additional comments?
Appendix E: Interview Script

The following script will guide all student interviews. Because interviews will be semi-structured, these questions are designed to give way to possible follow up questions depending on student responses.

**Part 1: Introductory Protocol**

*Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I will be asking you a series of questions that will attempt to shed light on your experiences during QuickStart, your current feelings about college, and the circumstances that led you to QuickStart in the first place.*

*The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of how QuickStart can best help students to succeed at the college level. For that reason, it is crucial that you be honest and explain your answers as much as possible. Please also note that if you do not want to answer a certain question or feel uncomfortable at any time, you may request that we skip the question or stop the interview and I will comply with that request.*

*Because your answers are important and need to be captured accurately, I would like to record the audio of the interview today. I will also be taking notes as we speak. No one will have access to these recordings at any time except for me. All of your responses will also be kept completely anonymous and your name will not be used in the study. A pseudonym will be referenced in my research report. At this time, I would like to begin the audio recording if you have no objections or if you have no questions for me.*

Okay, the audio has begun. *For the record, the interview subject with me today has been advised of the confidentiality agreement both verbally and through a written consent form. The participant has signed the consent form and is ready to begin the interview process.*

**Part 2: Participant Background**

*I would like to begin by asking you a series of general background questions. These are designed to help us understand what led to your decision to join the QuickStart program.*

1. *What can you tell me about your family? Without using their names, you can feel free to discuss your parents, any siblings, grandparents, or other important figures in your life growing up.*
   a. *Possible follow up question(s): Are these individuals still involved in your life? Why or why not?*
   b. *Possible follow up question(s): What kind of employment did your parents have growing up [aims to determine socio-economic standing]? Now?*
   c. *Possible follow up question(s): Are you still living at home with your parents?*
   d. *Possible follow up question(s): If so, who all lives in the home?*
e. Possible follow up question(s): If not, when did you move out? Where did you go? How are you supporting yourself?

2. Please describe your home town (no names). I'm looking for general information about things like the race, economic status, and basic descriptors. Also, what was your family’s place in this town? In other words, was your family an active part of the community? How so or why not?

3. Describe your academic high school experience. Would you say that you felt prepared for college upon graduation of high school? Why or why not?
   a. Possible follow up question(s): Without mentioning their names, are there any teachers who stand out either in a positive or negative way?
   b. Possible follow up question(s): What types of assignments or activities do you remember contributing most to your learning process in school?

4. When you graduated high school, did you immediately apply to college?
   a. Possible follow up question(s): If not, why did you decide to forego college? Why did you not at least apply? What did you decide to do instead?
   b. Possible follow up question(s): Why did you not feel college was the right decision for you?
   c. Possible follow up question(s): If you did apply but did not get into a college, where did you apply? What were the issues?
   d. Possible follow up question(s): Had anyone from a college or from your high school ever spoken to you about possibly applying to colleges? What did they say or do? Did anyone explain about community colleges and financial aid?

Part 3: QuickStart

5. Where did you hear about QuickStart?
   a. Possible follow up question(s): If you heard from multiple sources, which was the most effective in getting your attention?

6. What made you decide to give QuickStart a try?
   a. Possible follow up question(s): Did you have any doubts, concerns, or worries when you called to sign up for the class? Did someone help with these concerns?

7. What was your experience like on the very first day of class?
   a. Possible follow up question(s): What was your first impression of the instructors?
   b. Possible follow up question(s): Your impression of your classmates?
   c. Possible follow up question(s): Did your nerves increase or ease a bit after this first day? Why?
8. What did you think about the way the class was organized (four sections taught by four different teachers)?
   a. Possible follow up question(s): Could you see a more effective way of organizing the course? Perhaps with more time on a certain subject or being taught by fewer instructors?

9. What was your favorite part of the class?
   a. Possible follow up question(s): What was the most memorable thing that stood out to you?

10. What was the most challenging part?

11. Do you feel the program helped you to be more college ready? Why or why not?

12. Having now gone through the program, what would you like to say to any student who is still uncertain if college is right for them? Would you recommend the QuickStart program? Why or why not?

13. What specific changes do you feel the program could make to better help students prepare for college level work?

That concludes the interview. Do you have any questions for me at this time? Thank you for your participation.