NOT CROSSING THE FINISH LINE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE REASONS STUDENTS AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, ST. PAUL GET WITHIN FIFTEEN CREDITS OF GRADUATION BUT DO NOT COMPLETE THEIR BACHELOR’S DEGREE

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Abstract

Research on college student retention has been conducted for over four decades. However, the majority of this research focuses on first-year college students, with very few studies focusing on the retention of college seniors. While only a small percentage of college seniors withdraw from their universities, the impact of not obtaining a bachelor’s degree after spending so much time and money can be detrimental to students’ future economic and social mobility. This study, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was undertaken to better understand the decision making process of students who leave college with less than fifteen credits remaining. Participants included ten students who departed from Concordia University, St. Paul (CSP), a small, private, Lutheran university in St. Paul, Minnesota, in their senior year with very few graduation requirements remaining. The decision-making processes of the students interviewed were quite varied, leading to four superordinate themes: Timely Degree Completion, Distrust in the Academic Process, Barriers to Final Degree Completion, and Success without a Bachelor’s Degree. While the findings indicated that students make the decision to leave late in the college career for a wide variety of reasons, it is clear from this study that colleges and universities need to focus more on their college seniors and work with them all the way to graduation through continued outreach and support. Also, additional research needs to be conducted to better understand this extremely under researched college student population.

*Keywords:* retention, senior year, attrition, IPA, qualitative, late withdrawal
Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The topic. The administration at Concordia University, St. Paul (CSP) decided to take a closer look at the lower than average six-year graduation rate at their university. When analyzing the retention and graduation data, the administrators noticed that the majority of students left CSP after their freshman or sophomore years, which, according to the current retention literature available, is when the majority of students who depart from their first university choose to leave. However, a small number of students came within fifteen credits of completing their bachelor’s degree, but never finished their final degree requirements. Being within fifteen credits of graduation would mean that these students had less than one semester of courses remaining before earning their bachelor’s degree. The administrators were shocked that students would come so close to completing their degree but never “cross the finish line.” The administrators were not only worried about how these students impacted their university’s graduation rates, but also how these students fared in a job market and society that highly favors a bachelor’s degree. The administrators had many questions for these students, but mostly wondered how these students came to the decision to depart CSP when coming so close to earning their bachelor’s degree?

Research problem. The common objective of institutions of higher education is to create an efficient and effective path for students to achieve a college degree (Longden, 2004). Unfortunately, this path is often a complicated one for both students and colleges. Colleges and universities are constantly seeking strategies to enhance this pathway and to ensure their students are retained and obtain a college degree from their university. Thus, studies on student persistence and retention at colleges and universities are abundant (e.g. Allen & Robbins, 2010;
Bahr, 2009; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, & Bracken, 2000; Cabrera & Nora, 1993; Caison, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975; Turner, 2004). However, these studies focus primarily on the retention of certain student populations, such as first-year students, minority students, and first-generation students.

**Purpose statement.** Although retention and graduation rate research is abundant, less than a handful of studies focus on the retention of college seniors. The reasons behind these students’ late departure decisions and the significant gap in the research need to be explored further. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to better understand the decision-making process of traditional, undergraduate students at Concordia University, St. Paul who depart when they are so close to earning their bachelor’s degree.

**Justification for the research problem.** Of the handful of studies focusing on late college student departure, Neumann and Finaly-Neumann (1989) published the first retention study focusing on college seniors. The researchers found that seniors withdraw from college due to a lack of student-faculty contact, student involvement in academic programs, and strong academic content in a program. Recently, Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitchell, and Wilson (2012) and Donhardt (2012) published studies focusing on senior retention. Hunt et al. (2012) utilized data from a withdrawal survey to understand why seniors departed after spending so much time and money on their degree. The reasons for senior withdrawals included family issues, stress, anxiety and depression, and burnout, social involvement/sense of belonging, off-campus employment, and upper-level advising. Donhardt's (2012) study focused more on why students in their fourth year of study were behind and not graduating in this pivotal year, which was often due to stopping out, taking developmental courses, receiving an F, dropping to part-time, and withdrawing from classes.
The studies by Neumann and Finaly-Neumann (1989), Hunt et al. (2012), and Donhardt (2012) are all a great start to putting the pieces of the late student departure puzzle together, but these studies do not look at those students who are extremely close to graduation and simply leave their university. Neumann and Finaly-Neumann (1989) looked at how to predict senior retention, Hunt et al. (2012) studied students who took the time to fill out a withdrawal survey, and Donhardt (2012) researched reasons fourth-year students who are not close to graduation due to academic and social factors. Retention prediction (Neumann & Finaly-Neumann, 1989; Hunt et al., 2012) and a four year graduation plan (Donhardt, 2012) were the problems of practice for these late departure studies. The senior year study that most closely resembles this researcher’s problem of practice is by Mohr, Eiche, and Sedlacek (1998).

Mohr et al. (1998) examined students who simply left the university after completing 86 or more credits, which granted them senior status. The authors asked these students why they left in their senior year, and received reasons such as financial strain, starting or supporting a family, and personal problems. However, the majority of the students in the authors’ sample were still two semesters away from graduation. Thus, the study of seniors a semester or less from graduation is still lacking. Why would students come so close to earning their bachelor's degree and make the decision to leave with only a few remaining courses or degree requirements?

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** Although a few studies exist related to senior year attrition, the vast majority of literature on student retention focuses primarily on first to second year retention rates and incorporates different strategies to prevent first-year students from leaving their home institutions (e.g. Burks & Barrett, 2009; Longden, 2004; Veenstra, 2009) with no consideration for late college student departure. Unfortunately, student departure from college when close to graduation is an event that happens all too often, particularly at CSP. Thus, the
reasons behind students’ decisions to come so close to a college degree but never complete need to be explored. While using current retention research can assist in putting together this late dropout puzzle (Berger & Braxton, 1998), utilizing an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach with late departure students at CSP can help shed some light on the decision-making processes of these late college dropouts.

Relating the discussion to audiences. One of the purposes of this study is to assist administrators and advisors at CSP in understanding why students within a few credits of graduation are leaving CSP before obtaining their degree. In the era of increased college and university accountability and with graduation rates on every website, it is important that universities are successfully graduating their students (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006). Understanding the decision making process of the late departure students may assist administrators in making some retention programming and process decisions related to senior year retention. The hope is that administrators at other, similar, universities can also utilize this study, although the generalizability will be limited.

Significance of the Research Problem

CSP graduation rates are lower than the average urban, private college, and this can hurt the university in many ways. Colleges and universities are being held increasingly responsible for their graduation rates. For example, the "Student Right to Know Act", passed by Congress on November 9, 1990, requires institutions eligible for Title IV funding to publicly disclose graduation and completion rates in an effort to increase institutional accountability (Bailey, et. al, 2006). Prospective students and parents are able to explore these graduation rates and make enrollment decisions based on this data. These publicly disclosed graduation rates are also being used by several states to base their funding for colleges and universities (Marklein, n.d.). Thus, if
a college wants to receive more state funding for their institution, they need to show that students are not only enrolling in their institutions, but are also graduating. Knowing more about the students who have come within a few credits of earning their degrees but never completed is one way to begin assisting CSP in raising its very public graduation rates.

The effects on individual students who did not earn their bachelor's degree can be devastating. A college degree is becoming more and more necessary in today's knowledge-based society. A bachelor’s degree is a key factor for social mobility (Caison, 2005). In fact, the labor market rewards for earning a college degree have increased remarkably over the last quarter of a century (Turner, 2004) and is a requirement for the majority of entry-level professions (Caison, 2005). Students who do not cross the finish line by earning a college degree are often not valued as highly in the professional workforce and must work blue collar jobs that are becoming increasingly obsolete in the American economy (Turner, 2004). Thus, the students suffer from being underemployed, and the economy suffers due to its lower supply of skilled employees.

Economically, a bachelor's degree really matters. According to a U.S. Census Bureau (2002) study, individuals who obtained a bachelor's degree earned an average of $45,678 per year, while those who had begun college but did not complete a bachelor’s degree earned only $26,958 per year. The unemployment statistics also show the economic rewards of a bachelor's degree. For example, in 2001, the overall unemployment rate was 3.5 percent. At that time, only 2.0 percent of college graduates were unemployed, but the unemployment rate was 2.9 percent for those who began college but did not complete their bachelor's degree. As Tinto (2004) states, "Does entry to college matter? Yes! But finishing college and earning a bachelor’s degree matters even more" (p. 7).
Positionality Statement

The author’s bias can certainly be revealed within the problem of practice for this study. The fact that the location of the study is the same as the author's place of employment can cause a major bias within this study. Because of this chosen research site, the author is professionally acquainted with many of the students involved in this study. She needs to ensure that she creates boundaries between her role as the Director of Academic Advising at CSP and a doctoral researcher.

The author’s research question, as outlined in the next section, is to better understand how the students make sense of their decision to depart from CSP after coming so close to completing their bachelor’s degree. As the Director of Academic Advising, the author will be interested in a plan to bring these late departure students back to CSP to complete their final requirements, but the doctoral researcher must focus on only answering the specific research question. Again, a separation between advising professional and researcher must be established.

The worldview the author subscribes is social constructivist, as the author believes that meaning is established for individuals within the context that they live and work (Creswell, 2007). While this worldview goes hand in hand with the broad research question being asked to participants, once again, the line between researcher and professional must be established. As a researcher, the author must ensure that during interviews she allows the participants to fully express and details of their experiences and their reasons behind not completing their bachelor’s degree. She cannot allow her professional position to push participants toward bachelor’s degree completion at CSP. A social constructivist worldview must truly be the framework from which the author’s research is conducted in order to best answer the proposed research question.
Overall, the author of this study feels passionate about bachelor’s degree attainment. She always wants students to complete their college degree, so the students can be more socially and economically valued and, hopefully, feel a sense of accomplishment. Better understanding the decision-making process for students did not cross the finish line will, eventually, assist the author in creating better late retention strategies at CSP and help students achieve their goal of a bachelor’s degree. However, the author must first understand the decision-making process for some students who departed so late in their college career.

Research Central Questions/Hypothesis and Sub-questions/Hypothesis

Based on the topic of traditional, undergraduate students at CSP who got close to graduation but do not cross the finish line, one central research question was proposed to assist in developing the research on this problem of practice. The central research question was developed taking into account the utilization of an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach for this problem of practice. The central research question is as follows:

How do undergraduate college students at CSP who are within a semester of degree completion make sense of their decision to depart?

Theoretical Framework

Various theoretical frameworks have been developed related to college student retention (e.g. Astin, 1984; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1986). However, the theories that standout as being most applicable to late college student attrition are Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory of student retention and Bean's student attrition models (Bean, 1980; Metzner & Bean, 1987). This section will provide background information on these two theories and show how they can apply to late student retention. A discussion on how integrating these two theories is the best lens in which to view late student retention will also be presented.
**Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure.** Although no single theory is comprehensive enough to account for the complicated set of factors that interact to influence student retention (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), the student departure theories of Vincent Tinto are the most commonly cited theories within student retention research. In fact, Vincent Tinto is the “most frequently cited scholar on college student retention” (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 4), with his work cited approximately 775 times (Braxton et al., 2004). Tinto’s seminal theory is the interactionalist theory of student departure (Tinto, 1975). Many studies utilize Tinto’s theory as their theoretical framework and view Tinto’s work as valid when predicting higher education dropout (e.g. Cabrera & Nora, 1993; Caison, 2007; Mannan, 2007; Veenstra, 2009). Published in 1975, this theory attempted to “explain, not simply to describe, the processes that bring individuals to leave institutions of higher education” (p. 89). While Tinto has made several minor revisions to his interactionalist theory of student departure (Tinto, 1982; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 1993), the basis of his theory, including the concepts of social and academic integration, has remained the same.

Tinto’s (1975) theory grows out of Durkheim’s (1951) work on suicidal behavior. Durkheim proposed that individuals are more likely to commit suicide when they are not fully integrated into society. Like Durkheim, Tinto (1975) views student departure from higher education as the result of students’ interactions with their colleges as organizations. If a student enters a college with background characteristics, such as aptitude, family background, and motivation that fit well within the institution they are attending they are more likely to become acclimated to their college and become successful graduates. However, if students are not able to successfully integrate into the culture of their institution, their institutional commitment will diminish, and they will drop out.
In Tinto's (1975) theory, students need to feel integrated into two systems: academic and social. When discussing the academic system, Tinto notes that this can be measured through grade performance and intellectual development. According to Tinto, "grade performance has been shown to be the single most important factor in predicting persistence in college" (p. 104). Grade performance not only reflects students' academic abilities, but also their willingness to comply with the institutional guidelines regarding academic achievement. In turn, this compliance with institutional academic values and norms leads to individual intellectual development. Students who have enhanced their intellectual development "are likely to value their college education as a process of gaining knowledge and of appreciating ideas" (p. 104) and, thus, feel integrated into the academic system and persist.

According to Tinto (1975), the social systems within a higher educational institution include contact with extracurricular activities, faculty and other college personnel, and peer group interactions. Involvement in extracurricular activities provides social rewards and a sense of belonging to a smaller group within the larger university system. This allows students to feel a connection to their new college environment. Support from faculty and college personnel also assists students in feeling a part of the campus community. The relationships with faculty and staff members leads to a "more intimate and direct association with the institution" (Tinto, 1975, p. 109), thus decreasing the chances of student departure. Within all of the social system, peer group support appears to be the most vital for student retention. Absence of a supportive group or subculture on campus often leads to voluntary withdrawal, as students do not feel connected to their new community. One the other hand, too much peer interaction can lead to academic performance issues, and a loss in academic integration. Thus, a balance that includes social support and academic balance must be struck.
The social and academic systems described above must be seen as separate but parallel (Woodley, 2004). As Tinto (1975) notes (p. 92):

Distinguishing between the academic and social domains of the college further suggests that a person may be able to achieve integration in one area without doing so in the other. Thus, a person can conceivably be integrated into the social sphere of the college and still drop out because of insufficient integration into the academic domain of the college (e.g., through poor grade performance). Conversely, a person may perform adequately in the academic domain and still drop out because of insufficient integration into the social life of the institution (e.g., through voluntary withdrawal). Nevertheless, one would expect a reciprocal functional relationship between the two modes of integration such that excessive emphasis on integration in one domain would, at some point, detract from one's integration into the other domain.

Oftentimes, students are either integrated into or disengaged in these systems within the first year of college; thus, the majority of departure decisions occur early in students’ college careers (Veenstra, 2009).

Tinto’s (1975) theory is sociological in nature. His theory highlights the social actors involved in the academic and social integration of students into higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridge, & Hayek, 2007). The interactionalist theory of student departure stresses the anthropological rites of passage, stating that “students first must separate from the group with which they were formerly associated such as family members and high school peers, undergo a period of transition…, and incorporate or adopt the normative values and behaviors of the new group (or college)” (Kuh et al., 2007, p. 13). The student’s “entrance into institutions of higher education, and therefore entrance into a new society necessitates, to varying degrees, a severance
of ties to the individual's past society” (Liu & Liu, 1999, p. 537). This severance of ties can lead to confusion and insecurity, which may, eventually, lead to student dropout if the student does not become integrated into their new society.

As stated above, Tinto’s interactionalist theory of student departure has been applied primarily to studies related to first-year student departure (e.g. Longden, 2004; Veenstra, 2009). Senior attrition studies by Neumann and Finaly-Neumann (1989) and Mohr et al. (1998) claim that Tinto's theory is "fairly well-suited for first- and second-year students because they focus on the most basic tasks of academic and social integration, but that it is not appropriate for more advanced students who have already faced and coped with these tasks" (Mohr et al., 1998, p. 344). However, this theory can be utilized as a foundation for researching traditional, undergraduate students who get within fifteen credits of graduation but do not complete their bachelor’s degree.

It is proposed that students can become integrated into and then disengaged from the academic and social systems throughout their college careers, including at points close to the time of students’ degree attainment. Thus, Tinto's (1975) theory may be applicable to the current problem of practice. While Tinto's (1975) well-researched theory will serve as the primary theoretical framework for the problem of practice, Bean's student attrition models (Bean, 1980; Metzner & Bean, 1987) will also be utilized as the lens with which to view late student departure.

**Bean's student attrition models.** Although not as cited or well-known as Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure, Bean's (1980) student attrition model is another theoretical framework that investigates the determinants of student dropout. Bean’s work is based on Price's (1977) model of work turnover. Price's (1977) model of work turnover states
"that organizational determinants are expected to affect satisfaction, which in turn are expected to influence work turnover" (p. 157). According to Price, work turnover is based on two intervening variables (intent to leave and satisfaction) and eleven determinants. Bean (1980) utilized the same intervening variables (intent to leave and satisfaction) as Price and went a step further by adding background characteristics to this theory. Bean's (1980) "model indicates that the background characteristics of students must be taken into account in order to understand their interactions within the environment" (p. 158). The five background variables used in Bean's model include performance, socioeconomic status, state resident, distance home, and hometown size.

Bean (1980) then determined eighteen organizational determinants to take into account to determine how the student interacts with the institution through "objective measure, such as grade point average or belonging to campus organizations, as well as subjective measures, such as the practical value of the education and the quality of the institution" (Bean, 1980, p. 160). These determinants include routinization, development, practical value, institutional quality, integration, university GPA, goal commitment, communication, distributive justice, centralization, advisor, staff/faculty relationship, campus job, major (area), major (certainty), housing, campus organizations, and opportunity. These variables, in turn, impact satisfaction, which influences intent to leave. The more satisfied students are with their institution, the less likely they are to want to leave.

Bean’s (1980) perspective of student attrition is that of "a single organization, and student attrition is associated with membership in a particular institution, rather than membership in institutions of higher education in general" (Bean, 1980, p. 157). In other words, Bean's model takes into account the various institutional characteristics that can interfere with students'
likelihood to remain in college. For example, if a student were to get married during his or her time in college, how the institution accommodated this life change would determine the student's likelihood to remain at his or her institution.

Initially, like Tinto, Bean's research focused on first-year student retention (e.g. Bean, 1983; Bean & Bradley, 1986; Bean & Eaton, 2002; Eaton & Bean, 1995). However, Bean began to see the changing landscape of higher education, and created a model of student retention for nontraditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) defined nontraditional students as older than 25 years old, a commuter, and attending part-time. Through their research, Bean and Metzner (1985) found that these nontraditional students more often withdrew from school due to external factors, such as family obligations, than reasons based on social or academic integration. In another study by Metzner and Bean (1987), the authors found that utility for future employment was the greatest predictor for nontraditional student dropout. These nontraditional students often had outside obligations, such as a full-time job or a family, and only remained in school if they felt their education would warrant long-term career and monetary results.

Metzner and Bean (1987) created a model for nontraditional student attrition that takes into account all of the factors that the authors see as impacting the retention of nontraditional students, while still staying true to the intervening variables in Bean's (1980) student attrition model. Figure 1, taken directly from Metzner and Bean (1987, p. 17), shows all of the interacting variables that the authors believe impact nontraditional student retention. Unlike Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980), Metzner and Bean's (1987) theory emphasizes social integration variables far less than environmental and academic variables when it comes to analyzing nontraditional student dropout. External and academic factors impacted nontraditional student retention far more than social integration, which are more relevant for a first-year, traditional student.
According to Bean and Metzner (1985), nontraditional students are "not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution, but are chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (especially courses, certification, and degrees)" (p. 489).

Figure 1:

Bean’s (1980) and Metzner and Bean's (1987) models of student attrition go hand in hand with the problem of practice. Bean utilizes many specific determinants and intervening variables that assist in shedding some light on students who get within fifteen credits of their degree but do not complete their final requirements. Hunt et al. (2012) indirectly shows the applicability of these theories by concluding that family issues, anxiety and depression, and off-campus employment are a few of the reasons for late student withdrawals from a large, mid-Atlantic,
public, research university. These external variables interfered with students' completion of their degrees because either the university or the students' perceptions of the university lacked the proper resources to assist these students in overcoming these obstacles for degree completion. These external determinants had a direct impact on the intent to leave and university satisfaction for these college seniors. Even when these students are extremely close to completing their degree, external barriers, beyond academic and social integration, impeded degree completion.

Combining Tinto and Bean. Cabrera and Nora (1993) and Andreu (2002) believe that an effective theoretical framework for students not within the first-year, traditional student demographic should combine Tinto’s interactionalist theory of student departure and Bean’s student attrition model. Bean’s model fills a significant gap in Tinto’s theory by emphasizing the role of external factors (e.g. working full-time, supporting a family) in shaping students’ institutional perceptions and commitments (Cabrera & Nora, 1993). Andreu (2002) found that Bean’s model fits well with Tinto’s theory, as it allows more external factors, such as opportunities for employment, to be included in the prediction of student retention. Bean’s focus on the role of external factors, along with his focus on the role of non-intellectual factors in student retention, fills the gap in Tinto’s internal institutionally focused theory (Cabrera & Nora, 1993).

Combining Bean’s student attrition model with Tinto’s interactionalist theory of student departure can assist in making Tinto’s theory more applicable to all student populations (Andreu, 2002). Although this study explores traditional college seniors, these late college dropouts employ some of the traits of nontraditional students. In fact, the definition of a nontraditional student has been expanded since Bean and Metzner's (1985) study. Some studies, including one by Jeffreys (2004), state that the definition of nontraditional students can go beyond age, part-
time status, and commuter status, and include students who work full-time and students with dependent children. Some of the participants in this study do occupy these nontraditional student characteristics and research shows that external factors do play a large role in senior dropout, according to the few studies that focus on this student population (Hunt et al., 2012; Mohr et al., 1998; Neumann and Finaly-Neumann, 1987).

Using the models by Tinto (1975), Bean (1980), and Metzner and Bean (1987) consecutively creates a supportive theoretical framework that can work for all students. All of these theories need to be seen as complementary, not exclusive, in order to fully understand the diverse reasons for leaving college late in students’ college careers. As stated in one study in the ASHE Higher Education Report “taken together, the different theoretical perspectives on student success and departure account for many of the key factors that shape what students are prepared to do when they get to college and influence the meanings they make of their experiences” (Kuh et al., 2007, pp. 19-20).

**Conclusion/Forward**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the research problem by articulating the statement of the problem, significance of the research problem, central research question, and theoretical frameworks. Chapter Two reviews the literature related to retention and degree completion. Specifically, this chapter focuses on prominent and groundbreaking retention studies and junior and senior year retention studies. Chapter Three provides an overview of the research method and design to be utilized for this study. In Chapter Four, the senior dropouts from CSP speak about their experiences and their decision-making processes related to late departure. Finally, Chapter Five provides a discussion on the research findings and implications for future research and practice.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

College student retention is the most studied phenomenon in higher educational research, with "an extensive body of research literature that now spans more than four decades, books and edited volumes, a journal, and a variety of conferences dedicated solely to student retention" (Tinto, 2006, p. 1). With all of this retention research, few studies exist that examine the retention of students in their last year of college (Donhardt, 2012). However, even with little research on this author's proposed problem of practice, reviewing the literature related to overall student retention and its evolution can assist in painting a picture that can shed some light on the late student retention problem at CSP.

This literature review will explore the evolution of retention research over more than four decades. The review will include sections on early retention research, including a brief overview of the studies by Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975, 1987), as well as the movement toward student involvement theories, including the works of the prominent retention researchers Astin, Pascarella, and Terenzini. The literature review will then explore the movement into researching students from different backgrounds, such as first-generation students, low-income students, racial/ethnic minority students, and nontraditional students. The many institutional, economic, social, and cultural theories of student retention will then be investigated. Finally, the few retention studies related to senior year retention will be reviewed. As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) point out, the aim of a literature review within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study is to "introduce readers to the field...and inform [the readers] about some of the strengths and weaknesses within the key contributions to that field - and to offer an argument which show why [the] study can make a useful contribution" (p. 43). Connections between the
author’s findings and this literature review within the context of an IPA study will be discussed in Chapter Five.

**Early Retention Research**

Student retention did not become a well-researched area of higher education until about 40 years ago. Before this time, students who departed from college "were thought to be less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that college graduation was believed to bestow" (Tinto, 2006, p. 2). In other words, the students failed, not the institutions. However, in the 1970's, this "blaming the victim" mentality shifted "to take into account the role of the environment, in particular the institution, in students decisions to stay or leave" (Tinto, 2006, p. 2).

Spady’s (1970) work is widely known as the first in-depth research on college student retention (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Spady's retention model is sociological in nature and is based on Durkheim's suicide model. Spady suggested that five variables (academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support) could be directly linked to the decision to drop out of school through the intervening variables of satisfaction and commitment (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Spady (1971) followed up his 1970 published theory with an empirical study, which found that formal academic performance was the dominant factor for student retention.

Like Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto’s (1975, 1987) interactionalist theory of student departure is based in part on Durkheim’s suicide model. However, this model is more longitudinal in nature and makes explicit connections between the university and individual students. Central to Tinto's model is the idea of academic and social integration and the patterns of integration between the student and the institution. A more in-depth explanation of the Tinto's
interactionalist theory of student departure and the definition of academic and social integration can be seen in the Theoretical Framework section of Chapter One.

While both the works of Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975, 1987) are groundbreaking and allowed many future theorists to build upon their work, their theories were developed at a time when the population within higher education was more homogeneous, as there is no mention of underrepresented student populations. However, Tinto's work, as noted in the Theoretical Frameworks section of Chapter One, has been cited more than any other retention theory and is used as the foundation for many future retention studies with diverse student populations (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Thus, Tinto's (1975) theory will continue to be a part of this literature review as the evolution of retention research is explored.

**Student Involvement**

In 1975, around the same time as the development of Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure, Alexander Astin conducted a longitudinal study on student retention, which found that students who were more involved within their university were more likely to persist. Astin (1984) defines student involvement as the "amount of physical and psychological energy that students devote to their academic experience" (p. 518). The author found that students who were in honors programs, involved in athletics, involved in student government, and interacted with faculty on campus were expelling their energy within their academic experience and were more likely to persist. Astin's (1975) student involvement theory is similar to Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure in that Astin's definition of student involvement can be seen in Tinto's informal academic systems (i.e. faculty/staff interactions) and formal social systems (i.e. extracurricular activities) (Tinto, 1975). However, Astin (1984) places more of an emphasis on students' capabilities to find the time and energy to expel in their
academic life. Thus, according to Astin, college administrators need to look at student time as the greatest competitor for retaining students.

After the groundbreaking work of Astin (1975) and Tinto (1975), Pascarella and Terenzini began conducting much research on social and academic integration and student involvement as these factors relate to retention. In fact, in 1980, Pascarella and Terenzini created a 34-item, five factor integration scale to test the validity of Tinto's (1975) model. The five-factors included Peer Group, Informal Interactions with Faculty, Faculty Concern for Student Development and Teaching, Academic and Intellectual Development, and Institutional Goal Commitment. The authors found that at a large, public institution, all five of the factors contributed to student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). However, the strongest contributing factor to student retention within their research was Informal Interactions with Faculty. This strong, positive relationship to student retention not only validates the importance of Tinto's (1975) informal academic integration, but also confirms the physical and psychological energy utilized to work with and meet with faculty in an informal manner (Astin, 1975).

The study of student involvement with faculty in both formal and informal settings became quite prevalent in the student retention literature. Pascarella (1980) studied these faculty contacts exclusively as they relate to student retention and found that "significant positive associations exist between extent and quality of student-faculty informal contact and students' educational aspirations, their attitudes toward college, their academic achievement, intellectual and personal development, and their institutional persistence" (p. 545). Terenzini, Lorang, and Pascarella (1981) did a follow up on the Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) study, focusing primarily on faculty-student interaction. This time, the setting of the study was at large,
The authors found in their follow-up study that faculty-student interaction did not have nearly the impact on student retention as in the previous study (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). The authors speculate that this may be due to the fact that at the independent university, professional advisors, rather than faculty advisors, advisor students on their academics.

Endo and Harpel (1982) conducted a study as an extension of Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) study, but focused solely on the four aspects of faculty interaction. Overall, faculty-student interaction had a strong, positive influence on the personal and social outcomes of students, as well as their satisfaction with their educational experience (Endo & Harpel, 1982). However, the authors' study is based on Astin's (1975) model of student involvement, and shows that, while faculty-interaction is highly important for student retention, these interactions can only go so far. While faculty interactions play a strong role in the intellectual development of students, peer group interactions and involvement in clubs and organizations play a strong role in student social development (Endo & Harpel, 1982).

Pascarella and Chapman (1983) explored the various student involvement factors, as well as social and academic integration, at both two-year and four-year institutions. The author's findings suggest "social integration played a stronger role in influencing persistence at 4-year, primarily residential institutions, while academic integration was more important at 2- and 4-year, primarily commuter institutions" (p. 87). The institutional differences were significant and suggest that "persistence in primarily commuter institutions will be more likely to be directly influenced by student background traits, while the influence of such student traits in residential institutions is more likely to be mediated by the actual experience of college" (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983, p. 99). These findings can also be linked to Astin's (1975) theory of student
involvement, in that student time plays a role in student retention (Astin, 1984). For example, commuter students, it is assumed, have less time to get involved in on-campus activities, so must focus primarily on the academic involvement aspects of their college experience, while residential students are all on-campus at all times and are more likely to be involved in campus life during their free time.

**Students from Diverse Backgrounds**

The majority of early retention research and the studies listed above all focus on the retention of college students and tend to define college students as a homogeneous group, with little cultural, income, and other differences (Zurita, 2004). However, the changing demographics within higher education forced student retention researchers to look into the retention of students from different backgrounds, particularly minority, first-generation, and low-incomes students (Tinto, 2006). Studying students from different backgrounds has become particularly important, as higher education professionals have been predicting and seeing an increase in diversity on college campuses for years, and these students play a large role in the retention numbers at various colleges and universities (Torres, 2003).

One of a number of minority groups being studied within higher educational research is the retention of Latino college students. In fact, "from 1990 to 2000, the Latino population grew by a significant rate (58%) and became the nation’s largest “minority” group. Despite their increasing presence in the U.S. landscape, their educational attainment levels are relatively low" (Zurita, 2004). Thus, several researchers began studying the retention of Latinos at colleges and universities.

Nora (1987) decided to utilize Tinto's (1975) theory and see if his interactionalist theory of student departure would apply to Latino students at a two-year university. Nora's (1987)
research found that Tinto's theory did not apply to this student demographic, as social integration was not substantiated in regards to Latino student retention. The author found that initial goal commitment, high school grades, and encouragement were the best predictors of Latino student retention. Zurita (2004) findings were similar to Nora in that she found that social integration within college plays a small role in Latino student retention, while high school performance and home-to-school transition played a large role in the retention of the population.

Building on Nora's study and other Latino college student studies, Hernandez (2000) and Torres (2003) each conducted a qualitative study as a way to attempt to build a theory to apply to Latino student retention. Hernandez (2000) found a variety of themes in his study that may be able to be applied to a theory of why Latino students leave higher education. These themes include the family, friends and peers, faculty and staff, co-curricular involvement, finding a Latino community, money matters, environment equals people, personal experiences shape the perception of the physical environment, and involvement as a way to break down the environment. Torres (2003) found that the Latino students' situating identity, influenced by the family and external environment, and influences on identity changes within the college environment impact Latino college student retention. The major theme within these studies appears to be that outside influences, such as family and friends within the Latino community, have a huge impact on Latino students' decisions to depart higher education.

Black college students attending predominantly white colleges and universities is another area of study that became prominent with the increased diversity across college campuses. Studies by Allen (1985, 1986, 1992), Solorzano (2000), and Thompson and Fretz (1991) all use words such as alienation, isolation, and marginalization to describe the experiences of black students at white universities. Allen (1992) speaks to the unfortunate history of black students
within higher education and discusses how these students continue to be plagued by "problems associated with access, retention, and achievement in U.S. higher education" (p. 41). Allen (1992) also points out that black students may be academically prepared and integrated into a higher educational institution, according to Tinto's definition, but they fail to graduate because they never socially integrate into their new college environment. Solorzano (2000) and Thompson and Fretz (1991) echo Allen's findings, stating that the feelings of isolation that black college students may feel at a white university plays a huge role in the retention of these students.

Thayer (2000) describes the role isolation plays in first-generation, low-income student retention. Low-income, first-generation students are less likely to understand college, and, thus, need a lot of support in order for them to be introduced to the culture of university life. For these students, both social and academic integration are important for the success of these students, but many outside characteristics, commitments, and experiences also play a role in the retention of first-generation, low-income students.

Herndon (1984) notes that financial aid can play a role in increasing the retention of first-generation, low-income students. Herndon's (1984) study found that students who participate in college work study programs are more likely to retain. Thus, giving low-income, first-generation students opportunities within college work study cannot only help fund their college education, but it can also increase the social integration for these students.

Overall, external factors, including financial aid and family influences, play a role in the retention of students from different backgrounds. Retaining diverse student populations does include helping them academically and socially integrate. However, overall retention within a heterogeneous student population goes beyond academic and social integration issues.
Nontraditional Students

Besides the increase of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity on college campuses, universities began to see an influx of nontraditional college students. In fact, "older, part-time, and commuter students have composed an increasingly larger proportion of undergraduate collegiate student bodies and are predicted to continue this trend as the number of traditional age college students decreases" (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 485). Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of nontraditional student attrition, described in depth in the Theoretical Frameworks section of this paper, emphasizes environmental variables over social integration as it pertains to nontraditional student retention. The authors found that the nontraditional students they studied had less time for outside class activities and, thus, did not become socially integrated into their college or university. Social integration had little impact on the retention of nontraditional students and factors, such as poor academic performance, intent to leave, background/defining variables, and environmental variables, played a large role in the retention of these students.

Metzner and Bean (1987) conducted another study on 624 part-time, commuter students and found similar results to their 1985 study. According to the authors, GPA and credit hours enrolled, utility of education for future employment, satisfaction with student role, and the opportunity to transfer were all a function of nontraditional student dropout. In other words, nontraditional students were likely to drop out of college if they were not academically integrated into the university community and/or showed a lack of commitment to completing their degree at their initial university due to a perceived notion of not gaining future employment or the opportunity to transfer to a university that is perceived as better or more prestigious.

The idea that social integration has less of an impact on nontraditional students was also seen in a study by Pascarella and Chapman (1983). The author's looked at the applicability of
Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure, and found that social integration was extremely important for student retention for students at four-year, residential universities. However, when Tinto's model was applied to four-year commuter students and two-year commuter students, the importance of academic integration far outweighed social integration for retaining this student population. Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington (1986) echoed these findings when studying 825 nontraditional students attending two-year universities. In fact, these authors not only found that academic integration is more important than social integration when retaining these students, but also discovered that certain aspects social integration vary in importance by gender. For example, men were more likely to be retained if they were socially integrated into their university through knowing a faculty member or administrator, while women felt socially integrated by participating in leadership opportunities. While social integration did not play a large role in the retention of nontraditional students according to Pascarella et al.'s (1986) study, knowing what aspects of social integration are important to certain genders can help in creating programs to retain nontraditional students at a two-year institution.

Tinto (1997) began to recognize the fact that his theory needed to be revised to apply to nontraditional students. His interactionalist theory of student departure always emphasized the parallel yet separate relationship between academic and social integration. However, Tinto found that social integration can easily emerge from academic integration, especially when applied to nontraditional students who may not have the time to participate in campus activities and create a true peer group at their university. Thus, Tinto suggested that classrooms at community colleges and other colleges with large commuter and nontraditional student population can become learning communities, where the social and academic worlds merge. In Tinto's (1997) words, "classrooms serve as smaller academic and social meeting places or cross roads that intersect the
diverse faculty and student communities that mark the college generally. Membership in the
community of the classroom provides important linkages to membership in communities external
to the classroom” (p. 616).

**Beyond Social and Academic Integration**

The majority of the studies discussed in this literature review thus far mostly utilized
Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure or some variation on his theory (e.g.
Bean, 1980; Metzner & Bean, 1985) as the theoretical framework. However, Tinto (2006) noted
that retention theories have evolved beyond social and academic integration and have begun to
integrate the importance of the broad "array of forces, cultural, economic, social, and
institutional, that shape student retention" (p. 3). If fact, student retention research now
comprises of a "range of models, some sociological, some psychological, and others economic in
nature that have been proposed as being better suited to the task of explaining student leaving" (Tinto, 2006, p. 4). An explanation of some of the institutional, economic, social, and cultural
theories will be explained in further detail in the below sections.

**Institutional.** While Tinto (1975) saw the institution as an organization, the majority of
his interactionalist theory of student departure focused on how the student can fit into the
organization, with only a small emphasis on what the institution can do to create a better fit for
the student. Bean and Braxton are two of the key researchers who focused on how organizational
characteristics can contribute to overall student retention. Bean (1980), as explained in the
Theoretical Frameworks section of this paper, compared student retention to work turnover. He
found that college, as an organization, would be more likely to retain students if they admitted
students with higher GPAs (compared with hiring strong work applicants) and if their
university's education is perceived as quality (compared with having workers perceive their
workplace as quality). Thus, the applicants the university admits and a positive perception of the university will help to increase student retention.

Similar to the findings of Astin (1975), Pascarella (1980), and Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) discussed above, Braxton, Bray, and Berger (2000) found that faculty play a large role in assisting in creating a positive institutional environment. Braxton et al. (1980) saw faculty and their teaching skills as one of the largest pieces of the university as an organization. Faculty teaching skills are often what students will remark on when discussing the quality of their educational experience. Thus, having faculty members that are organized, prepared, clear, and possess a strong instructional skill set help to ensure that the campus as an organization is perceived in a positive manner and the college retains the students taking the courses from these strong faculty members.

Berger (2001) studied what a college campus can do as an organization to be perceived as quality. Providing students with information and clear lines of communication about campus goals, values, policies, and procedures was the top way for the organization to create a strong, trusting relationship with its students. Others ways to enhance this trust and, in turn, retain students include having students involved in organizational decisions, ensuring fairness within policies and procedures, and providing a balance between structure and responsiveness.

Braxton and McClendon (2001) echoed Berger's (2001) sediments regarding recommendations for enhancing the university as an organization to increase student retention. Besides recommending open lines of communication from the university to students, Braxton and McClendon (2001) also made recommendations for the areas of enrollment management, faculty development, faculty reward systems, student orientation programs, and residence life. Braxton and McClendon (2001) made twenty recommendations in eight different domains of
institutional practice, “thereby suggesting that the responsibility for student retention is campus-wide and goes beyond the province of admissions and student affairs to include academic and non-academic administrators and faculty members” (p. 67).

**Economic.** Academic and social integration and institutional theories of retention all place retention within institutional and student parameters. However, as was seen when discussing students from diverse backgrounds and nontraditional students, external factors can play a role in student retention. St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (2000) specifically cite how economic reasons can play a role in student retention. These authors' criticized Tinto for claiming that when students stated that they are leaving for financial reasons, it was simply an excuse disguising the real reason for departure, which is usually not feeling integrated into their campus community. However, ability to pay is a serious concern for many students, and, according to St. John et al. (2000), students will leave their institution for either the real or perceived notion that they will not be able to afford their current university.

Herndon's (1984) research also found that economic reasons can play a role in the retention of students. According to Herndon (1984), it is possible to predict potential dropouts based on ability to pay and provide these students with modified Financial Aid packages. Herndon (1984) notes that Financial Aid packages should not only include additional grants and loans, but also college work study. Providing students with college work study not only assists students with paying for college, but also helps integrate them into the campus community. Once again, social integration is at work in regards to student retention but, this time, in collaboration with economic need.

**Social.** Tinto (1975) utilized social anthropology with his interactionalist theory of student departure. In particular, Tinto (1988) utilized Van Gennep's "rites of passage" to
conceptualize the process of students integrating into their university environment. There are three stages in Tinto's rites of passage. These stages include:

1. The Stage of Separation. "Requires students to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the past communities, most typically those associated with the local high school and place of residence" (p. 443).

2. Transition to College. "A period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped for associations with communities of the present" (p. 444).

3. Incorporation in College. "After passing through the stages of separation and transition, the individual is faced with the task of becoming integrated, or to use Van Gennep's term, incorporated into the community of the college" (p. 446).

While Tinto (1988) admits that his rites of passage are not perfect and can vary by student type (e.g. commuter, older students), Nora (2001) found that Tinto's rites of passage do not assist at all in regards to student retention. In fact, Nora (2001) proposed that students do not need to separate from the significant others in their lives (i.e. parents and friends) because these significant others play a key role in supporting students throughout college. Outside support and attaining a bachelor's degree went hand in hand according to the author's research. Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994) also found that retaining ties with students' past communities can be an asset to their college success. However, Terenzini et al. (1994) did note that the significant others from past communities can also be a liability when it comes to college success if significant others and students are not on the same page when it comes to the role of a college student.
Terenzini et al. (1994) discuss how college students and their relationships with high school friends attending the same university can "provide important support during the transition" (p. 64) and play a "bridging function" in helping these students feel at home in their new college environment. Christie and Dinham (1991) also found that students who live with their high school friends on campus seemed to become more socially integrated into their college community. This living arrangement helped to decrease any sense of isolation these students may have felt. However, the authors found that, at some point, the students needed to separate from their high school communities in some ways and make friends outside of their initial circle. Failure to do this, according to Christie and Dinham (1991) resulted in students not feeling welcome at their university and departing.

London (1989) showed an interesting perspective in relation to the rites of passage with first-generation college students. Like the previous studies talking about high school friends being both an asset and a hindrance to college success, family can be both an asset and a setback to the degree attainment for first-generation students. First-generation students want to and seem to need to remain tied to their family. However, as they become more and more ingrained in their college community, they begin to feel disconnected from the family. This brings up some interesting cultural and sociological differences between first-generation families and families who have attained as college degree. As London (1989) states

From a wider cultural perspective the stories of these first-generation students dramatize the consequences for individuals of the shift from a traditional to a modern society. In traditional societies intergenerational continuity—in the areas of work, family, religion, and community—encourages the formation of a secure identity. Industrial societies, however, permit and even require the making of choices in these areas, so that people are
less certain of how and where and with whom they will find themselves. Thus the past is no longer as effective a guide to the present or the future, and the ethic of individual achievement and upward mobility that we, on the one hand, extol can, on the other, produce a discontinuity that cleaves families and friends (p. 168).

**Cultural.** Similar to London's (1989) findings, Tierney (1992) stated that applying the rites of passage to minorities can be harmful to their success. The author studied Native American students and found that college going was collective for this population and not individual. These students could not go through a ritual to leave their home community; they did not have a choice. Waterman (2004) studied twelve Haudenosaunee college students, from the Iroquois Native American tribe in upstate New York, and she, like Tierney (1992), also found that family was the greatest form of support for these students. These students managed to maintain their identity while still attending college, which resembled the integrating identity of adult and returning students (Waterman, 2004).

Attinasi (1989) and Torres (2003) both utilized ground theory to look at the cultural implications of student retention of Latino students. Latino students in Attinasi’s (1989) study were more likely to be successful if the college involved their friends and family in the college integration process. These students utilized cognitive maps to navigate their new college environment, and needed the help of their significant others to successfully navigate this new terrain. The retention of Latino students is also influenced by "where they grew up, their generational status in the United States, and self-perception; the societal status plays a major role in situating their identity in the first-year of college" (Torres, 2003, p. 544). Latino students, like Native American students, do not have the opportunity to separate from their culture, for better or worse. Thus, making sure colleges involve the family of Latino students, from orientation to
graduation, is key to keeping these students engaged and educating Latino families on the college culture (Torres, 2003).

**Senior Year Retention**

In 1989, Neumann and Finaly-Neumann did the first known study on the retention of third and fourth year college students. The authors utilized the Quality Learning Experience (QLE) model to predict the persistence of students in their final years of college. The authors found that Tinto's retention models could not be applied fully to the retention of college juniors and seniors. According to the authors, students later in their college career are more likely to be retained if they are academically integrated, with less emphasis on social integration. The author's QLE proposed five components of junior/senior retention: resources, content, flexibility, student-faculty contact, and involvement in academic programs. Neumann and Finaly-Neumann (1989) found that Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which highlights advising, teaching, and the value of courses, is the theoretical framework most applicable to college junior and senior retention.

A decade later, Mohr, Eiche, and Sedlacek (1998) studied the attrition of college seniors. The authors predicted that college seniors leave their institution due to a dissatisfaction with academic guidance, dissatisfaction with access to school-related information, dissatisfaction with the quality of education, and institutional alienation. However, the 42 college seniors who left while in their senior year in Mohr et al.'s (1998) study stated they left the university due to financial strain, transferring to another school, moving, starting or supporting a family, enhancing career development, personal problems, and needing a break from college. In other words, external factors, such as family status and personal issues, played a role in senior retention. Mohr et al.'s (1998) findings suggest that external and academic factors are key in the
retention of college seniors, which goes hand in hand with Metzner and Bean's (1987) student attrition model for nontraditional students. Mohr et al. (1998) suggested that college seniors are already socially integrated into their institution, so academic integration and external and social factors become a primary concern for these students.

Donhardt (2012) and Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitchell, and Wilson (2012), more than a decade after Mohr et al. (1998), are the most recent articles on senior year retention. Donhart's (2012) study focused on some of the early college variables that may impact senior year retention. According to the author, certain academic issues can predict senior year attrition. Donhardt (2012) found that students who stopped out, took developmental courses, received an "F", dropped to part-time status, and/or withdrew from classes were likely to withdraw in their senior year because they had not made the academic progress to complete their degree. The author notes that following up and supporting students early on who are struggling academically can assist in retaining them through their senior year.

Hunt et al. (2012) echoed Mohr et al.'s (1998) findings in stating that both academic and external factors cause the withdrawal of college seniors. Hunt et al. (2012) found that family issues, stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, off-campus employment, and upper-level advising are the reasons seniors withdrew according to data from a withdrawal survey. However, unlike Mohr et al. (1998), Hunt et al. (2012) noted that social involvement and a sense of belonging play a role in senior year retention. Thus, the Hunt et al. (2012) study indicates that both Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure and Bean's (1980) student attrition theory can be utilized with senior year retention, as the retention of these students combines academic and social integration and external factors and concerns.
Conclusion

Higher educational retention research has come a long way during the over four decades of study. Early retention research believed that students failed, not institutions and utilized a mentality now referred to as "blaming the victim" (Tinto, 2006, p. 2). However, retention research has changed and expanded over the years. The understanding of the "experience of students of different backgrounds has been greatly enhanced, as has the appreciation of how a broader array of forces, cultural, economic, social, and institutional shape student retention" (Tinto, 2006, p. 3). Models and theoretical frameworks have moved beyond student involvement and academic and social integration; some models are sociological, some psychological, and others economic in nature. These models have been proposed as being better suited to the task of explaining student leaving (Tinto, 2006).

However, with all of these decades of retention studies, a significant gap in the research remains: the retention of college seniors. Only four known studies exist on the subject, and all four studies state that these students withdraw in their senior year for different reasons (e.g. academic integration, social integration, external factors). Thus, studying the decision-making process for students withdraw within their last semester of college can add to this gap in the literature. It can also assist in determining which theoretical framework can best be applied to these late college dropouts. The most recent article on senior year retention (Hunt et al., 2012) implies that both Bean's (1980) and Tinto's (1975) retention theories can be applied to senior year departure. Thus, the author of this study utilized these two theoretical frameworks to see if it relates to senior year departure of CSP students.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Methodology

Based on the topic of traditional, undergraduate students at CSP who get close to graduation but do not cross the finish line, one central research question was developed to study this problem of practice. The central research question is as follows:

How do undergraduate college students at CSP who are within a semester of degree completion make sense of their decision to depart?

Due to the exploratory nature of this research study and the central research question, a qualitative research design and an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research tradition were utilized for this study.

The worldview the author subscribes is best described as social constructivist, as the author believes that meaning is established for individuals within the context that they live and work (Creswell, 2007). A social constructivist worldview is the framework from which the author’s research is conducted, as it best answers the research question. While this worldview goes hand in hand with the central research question, the line between researcher and professional had to be established for this study. As a researcher, the author ensured that during interviews she allowed the participants to fully express and detail their experiences and reasons behind not completing their bachelor’s degree. She did not allow her professional position, as Director of Advising at CSP, to push participants toward bachelor’s degree completion.

Overall, the author of this study feels passionate about bachelor’s degree attainment. She always wants students to complete their college degree, so the students can be more socially and economically valued and, hopefully, feel a sense of accomplishment. Better understanding the decision-making process for students who did not cross the finish line assists the author in
creating better late retention strategies at CSP, which may help future students achieve their goal of a bachelor’s degree.

**Research Design**

Creswell (2009) points out that a qualitative research design is "useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine" (p. 18). In other words, this type of design should be utilized when the researcher knows very little about a central phenomenon and little research has been done on this phenomenon. Because the issue of late college student attrition has been sparsely studied, a qualitative research design is best in order to identify variables that can be measured for later study (Creswell, 2007).

Certain problems of practice are beyond the scope of quantitative research and statistical analysis because quantitative studies do not take into account the uniqueness of individuals and situations (Creswell, 2007). A qualitative study "is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Exploring the reasons for late student departure at CSP fits within a qualitative design because the study will explore how students make sense out of their unique late dropout decision. This study is about individual experiences, not quantitative data analysis.

**Research Tradition**

An interpretive phenomenological approach, abbreviated IPA, is a "qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). IPA is informed from some of the key concepts within phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. Many of the principles from these key areas of the philosophy of knowledge carefully examine the human experience though a thorough understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals (Smith,
Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These philosophical areas are more conceptual in nature, and IPA brings a more practical approach to researching lived experiences. Smith et al. (2009) notes that IPA establishes a "worldly position with a focus on understanding the perspective directedness of our involvement in the lived world".

IPA goes "back to the things themselves...rather than attempting to fix experiences in predefined or overly abstract categories" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 40). It attempts to examine how individuals make sense of their experiences with little interference from the researcher, while at the same time allowing the researcher to interpret and bracket findings based on the patterns presented by the individuals being studied (Smith et al., 2009). In the case of late college drop outs, no solutions have been created to fix this issue because little research has been done on this student population. IPA is perfect for this problem of practice, as sense needs to be made out of the experiences of these students before a solution can be created to help prevent these students from withdrawing when so close to graduation. Utilizing IPA with this problem of practice is, as Smith et al. (2009) put it, a double hermeneutic: it is about the researcher making sense of others making sense of their late drop out decision.

Context

Concordia University, St. Paul (CSP) was selected as the research site because it is the researcher’s place of employment, and the researcher is able to easily gather the data necessary for this study. Besides simple convenience sampling, CSP's location and student body make it an ideal research site. CSP's campus is located in an urban section of St. Paul, Minnesota, where the students "come from diverse backgrounds, faith traditions, and cultural heritages" (http://www.csp.edu/academics/why-study-at-csp/). Obtaining a sample that includes students from different demographical backgrounds assists in shedding some light on the late departure
decisions of a diverse student body, which is more representative of today’s higher education population.

**Sampling**

A purposive homogeneous sampling method was utilized for this study. Purposive sampling means that a particular population was selected to give the researcher insight into a particular experience (Smith et al., 2009), and homogenous sampling is defined as purposefully sampling individuals who possess similar characteristics (Creswell, 2012). A purposive homogenous sample is necessary within an IPA study, as the "more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes, and the overall essence of the experience for all participants" (Creswell, 2007, p. 122). The purposive homogenous sample of students for this study consist of previous, traditional, college students who departed from CSP when they were within a semester (15 credit hours) or less of completing their bachelor's degree. For this study, traditional college student was defined as students who were 18-22 year-old years of age when taking face-to-face, daytime college courses at CSP.

**Recruitment**

The participant recruitment process began by utilizing the BANNER Student Information System and Microsoft Access at CSP. A list of possible participants were extracted by creating a Microsoft Access query that pulled previous traditional CSP students who were within 15 credits of graduation and were no longer registered, active students. In order to obtain a more homogenous group from this list, the researcher only recruited previous students whose anticipated graduation date was between May of 2010 and December of 2012. All the previous students whose graduation date was within this date range were be contacted via email and
invited to participate in two semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A). No incentives were utilized to entice participation in this study. From the emails, twelve former students showed interest in participating in this study. After initial phone consultations with all twelve potential participants, which discussed the informed consent and the interview process, ten former CSP students became the final participants for this study.

Participants

According to Smith et al. (2009), sample sizes of between four and ten are appropriate for a professional doctorate study. Quality over quantity is important in an IPA study, as a large sample size may cause the researcher to be "in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). Thus, for this study, the researcher aimed for six to ten participants and was pleased when ten former students agreed to participate in this study.

Table 1 outlines these ten participants and is seen below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Anticipated Graduation Date</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>May of 2010</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong/Asian-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>December of 2011</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bri</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>December of 2012</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuck</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>May of 2010</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>August of 2012</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>August of 2012</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>May of 2011</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sid</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>August of 2010</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiff</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>December of 2011</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vince</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>May of 2012</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong/Asian American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant profiles. As stated above, the researcher only anticipated six participants in her study and was pleased when ten participants made the decision to and followed through with
being a part of this study. Demographically, three of the ten participants were male, while seven were female. Four of the ten were students of color, which is very representative of CSP's diverse student population where over 30% of students are domestic students of color. All participants were in the same age range (25 - 28 years old), which was purposeful on the researcher's part, as the researcher only wanted to interview participants who were traditional, college-aged students when they attended CSP.

Amy described herself in our initial email communication as a "wife and mother living in Europe." She is Hmong and from a very traditional Hmong family, where the role of the woman is to care for her family. Both of Amy's parents possess a college degree, as well as several of her brothers and sisters, so she felt pressure to attend college, although all she ever wanted was to marry her then boyfriend and start a family. She chose to attend CSP because it was close to home, and one of her brothers earned his bachelor's degree from CSP.

Anne is a white female from a very educated family. In fact, both of her parents possess advanced degrees. She always knew she would go to college directly out of high school and chose to attend CSP because it was close to home and offered a business program that she felt would prepare her for an advanced career. She described her time at CSP as "very productive", where she was involved in a few clubs and had multiple internships during her college career.

Bri came to CSP from South Dakota as a legacy student. Her family belongs to the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LCMS), which is the church body that owns and operates CSP. Bri can name up to ten relatives with a degree from CSP, including her mother, who raised Bri, an only child, as a single mother. She talked about never having any issues with adjusting to being away from her mother. Bri talked fondly of her time at CSP in regards to her social life there, but spoke poorly regarding her academic experiences at CSP.
Chuck came to CSP for one reason: to play collegiate baseball. He knew getting a college degree was important, but only looked at colleges that offered him a baseball scholarship. He is a first generation college student, and his father is a very successful business owner. He has three siblings, and all but one have a college degree at this point, with his youngest sister currently working on completing her degree. He discussed not really remembering his time at CSP outside of playing baseball.

Lauren is a first generation college student who chose CSP because of the financial aid package she was offered. She graduated from the high school down the street from CSP and was very excited at the opportunity to earn a college degree. She talked at length about attending college to make a better life for herself and to be a role model to her younger sister, who has since attended community college but has yet to earn her degree. She very much enjoyed her time at CSP and talked about feeling at home in the CSP community.

Like Bri, Meg is LCMS, and many of her family members are graduates of CSP. Meg's father is an LCMS pastor, and her sister works as a youth director in an LCMS church. Meg chose CSP because she felt "called by God" to be Lutheran Classroom Teacher and work in a Lutheran elementary school. CSP is one of the few schools in the nation to offer a Lutheran Classroom Teacher certification, which is what Meg knew she needed to achieve her career goal.

Molly is a first-generation student who stated that she knew nothing about college while in high school, but knew she had to go to college "to get a good job". She was raised by a single mother, and she has one brother and several half siblings. None of her siblings have attended college, and she wanted to be the first in her family to obtain a bachelor's degree. She chose CSP because "they called her the most and sold her on the place." She described her time at CSP as
extremely hectic. She stated multiple times that she never felt fully engaged in the CSP community during her entire college career.

Sid is first-generation college student who described his socioeconomic status as "very, very poor". He grew up in Florida and moved to St. Paul, Minnesota to live with an aunt in order to escape the gang lifestyle that four of his five brothers had become involved with. He knew that he needed a degree to obtain a great career and assist his family back in Florida. When he began his time at CSP, he had a few misdemeanors on his police record but wanted to leave his life of breaking the rules behind. Sid began working part-time jobs when he was 12 years old and never socially engaged with his classmates in during middle or high school, and he continued this pattern at CSP. He discussed not remembering the names of any of his classmates from CSP.

Tiff is a first-generation college student who attended CSP extremely excited to get involved and live the college lifestyle. She was raised by a single mother, who consistently pushed the importance of college in terms of obtaining an advanced career. Tiff’s mother also told her that college should be "the best time of her life". Tiff described her time at CSP as wonderful, where she was a student leader, involved in multiple clubs, and earned above a 3.0 GPA.

Vince is a second-generation Hmong immigrant, whose parents speak only Hmong in the household. His family converted to LCMS when he was a teenager, and he felt "called by God" to be a Lutheran pastor when he was sixteen years old. Thus, CSP was the obvious choice for college, as there was a direct path to seminary after earning a bachelor's degree. He described his time at CSP as "wonderful", and a place where his "faith became even stronger".
Data Collection

The primary method of data collection within an IPA study is in-depth interviewing (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2013). Thus, two in-depth interviews were completed with the ten participants in this study. The interviews were semi-structured and involved an "informal, interactive process and utilized open-ended comments and questions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).

The first interview began with a social conversation, in order to create a relaxed and trusting research environment (Moustakas, 1994). Then, the researcher began asking a set of open-ended questions. Although this study utilized two interviews, Siedman's (2013) three-interview series was used as the framework for the interviews. Seidman (2013) states that a good phenomenological interview will cover three main areas (pp. 21-22):

- **participants' experience** in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time
- **participants' present lived experience** in the topic area of the study
- **participants' reflection** on the meaning of their experience

The interviews protocol with the list of interview questions can be viewed in Appendix D. As can be seen in this interview protocol, significant time was spent on each of Siedman's (2013) three interview-series subsections, with the first interview focusing on the first two subsections and the second interview focusing on the third subsection. While the interview protocol and questions were used as a guide for the interviews, the researcher was flexible within the interview and often abandoned the structure in order to follow the concerns of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009).
IPA "requires a verbatim record of the data collection event" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 73). As Seidman (2013) notes "to substitute the researcher's paraphrasing or summaries of what the participants say for their actual words is to substitute the researcher's consciousness for that of the participants" (Seidman, 2013, p. 117). Thus, the interviews were all be audio-recorded using the researcher's password protected I-Phone. The researcher used the Rev Voice Recorder App (http://www.rev.com/) in order to have a word for word account of the participants’ thoughts and consciousness (Seidman, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). The interviews were transcribed using the Rev Voice Recorder Transcription Service, which provided secure and confidential transcription within 48 hours of interview submission (http://www.rev.com/).

Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2009) outlined a six step process for data analysis within an IPA study. The first step involves reading and rereading the interviews. This is the slowing down part of the data collection and analysis process in which "the participant becomes the focus of analysis" (Smith et al., 2009). Step two is the initial noting stage. Often, this stage merges with stage one, as noting often instinctively occurs when reading and rereading the interview transcripts. However, during stage two, the researcher looked for three specific types of comments and differentiated between these three types of comments during the note stage. These comments included (Smith et al., 2009, p. 84):

- Descriptive comments focused on describing the content of what the participant has said, the subject of the talk within the transcript.
- Linguistic comments focused upon exploring the specific use of language by the participant.
- Conceptual comments focused on engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level.
Step three and four, according to Smith et al. (2009) involve developing emergent themes and searching for connections across emergent themes. Throughout the developing themes and searching for connections stages, the researcher utilized her notes from the noting stage, and used Microsoft Access as an organizational tool to double check her work to ensure she did not miss any themes or connections. Putting her notes in Microsoft Access also allowed her to query on the themes presented.

After completing steps one through four for the first interview, the researcher repeated these steps for the subsequent interview, which is step five according Smith et al. (2009). Then, the researcher moved on to the final step, step six, to look for patterns across the cases (Smith et al., 2009). The goal of this step is to point "to ways in which participants represent unique idiosyncratic instances but also share higher order qualities" (Smith et al., 2009). A table outlining the themes and patterns is presented in Chapter 4 in order to help the reader visualize these higher order qualities.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

**Informed consent and IRB.** Before each interview, the participants were given an informed consent form as both required protocol and to help establish trust (see Appendix B). The researcher went over the informed consent form verbally with each participant and asked them to both verbally agree to the informed consent form, as well as sign the form. The informed consent included the following information for participants (Creswell, 2009, p. 89):

- Identification of the researcher
- Identification of the sponsoring institution
- Identification of how the participants were selected
- Identification of the purpose of the research
- Identification of the benefits for participating
- Identification of the level and type of participant involvement
- Notation of risks to the participant
- Guarantee of confidentiality to the participant
- Assurance that the participant can withdraw at any time
- Provision of names of persons to contact if questions arise

Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before the interviews and before any data was collected for this study. The assurance of the principal investigator was also be acquired. The signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form is in the appendix (see Appendix C).

Confidentiality. Smith et al. (2009) notes that "raw, unedited data transcripts should only be seen by the research team: any data for wider use must be edited for anonymity" (p. 53). Thus, the storage of any participant data is important and must be kept confidential. To keep this data confidential, the audio recordings from the interviews that were stored on the researcher's password protected I-phone were erased as soon as they were uploaded to the researcher's computer. All electronic data from the audio recordings and interview transcripts were kept on the researcher's password protected computer until the conclusion of the research, at which time, these files will be delete.

Throughout the transcribing process, any identifying characteristics of the participants were removed from the report and pseudonyms were used during the data collection to identify each participant’s data. A pseudonym key was be created for the researcher and kept on her computer until the conclusion of the research study. The signed, paper informed consent forms
were scanned into the researcher's computer and then shredded. They will be deleted at the conclusion of this study.

**Reciprocity.** Reciprocity refers to "the need for the participants in the study to receive something in return for their willingness to be observed and provide information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 243). No material incentives were provided to participants in this study. However, the participants were given the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their decision to leave CSP with only a few credits remaining and make meaning on how this decision plays a role in their current and future life goals. This intangible form of reciprocity was the reason for using an IPA research tradition, which is to allow participants to be "engaged with an experience of something major in their lives...reflect on the significance of what is happening and...engage with these reflections" (Smith et al., 2007).

**Interaction with participants.** Within an IPA study, establishing a rapport with the participants is key to effective interviewing (Smith et al., 2009). One of the ways to establish this rapport is to ensure the participant's fully trust the researcher to protect their information. The data storage section of this chapter fully describes how the researcher took extra steps to keep the participants' identities anonymous and the interview data secure. Also, the researcher gave all participants the opportunity to review the interview transcripts for accuracy (Smith et al., 2009). While this opportunity was available to all participants, none of the participants decided to review their transcripts and affirmed their full trust in the researcher for sharing accurate data about their lived experiences. All of the above steps helped establish a trusting relationship between the researcher and participants to allow for more rich data collection and an ethical, participant-centered study.
Quality and Validity

Smith et al. (2009) note that qualitative research is still “being evaluated according to the criteria for validity and reliability which are applied to quantitative research” (p. 179). However, the authors believe that the validity and quality of qualitative research should be evaluated in relation to the appropriateness of the type of research being conducted. Thus, Yardley’s (2000) four principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research was selected as a way for ensuring the quality of this study. Yardley’s four principles are sensitivity to content, commitment to rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Sensitivity to content can be shown in many different ways, and the author of this study shows this sensitivity through truly giving the participants a voice in her study. The author showed care for her participants by treating them as unique individuals and allowing their viewpoints to be the center of the study. Verbatim extracts from the interviews and cautious interpretations of the interview data show this sensitivity. Chapter 5 of this study also shows a true sensitivity to the content, as the author has a dialogue with the existing literature and its relationship to her findings from the interviews.

Commitment and rigor are demonstrated in this study through attending to the participants and the “quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis undertaken” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 181). The author is passionate about her study. Thus, committing to her participants and ensuring that a rigorous interview and analysis process is undertaken is a simple step in completing a quality study that gets at the heart of the research question.

Transparency and coherence, the third principle, is demonstrated in this chapter, where the author has outlined her research design and process. The author knows that that the write up of her study has, “as its focal topic, a significant experiential domain for the participants, and the
writer is able to demonstrate a commitment to attending closely to the ‘thing itself’” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 182), which is late college dropouts.

Impact and importance is the final principle, and Smith et al. (2009) explain that “a test of real validity lies in whether a study tells the reader something interesting, important or useful” (p. 183). The author feels that her study will be useful in adding to a significant gap in the retention literature. She also finds the study to be interesting to her and the colleagues she has discussed it with, and hopes that others will find the content of this study appealing.

Another way to test for validity, according to Smith et al. (2009) is to conduct an independent audit, as suggested by Yin (1989). The independent audit means filing “all the data in such a way that somebody could follow the chain of evidence that leads from initial documentation through to the final report” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 183). Through auditing this evidence, the researcher is attempting to “ensure that the account produced is a credible one, not that it is the only credible one” (p. 183). The researcher of this study did conduct of independent audit of her study, and actually made a few edits after this audit to increase the study’s credibility. While the researcher did not have an outside researcher conduct this audit, she does feel that her own independent audit was thorough and added to the credibility and validity of her study.

**Limitations**

One of the main limitations of this study is the lens from which this study is conducted, particularly the theoretical frameworks. Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure and Bean's (1980) and Metzner and Bean's (1987) student attrition models are solution-based frameworks, attempting to solve the issue of college student attrition. Even the author's personal lens in which she views college student attrition is solution-oriented, where the author's bias
appears in attempting to find ways to curb the issue of late student departure. While this lens is not inappropriate for this study, it does hinder a pure IPA research tradition, where understanding the participants' experiences takes precedence over constructing any fixes to the problem of practice.

Another limitation, as described by Smith et al. (2009), is the larger IPA sample size utilized in this study. Smith et al. (2009) cautioned that a large sample size cause the researcher to be "in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated" (p. 51) and larger datasets tend to inhibit time, reflection, and dialogue (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), conducting twenty interviews (two for each of the ten participants, as done in this study) can make for a large and overwhelming dataset. While it is true that the large number of interviews did lead to a large number of superordinate and sub-themes, the opportunity to hear from a larger and more diverse group of previous CSP students lead to more themes, which can then lead to more opportunities for further research. Because of the larger sample size, there are now more areas to pursue for further study on late student departure to help fill in this significant gap in retention research.

**Conclusion**

Chapter Three provided an overview of the research methods that were utilized for this study. Due to the exploratory nature of the problem of practice, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach was utilized. Details related to the research design, including data analysis and protection of human subjects, were explained in this chapter. The application of this research design for this study will be reviewed in Chapters Four and Five.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The researcher of this study intended to gain a greater understanding of how students at Concordia University, St. Paul came to the decision to depart college within a semester of earning their bachelor’s degree. The theoretical frameworks that guided this study were Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure and the retention models of Bean (1980) and Metzner and Bean (1987). While conducting two semi-structured interviews with ten participants, the researcher attempted to answer the central research through the interview protocol found in Appendix D. The central research question is as follows:

How do undergraduate college students at CSP who are within a semester of degree completion make sense of their decision to depart?

After analyzing the interview transcripts from the two interviews, four superordinate and eleven sub-themes emerged. These themes spoke to how the participants made sense of their time at CSP and their decision to depart when so close to completing their bachelor’s degree. An explanation of each of these superordinate themes and sub-themes is the basis of this chapter.

The superordinate themes and their sub-themes are: 1.) Timely Degree Completion (1.1 Career and Salary Motivation, 1.2 Outside Responsibilities, 1.3 Lack of Social Integration), 2.) Distrust in the Academic Process (2.1 Uselessness of Coursework, 2.2 Poor Academic Advising Experience), 3.) Barriers to Final Degree Completion (3.1 Starting a Family, 3.2 Financial Issues, 3.3 Legal Trouble, 3.4 Mental Health Concerns), and 4.) Success without a Bachelor’s Degree (4.1 Family, 4.2 Employment and Graduate School Opportunities). Table 2, which visualizes how each participant encompassed each of these themes, is below:
Table 2: Participant and Theme Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Career (1.1)</th>
<th>Outside (1.2)</th>
<th>Social (1.3)</th>
<th>Uselessness (2.1)</th>
<th>Advising (2.2)</th>
<th>Family (3.1)</th>
<th>Financial (3.2)</th>
<th>Legal (3.3)</th>
<th>Mental Health (3.4)</th>
<th>Family (4.1)</th>
<th>Employment (4.2)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<td>Amy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Anne</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bri</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<th>2</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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</table>

Timely Degree Completion

The first superordinate theme to emerge during interviews was a “get in, get out” mentality by several of the participants related to their time at CSP. These participants consistently spoke about wanting to complete their degree in a timely manner due to several different reasons. The reasons became the converging sub-themes under this superordinate theme. These identified sub-themes are: Career and Salary Motivation, Outside Responsibilities, and Lack of Social Integration.

Career and salary motivation. Like many college students today, the majority of the participants in this study noted that their primary reason for attending college was to get a better job and make more money. In fact, six of the ten participants talked at length about their desire to complete a degree as quickly as possible, so they could get a job and make money. As Anne put it, she wanted to hurry through the degree completion process so she could “make some money and move on with her life”. All of the students who discussed their primary motivation for
attending college as career and salary motivation attempted to rush through their degree completion to the detriment of actually earning their degree.

Sid, a first-generation college student, who described his socioeconomic status as “very, very poor,” talked at length about his desire to earn his degree in less than four years in order to begin making money to break the cycle of poverty in his family:

The only reason I wanted to go to school was to make sure I got a job. I majored in business cause that is what seemed practical. Making money was very important, and I needed to start making money ASAP. I took a lot of classes in each semester to get through quicker. All I wanted was a cool office job, and I moved way too fast.

Like Sid, Molly is also a first-generation college student. She discussed how she did not even realize there could be other reasons for attending college besides getting a job and making money. She rushed through her classes trying to obtain the dream job that she feels colleges promise their students. She discussed coming from a working class home where education was never a priority:

I never had anyone holding my hand when it came to school. No one helped me with homework, and no one talked about college. When colleges came to visit my high school, I got excited about going and earning more money than my mom. I knew that I had to rush through college though because I did not have the time or money to spend four or more years in more classes. My money motivation put me in a hurry.

Even though Anne was not a first-generation college student, she also felt pressure to hurry through completing her bachelor’s degree. As a double major in marketing and finance and a straight A student, she saw the potential wages that she could earn. She became so fixated on
her career prospects that, while she was completing multiple, high-level internships, she ignored some of her final degree requirements to actually complete her degree.

Chuck also attempted to earn his degree quickly. For Chuck, he played collegiate baseball and had a four year scholarship. He could not afford to attend CSP for an extra semester, so he crammed too many courses into several semesters to ensure he was on track for a four-year graduation. However, with playing collegiate baseball, he was unable to handle his tough course load, and his GPA suffered, causing him to be unable to earn his diploma due to a low major GPA.

Like all of the above participants, Vince and Meg also felt compelled to complete their degree in as little time as possible. Vince and Meg were both very passionate about their chosen fields of study: pastoral studies and Lutheran classroom teaching, respectively. Vince stated:

I felt called by God to be a Lutheran pastor. I have known since I was young this was exactly what I needed to be. Taking classes felt stupid because all that I would learn would be on the job. I did okay in my classes, but who cares? I understand how to serve God. Just because I don’t have the best grades doesn’t mean that I should not serve God. I am glad I am in seminary, even without completion. I know I have to go back soon to finish my last class. I was too excited to start seminary that I am fine with missing a class to get the degree that does not matter to my calling.

Both Vince and Meg only wanted to do what they felt they were "called by God” to do. However, the coursework became tough due to taking too many courses at once and made completion of their degrees a bit out of reach.

Meg talked several times in her interviews about the significant rigor the Lutheran Confessionalism courses she needed to be a Lutheran classroom teacher. She commented:
Lutheran schools need great teachers who know how to teach regular classes and about God. The Religion courses I took were really tough, but I just kept taking many of them at a time to get into a classroom as soon as possible.

Vince and Meg knew that they had the skill set to be a pastor and Lutheran classroom teacher, respectively, but they focused too much on their long-term career goals to the detriment of their short-term degree completion goals.

**Outside responsibilities.** More than any of the other participants in this study, Sid and Molly seemed to feel the most pressure for timely degree completion. The main reason for this was the many outside responsibilities these two had during their time CSP. Unlike the other participants, Molly and Sid were both supporting themselves one hundred percent during their college career. Sid was working two part-time jobs to pay for his living expenses and books:

> It was great because financial aid did cover all of my tuition. But, I am from Florida with no family around and can’t afford to live on campus. So, I had to work a couple of jobs to have a roof over my head. Working and going to class is not easy. I blame having to work on not getting my degree. I only wish I had parents to cover the bills, but I don’t.

Molly also had to work several jobs to support herself and her boyfriend during college. She talked about getting evicted a few times during her time at CSP, and the stress that comes with supporting two people and taking a rigorous course load. She talked about the cycle that comes with having outside responsibilities while being in school:

> I worked to pay my bills to stay in school. But, the more I worked the worse I did in school. Then, I had to pay for courses I failed, blah, blah, blah. I wish this wasn’t the case, but it was what happened. I always took a lot of hard classes at once thinking I would get through faster. Think again…
These outside responsibilities caused Molly and Sid to want to finish their degree quickly, so they could spend as little time as possible splitting their time between work and school. However, both participants found that their identity often became "employee" over "student" because their basic needs of food and shelter needed to be met before going to class. Sid and Molly felt resentful of some of the other students at CSP, who they perceived as having parents to support them throughout their time in college and did not have to work multiple jobs while in school. They both reiterated that they may have slowed down their course loads if they did not feel rushed to complete in order to pay less tuition to CSP.

Lack of social integration. When many of the participants felt the need to hurry through their academics, they often missed out on the social aspect of their college life at CSP. Amy talked about never being “connected” to CSP. She attended CSP because of parental pressure. However, when she entered CSP, she knew that she would soon be married and finishing her degree would not be very important. Thus, she did not make any strong connections with others at CSP. However, she now feels that if she would have gotten involved in social activities at CSP, she may have completed her degree:

If I would have had a social circle and been involved in clubs, I might have felt the need to have the pride of being a Concordia grad. But, why did I need to make friends? I had my own agenda, and no one was getting in my way. Now, I look back wishing I had fun in college. Fun can help some people stay in school. I am not sure it would have worked for me, but it may have helped me think more positively about getting a degree. But, I am happy where I am now.

Molly and Sid, mostly due to their outside responsibilities, also talked about feeling no social ties to CSP. As Molly stated:
I never thought of Concordia as my home. I needed a degree. I can get a degree from anywhere. I guess that I figured if I didn’t graduate from Concordia I can just go somewhere else. If I would have had the time and energy to devote to being a part of Concordia, I might have fought harder, but you never know. I just wish college was the greatest time of my life. Instead, it was the most stressful.

Sid talked a bit differently about his lack of connection to CSP. He talked about college as a “job responsibility and sometimes there is no time for fun”. When asked if his lack of feeling a part of CSP lead to his early departure, he was unsure, noting that “I guess you do need to really like your company if you want to stay at your job.” While the social integration may not have been a main reason for the early departures of Amy, Molly, and Sid, they all stated remorse for not remembering their time at CSP as some of the best times of their lives. A connection to CSP may have helped them complete their degree, as they would have had connections to individuals on campus rooting for their success.

**Conclusion.** For many of the participants, obtaining a high level career with a high salary was a priority. However, these long-term career goals were at the expense of their short-term goal of degree completion. These participants took tough schedules and many credits at a time to try to complete their degree in as little time as possible, which led to lower GPAs and completion issues. A few participants took on too much with regard to courses and outside work responsibilities. These participants felt resentful toward students who could attend and pay for college without having to work full-time. For these participants, full-time employment lead to a vicious cycle of working multiple jobs to pay for school, which led to lower academic performance, which led to having to pay for repeating courses, which cost the participants more money. This vicious cycle caused poor academic performance and late departure for a few
participants. The rush to complete a degree also led a few participants to feel disconnected from CSP socially. While none of the participants stated that this directly impacted their late departure, a few did feel that they may have been more compelled to complete their degree if they would have been involved on-campus and felt their college experience was fun.

**Distrust in Academic Process**

Distrust in the academic process was the second superordinate theme to emerge from the interviews. Many of the participants felt their time spent at CSP was not well-spent due to the uselessness of their coursework and inaccurate academic advising. Thus, two sub-themes were identified under this superordinate theme: Uselessness of Coursework and Poor Academic Advising Experience.

**Uselessness of coursework.** In line with the Career and Salary Motivation sub-theme discussed above, several of the participants felt that their coursework was not useful for “real world” job application. Molly noted over and over again in her interviews that her coursework was quite boring. She was only at CSP to get a degree and only chose Psychology as her major because a few friends noted that it was an easy major. However, when taking her classes, psychological theories seemed “unrealistic” to her. She kept asking herself “why do I need to know what the teacher is talking about?” Plus, with being tired from working multiple jobs, she often “zoned out in class” or skipped classes altogether, leading to low grades and, overall, degree completion issues.

Chuck also thought of his coursework as “stupid.” Like Molly, he was told he simply needed a degree to get a job and chose Communication Studies as major:

I knew I wanted to work in business and thought about a business major. When I looked at the business classes, there was a lot of math and accounting. I don’t like numbers and
knew I would really hate those classes. I had a bud who majored in communications and got a pretty good job, so I tried. The courses were pretty dumb, and I really did find them unhelpful. I am pretty sure I would have felt that way about business classes too. How many times do you write a twenty page paper in a job? It is not necessary to be good at a job.

Bri and Amy were two other participants who noted that they felt their coursework at CSP was useless. Bri laughed when she talked about her coursework and major:

I was an art major, and I love making art. However, I like doing it at my pace without deadlines. How can I make awesome art if someone tells me when and where to do it? I honestly don’t know how true artists major in art. There are so many restrictions on their work. I majored in studio art cause I thought it would be easy for me, since I am great at sculpture and ceramics. Nope, not the case. I actually failed more art classes than other classes. I guess, what would I do with an art major anyway?

Amy was not sure what she would do with any major. She went to college due to family pressure to get a degree. However, she joked that she only went to CSP to get her “M.R.S. degree”:

All I wanted was to get married and have children. Going to class was hard for me cause I didn’t want to be there. I had a serious boyfriend and knew we would get married before I graduated, and I would leave school. All my courses were so useless. I don’t even remember what I majored in. Is that sad? I wish I liked my classes, but I was never really present.

Meg and Vince, similar to their discussion related to Career and Salary Motivation, also felt their coursework did not have a direct connection to the work they wanted to do. Meg took
several Confessional Lutheranism courses in Religion and found the constant memorization of terms written by "old men back in the day" did not have any relevance to teaching children about the Lutheran faith. Vince ended up majoring in History because he knew how tough the Religion courses were. He knew he loved the subject area, but never felt motivated in class because knowing history would not make him a better pastor. Meg and Vince's "calling" made them feel as though earning a college degree was just a hoop to jump through in order for them to get to their desired career goals.

It is interesting to note that Sid, one of the main participants who was extremely motivated by a high-level career and high salary, spoke about how much he enjoyed his courses. He stated:

I did not know anything about business, just that it was a useful major. The courses helped me see more about what I can do with this major.

Sid really did want to go to class and complete his degree, but he faced too many barriers during his time at CSP. He also felt that his academic preparation was not sufficient to do well in these courses taught by, as he put it, "highly-skilled professionals".

**Poor academic advising experience.** Five of the ten participants noted a poor experience with academic advising. This experience often lead to a distrust, not only in their academic advisor, but also their academic experience at CSP. The participants saw their academic advisor as a large representation of CSP, and their experience with their advisor lead to negative feelings about CSP that linger well beyond their departure.

Molly is the only participate who noted that she disliked and did not trust her academic advisor from the start:
When I came to orientation, my advisor didn’t care about me. He rushed me through and went on to the next. I never wanted to talk to him again. When I ran into problems getting into my internship, I needed my advisor. He scolded me for never seeing him and didn’t help me register for the internship. I never got to the internship. CSP was not helpful. They didn’t care if I graduated.

Similar to Molly, Anne, Meg, Sid, and Lauren also disliked their academic advisor, but all of these participants mostly discussed issues with advising later in the academic careers, which they often blamed for their lack of degree completion. For example, Anne stated that her advisor always told her to double major in Finance and Marketing because it was just a couple of extra classes. She was very excited to major in these “practical” degree areas. However, when it came time for graduation, she was surprised to learn how much was missed in her double major:

I went to my graduation meeting and was told I was two classes short of getting both my majors. I was so mad. My advisor missed important classes in his area. I couldn’t believe it. Luckily, I had a job lined up, so I really didn’t worry about it. My advisor was definitely to blame.

Meg also blamed her advisor for not completing her degree. Meg had a passion for being a Lutheran classroom teacher and took many Lutheran religion courses that she stated were “extremely tough and hurting my GPA.” She later learned that she could work at a Lutheran school without a “Lutheran Confessionalism” minor. She has since begun working at a Lutheran school and plans to finish her coursework in education without the Lutheran Confessionalism minor. Meg stated:

I wish my advisor would have told me the reality of my situation. I would have made different decisions and gotten a damn degree.
Sid also noted significant issues with his advisor close to graduation. Sid noted that he did fail quite a few classes throughout his CSP career and needed to retake several of his business courses. By the time he got around to retaking his classes, several of the requirements had changed, and, in fact, one course he had failed previously was no longer offered. When Sid went to see his academic advisor, Sid stated that she had no idea how to address his situation:

My advisor didn’t know what she was doing. She thought my course was still offered and, when she found out it wasn’t, she didn’t know how to help me. I was working a ton and didn’t have time to keep bugging her about it. She never called or emailed me about it. I stopped caring.

Lauren also “stopped caring” about completing her degree at the end of her time at CSP. She told me about the “surprise of her life” that she got during her graduation check:

I was one credit short of graduation. One stupid credit. Can you believe it? Turns out, I took Child Psych twice. Once my freshman year and once my senior year. I had no idea, and they only counted it once. Why did my advisor not know this? She signed off on my taking the class. Now, I am one credit away. I cannot afford to take this credit. My advisor should pay for it.

All of the participants who discussed a poor academic advising experience talked over and over again about wanting their advisor to reach out to them and not have to continuously follow up. As Lauren put it:

Shouldn't my advisor care if I graduate? I am bothering my advisor over and over again about different issues, but I rarely ever got an email from her.
The lack of proactive advising painted a picture to the participants that they were not worth following up with, and many of them gave up on completing their bachelor’s degree even though they were extremely close to completion.

**Conclusion.** Several participants found their courses useless, especially when thinking about the application of coursework to “real world” work experience. The participants did not understand the need to sit through classes and simply attended class because they knew that was what they needed to do to get a degree. Furthermore, their negative feelings toward their coursework led to low motivation to complete all of their courses. Also, the academic advising experience for several participants was extremely negative. Many participants viewed their academic advisor as the sole reason for them not currently possessing their bachelor’s degree. Oftentimes, these participants had a positive relationship with their advisor, but it turned negative when the advisor missed requirements later in the participants’ CSP career.

**Barriers to Final Degree Completion**

Six of the ten participants stated that their reason for not completing their bachelor’s degree was due to a barrier that occurred late in their CSP college career. Thus, the third superordinate theme to emerge during the interviews involved barriers outside of CSP that hindered the participants’ final degree completion. These barriers to final degree completion had a significant impact on these participants, both as a student and an individual. However, only two or three participants had a similar barrier to completion, which made for four sub-themes involving a small number of participants. The four identified sub-themes are: Starting a Family, Financial Issues, Legal Trouble, and Mental Health Concerns.

**Starting a family.** For Tiff and Amy, starting a family made completing a bachelor’s degree a second priority. Tiff only had two classes remaining before earning her bachelor's
degree when she found out that she was pregnant. While the pregnancy was not planned, she was excited to become a mom with her fiancé, now husband. She was ready to put her daughter first and school second. However, she still thought degree completion could be obtained directly after giving birth to her daughter:

[My daughter] was born, and I was ready to go back to school. I only had two classes left, one with the easiest professor. So, I had [my daughter] in December and signed up for classes in January. Next thing I knew, I was in over my head and dropped out. I tried to go back two other times. But, with a husband working 60 hours a week and baby who needs me, I just can’t do it right now. Right now. I will do it someday.

Like Tiff, Amy also found out she was pregnant in her last semester at CSP. However, she was married in December of her junior year and was ready to start a family right away. She knew that she may not finish her degree, as all she ever wanted was to get married and stay home with her children. She was the one participant who seemed to have no regrets about not completing her degree:

I am a wife and mother living in Europe. No, I didn't finish my education and certification due to pregnancy and knew I was leaving the country with my husband. Yes, I sometimes look back and think it would be nice to have, but I am not using a degree. They don’t teach you to raise children at Concordia.

Both Tiff and Amy discussed how they feel successful without their degree, and both have no regrets about putting their children before finishing their degree. However, they both believe that they may have earned their degree if they did not become pregnant in their last semester at CSP. While Amy states she will never go back for a degree, Tiff feels like she will someday earn her bachelor’s degree and make her daughter proud.
Financial issues. While all of the participants discussed the significant financial expense of attending CSP during one of the two interviews, only four participants stated that financial issues were one of the reasons for leaving CSP. While Chuck did not talk as strongly about finances hindering his degree completion as a few other participants, he did discuss how without his baseball scholarship, he could not have afforded to attend CSP. Thus, the main reason for his rush to complete a degree went hand in hand with his financial issues, as his baseball scholarship only covered eight semesters at CSP.

Like Chuck, financial issues overlapped with timely degree completion for Molly and Sid. As Molly stated:

I couldn’t afford to continue at CSP and was racking up debt. I know how bad loans can be, and I don’t want to pay them off.

Sid, who was very excited to earn his bachelor’s degree to “end the cycle of poverty” in his family, discussed how his low-income status impeded his final degree completion:

I was working so much, taking too many classes, and failing that I ran out of [financial] aid. I knew it could happen someday, but I can’t go to school without aid. I tried to pay cash one semester, but that meant working so much that I had to actually miss class all the time. Finally, the school wouldn’t let me back cause of my bills. I doubt I’ll ever be able to pay back what I owe Concordia. I’ll probably never get the degree, which sucks. I wish I could.

Molly also ran into major financial issues in her last semester. Like Sid, she ran out of financial aid, and needed to only complete her internship to earn her degree. She got “a great internship at a great site” and was excited to start her psychology internship. However, she did not realize the financial impact the internship would have on her final semester at CSP:
I can’t believe that I had to pay to work. So, I was paying for 12 credit hours, out of aid, and no way to pay. It was ridiculous. I had the [internship] site and started working. Then, I got kicked out for not paying. I don’t know how I will raise the funds for 12 credits. Not sure I can return to complete.

The financial barrier for Lauren may not be considered significant for many, but it was for her. She thought she was completely finished with her bachelor’s degree until she went to her graduation check and learned she was one credit short of graduation:

Everyone told me to just go to community college and take basket weaving to finish. I could take any class I want. They said it like it was no big deal. However, one credit at MCTC is almost $200, and no one gets aid for one credit. I don’t have anyone to get money from. I hope to get the money really soon. It just took longer than most people think it should. $200 is a big deal.

No matter if the financial burden is perceived by others as large or small, to these participants, finances played a large role in their lack of degree completion. CSP is a small, private college with a higher price tag than several state institutions in Minnesota. Thus, when the participants made the decision to attend CSP, they knew that the financial burden may be large, but none of the four participants in this sub-theme expected that they would pay for almost four years of college without actually receiving their degree. The amount of money lost due to an incomplete degree is not lost on these participants. As Molly put it:

I wish college was like anything else. You get what you paid for. I definitely paid for my degree.

Legal trouble. Almost tandem with their financial issues, Sid and Molly ran into significant legal issues during their time at CSP, which hindered their degree completion. Sid
talked at length about how his legal issues not only led to him being "broke" but also to complete embarrassment:

I actually got arrested in class... embarrassing. It was for parking tickets... But, I had to pay them or else I would lose my job. So, this made me broke and with no way to pay for school. I think I still would have issues without getting arrested, but still hard. The arrest was so embarrassing. I almost didn’t want to come back ever.

Molly was arrested for an incident involving her vehicle and was charged with a felony and spent time in jail. Her lawyer bills were significant. She already had issues paying for her internship, but, when this incident occurred, she knew that finishing her degree at CSP was not going to happen in the near future:

It is expensive to get into trouble. Also, I now have a felony on my record, so I can’t get even private aid, and the school can’t take me back. The legal issues messed this up more than anything. Spending time in jail is humiliating, and I don’t have a degree to fall back on. Getting a real job is tough.

The legal issues for Molly and Sid only increased their financial barriers to degree completion. However, legal issues are separate from their financial issues, as they created an even greater barrier to degree completion than simply the monetary cost of attending CSP. Both individuals felt embarrassed by their legal trouble, and this trouble created barriers outside of degree completion, including difficulty gaining employment and the ability to obtain financial aid to pay to finish their degrees. The vicious cycle of trying to complete their degree continued for Molly and Sid.

**Mental health concerns.** Besides the financial issues and legal trouble, Molly also dealt with mental health concerns, which significantly impaired her during her time at Concordia.
Molly suffers from clinical depression, which she stated impacted her decision making while at CSP. When everything became overwhelming with work, school, and supporting a significant other, she often isolated herself:

One professor kept emailing, but I ignored it. When you have depression, it is tough to do anything, and no one understands. I think my depression is really what made me not finish. I didn’t stay on my meds, and just let everything happen around me. I also think it is part to blame for my [car] accident. I just can’t make decisions like normal people.

College is not helpful for crazy people.

Bri also talked about how her mental illness impaired in her decision making. Bri lives with bipolar disorder and often “skipped” her medication, as she did not like the way it felt:

I am a stereotype. The girl who doesn’t want to take her lithium cause it impacts her creativity. But, that was me. When I was off my medication, I didn’t go to class, and I sometimes skipped my rent. I got evicted at one point. I honestly couldn’t function. I need structure, and college does not provide this. I realized I needed to take care of me before getting a degree in art. I couldn’t do it all.

The mental health concerns for both Bri and Molly do impact their everyday lives. However, their bipolar disorder and depression, respectively, both became severe as they got closer to graduation. Bri believes this may have been due to graduation anxiety, but also states that “with a 2.1 GPA, I was barely functioning as a student as is”. In their final semester, these participants' mental illnesses made enough of an impact on these participants’ CSP lives that they could not complete their degree.

**Conclusion.** While several participants had significant external barriers to final degree completion, few participants stated the same barrier. In fact, financial issues was the largest sub-
theme, with only four participants noting this as a major barrier to completion. Two participants, Sid and Molly, noted more than one barrier impeding their degree completion, including financial issues, legal trouble, and, in the case of Molly, mental health concerns. While these barriers may overlap, each barrier plays a separate, significant role in hindering these participants' degree completion. While many of the participants seemed upset about certain barriers impeding their college completion, it should be noted that the two participants who stated that starting a family was their primary reason for not completing their degree had few regrets about not currently possessing a bachelor's degree.

Success without a Bachelor’s Degree

The most surprising superordinate theme to emerge from the interviews was Success without a Bachelor’s Degree. In fact, seven of the ten participants noted an opportunity to obtain personal or career success was given to them before earning their bachelor’s degree. This success was one of the main factors that lead to their decision to depart CSP when so close to earning their bachelor’s degree. Within this superordinate theme, two sub-themes emerged: Family and Employment and Graduate School Opportunities.

Family. Amy and Tiff were both discussed above in relation to their pregnancy during their senior year at CSP. While this pregnancy was considered a barrier to final degree completion, Amy and Tiff also viewed starting a family while at CSP as a form of personal success. Tiff, who described her pregnancy as a surprise, had no regrets about leaving CSP when she did:

I truly feel successful. I wish I had a degree, but I can get that anytime I want. Now, I need to focus on my baby girl and partner. I used to think of success as money, but this is
success. I feel great where I am in my life. I will go back and earn my degree soon. I want to. But, right now, it’s not the end of the world to have a baby and no degree.

Amy’s described her pregnancy as “not planned but not a surprise” and always felt as though success was being a wife and mother. Thus, when she got married and had her baby girl, she felt complete. She discussed never feeling the need to be a career woman or “hang a diploma on the wall”. She achieved her success when she started her family. She now lives in Europe with her husband and has three children. She talked continuously about her happiness and could not think of any reason she would want to return to complete her degree. As she stated:

Circumstances may change, but my happiness is at home with my children and husband. Also, I live in Europe, which is pretty awesome.

Employment and graduate school opportunities. Five of the ten participants stated that they were able to obtain a high-level job or get into graduate school without a completed bachelor’s degree. For Bri and Chuck, employment opportunities fell into their laps when they were in their senior year, and they both decided that these opportunities were worth departing CSP in their senior year. Bri had worked a student worker appointment in information technology throughout her time CSP and really learned to love this student position. When a full-time position opened up, she applied and received the job offer:

With my bipolar disorder, I needed a steady income for my meds and structure in general. I also love working in IT and was majoring in art. I couldn’t pass up this job, and I do not regret it one bit...I do have to go back and finish at some point to keep my job. It will be hard, but I can do it. I am happy I was able to work a job I love and not having my diploma wasn’t an issue.
Chuck was doing an internship with a large corporation, when, like Bri, a great management position opened up. After doing his final graduation check, he found out his major GPA was too low for him to graduate in one semester, and he would have to retake some courses in order to complete his degree. He had to make the choice between “a paycheck and a degree”. Because his baseball scholarship would not cover one more semester, he chose the paycheck. While he feels this was the right decision at the time, he does have some regrets now:

When I took the job, I was so happy. I had money coming in. I moved to a new state. I lived a new life. It was fun. Now, I’m old. I want a different job, but it is hard without my diploma. I need to go back and wish I would have finished. I don’t know how I would have paid for it, but I wish I would have finished. At least, I am still earning my paycheck.

Meg also knows that she needs to go back to complete her degree. She is currently teaching at a Lutheran school, her lifelong career goal. However, she must complete her bachelor’s degree by the end of this school year to keep her position. Adding to this timeline, Meg has also decided she wants to work in the public school sector after her experience in a Lutheran school. This is tough for her because she is unsure how she will be able to complete her degree while working full-time. She is thankful she got the opportunity to work in a Lutheran school, but knows she has go to back to complete some licensure tests and a few courses.

Anne and Vince both know that they can easily complete their degree but both “forgot” to complete a final requirement due to opportunities that did not check for degree completion. Anne was a double major in Marketing and Finance. She had completed her requirements for her Marketing major, but is two classes short of her Finance major; thus, making her degree incomplete:
I know all that I have to do is call Concordia and tell them to drop my Finance major, but I keep forgetting. I got a great job in marketing, and, apparently, they don’t care about my diploma. I told them I had a degree, so I better get it taken care of. I will call after I talk to you.

Vince is currently in Seminary school earning his Master’s of Divinity. He knows he has to finish his last class before he can earn his master’s, and he hopes to finish this soon:

I didn't really leave CSP. I took my history class as an independent study, and I never got all my work done my senior year. I already walked in 2012. I'm currently in my studies at [Seminary] in my third year. I also serve at a church. Time gets in the way, and I've never gotten around to finishing up that one class.

Vince stated that the interview motivated him to complete his final requirements. He knows that his bachelor's degree must be complete in order for him to become the pastor and “serve God in the way he was called”.

**Conclusion.** Several participants felt they had achieved some form of personal or career success without a bachelor’s degree. While some participants regret not having their bachelor’s degree more than others, all of the participants stated that they were happy that they took their career or personal opportunity when they did. As many of them stated, “school will always be there.” A few of the participants know that they must go back and complete their degree in order to continue in their career or graduate school opportunity. In fact, these interviews prompted a few of the participants to go back and complete their degree in order for them to continue their success.
Conclusion

This chapter described the findings of an IPA study through the transcribed data from two semi structured interviews with previous CSP students regarding their late departure decision-making process. This analysis resulted in the identification of four superordinate themes and eleven sub-themes, illustrating how the participants made sense the decision to depart CSP when they were all within 15 credit hours of earning their bachelor’s degrees.

The participants’ decision-making processes were quite diverse, resulting in the eleven sub-themes. Several sub-themes, notably all of the sub-themes under the Barriers to Completion superordinate theme, only encompassed a small number of participants. The Career and Salary Motivation, Bad Advising, and Employment and Graduate School Opportunities all offered the highest number of participant responses, with six, five, and five, respectively. Also significant from the interviews is that some participants’ decision-making process cut across several sub-themes, such as Molly and Sid, who fell into eight and six sub-themes, respectively. Others, such as Tiff and Lauren, only encompassed two sub-themes in their interviews, with Tiff’s decision-making process focusing almost exclusively on her becoming pregnant as a senior at CSP and starting a family. These diverse findings make drawing any final conclusions related to the research question difficult to obtain.

A discussion of these findings will be the focus of the chapter that follows. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the superordinate themes with an emphasis on how they support and contribute to the research literature on late student retention, as well as the theoretical frameworks presented in an earlier chapter. The significance of these findings and the possible implications for late departure students in higher education will also be discussed.
Chapter 5: Discussion of the Research Findings

This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to understand the decision making process of students who departed from Concordia University, St. Paul (CSP) when they were extremely close to completing their bachelor’s degree. One central research question was used to guide the investigation of this phenomenon. The central research question is as follows:

How do undergraduate college students at CSP who are within a semester of degree completion make sense of their decision to depart?

Four principal, superordinate themes and eleven sub-themes emerged from this study. The superordinate themes and their sub-themes are: 1.) Timely Degree Completion (1.1 Career and Salary Motivation, 1.2 Outside Responsibilities, 1.3 Lack of Social Integration), 2.) Distrust in the Academic Process (2.1 Uselessness of Coursework, 2.2 Poor Academic Advising Experience), 3.) Barriers to Final Degree Completion (3.1 Starting a Family, 3.2 Financial Issues, 3.3 Legal Trouble, 3.4 Mental Health Concerns), and 4.) Success without a Bachelor’s Degree (4.1 Family, 4.2 Employment and Graduate School Opportunities). This fifth and final chapter will include a discussion of these themes with a focus on how they support and contribute to the existing research literature on student retention and departure. The significance and limitations of the research findings and the possible implications for practice and future research will also be discussed in this chapter.

Timely Degree Completion

Career and salary motivation. Seven of the ten participants spoke at length about their need to earn a degree as quickly as possible due to their desires to enter the workforce with a higher status career and salary. Metzner and Bean (1987) and Bean (1980) both note that students often enter college due to the practical value of higher education and utility for future
employment. In the case of Bean’s (1980) student attribution model, students who view their college education as possessing a practical value are likely to remain committed to their institution and graduate. Bean notes that the more committed students are to their institution, the less likely they are to dropout.

Metzner and Bean (1987) found that utility for future employment was the greatest predictor for nontraditional student dropout. In other words, nontraditional students who felt their degree would directly lead to strong employment opportunities were likely to remain in college. Metzner and Bean’s conclusion combats the findings of this study, as the participants did feel their degree completion would yield career and economic success, yet they did leave CSP before graduation. However, it appears that when career and salary motivation was the primary incentive for entering college, the participants in this study were so focused on their long-term goals that they were not successful in achieving their shorter-term goals of earning a bachelor’s degree.

The findings that several participants want to move quickly toward a degree without gaining an understanding of the culture of their university does confirm some of Thayer’s (2000) research on first-generation students. Thayer (2000) notes that “first generation students are likely to have limited access to information about the college experience, either firsthand or from a relative” (p. 4). Thus, many first-generation students know the careers they want to pursue but have limited knowledge about the process of earning a degree. While not all of the participants in this study were first-generation, Thayer’s (2000) study appears to apply well to the participants who attempted to move through CSP at a rapid pace in order to obtain career and monetary success to the detriment of finishing their bachelor’s degree.
Outside responsibilities. Astin (1984) described student involvement as the physical and psychological energy expelled toward the academic and social college experience. However, several students, particularly first-generation (Thayer, 2000) and commuter students (Tinto, 1997) often do not have the energy to expel due to outside responsibilities, as is the case with a few participants from this study. Thayer’s (2000) study found that first-generation students often have outside commitments, including work and family commitments that interfere with their college experience. These first-generation students often do not have an understanding as to how these outside commitments can impact their college success.

Outside commitments leave students with little time to fully engage in the college experience, including their academic and classroom experiences, according to Tinto (1997). Tinto (1997) notes that this lack of commitment and engagement is more pronounced with commuter students. Although not all of the participants in this study were classified as commuter students, analyzing retention studies that focus on particular student populations begin to shed some light on late student departure, especially since so few studies focus on college seniors.

Hunt et al. (2012) is one of the few existing senior retention studies and confirms the finding that outside responsibilities play a role in late student departure. The authors state that outside responsibilities, such as off-campus employment, are a main reason for late student withdrawals from a large, mid-Atlantic, public university. These responsibilities have a direct impact on senior year retention and the decision-making process for late college departure. Even when the students were extremely close to completing their degree, having outside responsibilities impeded student degree completion.

Lack of social integration. Pascarella et al. (1986) noted that students who enter higher education with only an end career goal in mind may believe school is for earning a degree and
nothing more. This leads students to not become socially integrated into their university environment. Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure strongly emphasizes social integration into higher education, which some participants in this study lacked due to rushing to earn their bachelor's degree. This social integration and sense of social belonging, according to Tinto (1975), is a key component in retaining students. Several studies have echoed the importance of social integration and a sense of belonging and noted that peer group interactions are vital in student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Christie & Dinham, 1991). Even, Hunt et al.’s (2012) senior attrition study noted that a sense of belong is a factor in senior year attrition.

While a sense of belonging may be important in Tinto’s (1975) theory and the research of other retention theorists, it is important to note that lack of social integration was not a highly represented reason for timely degree completion by the participants in this study. Bean and Metzner (1985) note that some students, specifically non-traditional students, are not greatly influenced by the social life of their university. In fact, in the case of the participants in this study, the academic and social worlds appeared to merge, confirming Tinto’s (1997) research with students on commuter college campuses.

CSP can be described as a commuter campus, with only twenty percent of students living on campus. On commuter heavy campuses, a sense of social belonging is often developed in the classroom. Many of the participants discussed going to class and going home with no time to socialize. Thus, the only place for these participants to engage with their peers was in the classroom. However, the participants rarely discussed engaging, or not engaging, in the campus life at CSP in terms of student involvement and making new peer connections. While this may be
due to the commuter status of CSP, it also reflects the outside responsibilities of a few of the participants and the view that college is for earning a degree to get a job and nothing more.

**Conclusion.** According to Tinto (1975), the goal of higher education is to promote intellectual development by integrating students into the academic and social realms of the university. However, the participants in this study appeared to overlook this intellectual development, through social and academic integration, and replace this development with rushing through completing their college degree.

Recently, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), found in its CIRP Freshman Survey Results for 2015 that 60.1% of college freshmen chose a university based on how many graduates get good jobs (HERI, 2016). This number is up from 53.4% in 2014, and has increased over 15% in the last ten years. Other results from this survey echo the findings of this study by highlighting the fact that more and more students need to work during college to pay for school (outside responsibilities) and the fact that more students are living at home or with relatives than ever before and not engaging on campus (lack of social integration). The results of this survey show that this timely degree completion superordinate theme will continue to be a theme for future college students. It can be concluded that the motivation and behaviors that impact timely degree completion influence both the decision-making for attending college and departing from college.

**Distrust in the Academic Process**

**Uselessness of coursework.** The distrust in the academic process, as stated by the participants, confirms the findings of three of the senior retention studies. Mohr et al. (1998) and Hunt et al. (2012) specifically noted that the college seniors in their studies viewed their academic experience to be more important than their social experience in college. Thus, if they
did not feel their coursework to be valid and engaging, these students stopped engaging in their academic life and struggled at the end of their college career. As Neumann and Finaly-Newmann's (1989) study noted, not being engaged with academics and perceiving coursework as useless in students' senior years caused these students to depart.

Pascarella et al. (1986) and Tinto (1997) emphasized academic over social integration in the case of students on commuter campuses, where students often come to school to simply go to class. While CSP is not fully a commuter campus, all of the participants in the study were commuter students in their senior year when they departed. Thus, if the students distrusted the academic process and found the courses they had to commute to attend useless, they were likely to depart college, even if they were close to graduation.

The student attrition models by Bean (1980), Metzner and Bean (1987), and Bean and Metzner (1985) all state that students will depart from higher education if they do not feel their educational experience possess a practical value. Metzner and Bean (1987) state that a utility for future employment is one of the contributing factors in student persistence. In the case of the participants in this study, many wanted to achieve a degree to obtain a high-valued career and higher salary. When the participants did not feel their coursework applied to real-world work experience, they disengaged with the academic experience by not going to class and performing poorly in their coursework.

**Poor academic advising experience.** Terenzini et al. (1981), Endo and Harper (1982), Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), and Tinto (1975) all note the importance of positive interactions with faculty to be one of the keys to student retention. Unfortunately, many of the participants stated that their classes were boring and the faculty did not engage with them. They also blamed the faculty advisors who provided poor advising at the end of their college careers for their late
departures. Because some of the participants interacted with faculty as both instructors and advisors at CSP, once a student felt misguided by a poor academic advising experience, the participants then generalized this poor experience to all faculty experiences at CSP.

As Hunt et al. (2012) found, upper-level advising is one factor in senior year departure. Advising students in their senior years is often complicated and attention to detail is very important to ensure degree completion. In the case of some participants, not only did they perceive poor academic advising but advising errors truly did occur. This lack of detail in advising these students during their senior years caused some students to be short of certain degree requirements and not graduate. Thus, real and perceived poor academic advising experiences were a strong part several participants’ decisions to depart, which confirms the findings of Hunt et al. (2012), as well as the positive faculty interaction studies noted above.

**Conclusion.** The distrust in the academic process highlighted by the perceived uselessness of courses in combination with a poor faculty, upper-level advising experience lead several participants to decide to depart from CSP. Strong academic offerings and content are important for students to feel their coursework is applicable to their future career goals (Bean, 1980; Neumann & Finaly-Neumann, 1989). As noted in the HERI (2016) CIRP Freshman Survey Results for 2015, students are going to college in order to obtain a career, so they want the coursework they take to apply to their future career goals. They also need good academic advising in order to complete their degree and be eligible for these career opportunities. Students feeling their coursework is useless and not engaging in their academic advising experience is the perfect storm for student departure.

Berger (2001) found that institutions can help retain students if they clearly communicate the goals of their academic offerings and how courses are applicable to future career skills and
opportunities. In addition to this clear communication, students must also feel their institution is seen as a quality institution that can provide them with the skills to be productive future employees (Bean, 1980). The participants who fell into the distrust in the academic process superordinate theme clearly did not believe their coursework and institution were prepping them for their future career goals and going to class and academically engaging at CSP became less of a priority to these students, to the detriment of these participants completing their bachelor’s degree. CSP, and other institutions, must work on clearly communicating the value of their coursework and academic experience in relation to future employment.

**Barriers to Final Degree Completion**

**External factors.** Astin (1984) states that students who cannot expend physical and psychological energy on their student experience cannot be fully integrated into their institution. Several of the participants in this study experienced circumstances such as starting a family, financial issues, legal trouble, and mental health concerns, which made it not possible for them to expel the energy necessary to fully engage in their CSP experience. Thus, these students made the decision to depart from CSP because these barriers interfered with the time and energy it takes to complete a bachelor’s degree, confirming Astin’s (1984) findings. The senior attrition studies by Hunt et al. (2012) and Mohr et al. (1998) also found that external factors, such as the sub-themes under barriers to final degree completion, impact late college departure.

The findings of this study also concur with the findings of several studies that found external factors highly influence the retention of nontraditional students (Bean, 1980; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Bean & Metzner, 1985). Although the students in this study were defined by CSP standards as traditional college students when attending CSP, several of the participants
possessed some characteristics of nontraditional students, such as having a family and working full-time (Jeffreys, 2002), even when enrolled at CSP.

**Sub-theme studies.** Several studies confirm the subthemes (starting a family, financial issues, legal trouble, and mental health concerns) within the barriers to final degree completion superordinate theme. In particular, Hunt et al.'s (2012) senior retention study found that stress, anxiety, and depression (i.e. mental health concerns) were reasons students did not complete their bachelor’s degree when extremely close to degree completion. Mohr et al.'s (1998) late departure study noted that supporting a family and financial strain are two of the reasons for senior departure. Herndon (1980) and St. John et al. (2000) also confirmed that financial issues can cause students to leave their university due to inability to pay or fear of excessive loan debt. It has to be noted that legal trouble was not specifically cited as a reason for departure in the literature reviewed. The correlation of student legal issues and degree completion is an area that requires further study.

**Conclusion.** For this study, two theoretical frameworks were chosen: Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure and Bean's (1980) and Metzner and Bean's (1987) student attrition models. The use of these two frameworks consecutively is confirmed by the majority of the findings of this study, but specifically the barriers to final degree completion superordinate theme. While Tinto's model, focusing on social and academic integration, is a great foundational framework for this study, Bean’s model fills a significant gap in Tinto’s theory by allowing more external factors, such as starting a family, to be included in the prediction of student retention. (Andreu, 2002).

While these external factors and barriers to final degree completion impeded the participants from bachelor’s degree completion, Bean (1980) states that institutional factors play
a role in how these external factors impact student success and retention. For example, students who departed for financial issues may have been able to remain at CSP if they felt supported in their time of financial distress. The same could be said for students who departed due to starting a family. If CSP offered more resources for parenting students, starting a family at the end of these students’ college careers might not have impeded their final degree completion.

**Success without a Bachelor’s Degree**

**Family.** For a few participants in this study, personal success came in the form of starting a family. Supporting a family has been shown to be a reason for late student departure in the senior year retention study completed by Mohr et al. (1998). However, unlike Mohr et al.’s (1998) study, some participants in this study view starting a family as a form of success, which has not been seen in the research. Instead, starting and supporting a family is seen as a barrier to degree completion. While this study confirms that starting a family often leads to attrition, it does bring up the idea that leaving college to start a family may not be perceived as regretful or negative for some late college departure students.

**Employment and graduate school opportunities.** Bean (1980), Metzner and Bean (1987), and Andreu (2002) all state that employment opportunities may impede students from completing their degree. In the case of Metzner and Bean’s (1987) study, students may leave their institution if they do not believe their degree will provide them with utility for future employment. It can be assumed from this statement that if students attend college to obtain a high-level career, which is the case for several participants in this study, and they are offered a professional employment opportunity, they would no longer feel their degree was necessary to reach their employment goals. Bean's (1980) student attrition model specifically found that opportunities for employment is a major predictor of student retention.
The senior retention studies by Mohr et al. (1998) and Hunt et al. (2012) confirm that gaining employment while still attending college is one reason for late departure. In fact, in the Hunt et al. (2012) study, the authors note that some of the participants in their study left their institution in their senior year for employment opportunities, as they saw these opportunities as enhancing their career development. The participants from Hunt et al.’s (2012) study, like the participants from this study, all know they may need to return to college to complete their degree. However, these students wanted to accept the employment opportunities offered to them in order to build their career development and enhance their employment skills.

**Conclusion.** One of the most surprising themes to arise from this study is that fact that seven of the ten participants stated that they achieved some form of “success” even without a bachelor’s degree. The assumption of the researcher was that students must possess a bachelor's degree to achieve career and other forms of success. However, after reviewing the literature and interviewing the participants, it is rather conclusive that students will leave college if opportunities exist to gain professional employment or other forms of success, without a degree. As many of these participants stated, a college degree will always be an option, but certain personal and employment opportunities only come along every once in a while. This conclusion goes hand in hand with Andreu's (2002) research. Andreu (2002) stated that Bean’s student attrition model fits well with Tinto’s theory, as it allows more external factors, such as opportunities for employment, to be included in the prediction of student retention. This, once again, confirms the usage of these two theoretical frameworks for this study.

**Limitations of Findings**

One of the main limitations of the findings is that the participants in the study were not as homogenous as anticipated, leading to a large number of themes and a diverse set of findings.
Smith et al. (2009) states that having a homogenous sample assists the researcher in examining detailed “psychological variability within the group, by analyzing the pattern of convergence and divergence which arises” (p. 50). While the researcher attempted homogenous sampling by limiting her participant recruitment to previous traditional CSP students within a two and half a year anticipated graduation period, the final participants ended up coming from very different backgrounds with extremely different decision-making processes related to their late departure. However, this heterogeneous sample and large number of themes does open more doors for future research.

Another limitation of the findings is the researcher's professional role, specifically her role as Director of Advising at CSP. While the researcher attempted to be as unbiased as possible in the interviews and separate her professional role from research practitioner, it cannot be denied that often these two roles converged, especially in the minds of the participants. For example, two students explicitly asked the researcher who they should contact to return to CSP and complete their degree. As the Director of Advising, the researcher knew this information and did help the students get in contact with the right professionals to return to CSP. However, the researcher maintains that she was able to separate herself from her professional role during the majority of the interviews, and advising conversations always occurred after the official interviews had concluded.

**Intellectual Goals**

Intellectual goals are “focused on understanding something – gaining insight into what is going on and why this happened, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately addressed” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 21). Although a few studies exist related to senior year attrition, the vast majority of literature on student retention focuses primarily on first to second
year retention rates and incorporates different strategies to prevent first-year students from leaving their home institutions (e.g. Burks & Barrett, 2009; Longden, 2004; Veenstra, 2009) with no consideration for late college student departure. Based on this lack of research, the researcher’s first intellectual goal was simply to provide an additional study on the retention of college seniors, a significantly under researched population.

Other intellectual goals related to the theoretical frameworks discussed in this study. First, the researcher wanted to see if the theoretical frameworks of Tinto (1975), Bean (1980), and Metzner and Bean (1985) were relevant to senior student attrition issues at CSP, which they appear to be. The second intellectual goal was to begin creating a theoretical framework related to late college departure. Although a new theoretical framework cannot be established from this study, future research may be able to provide a more consistent theoretical framework for this study’s student population.

Implications for Practice

This study provides evidence that colleges and universities need to pay attention to their seniors. While focusing on first-year students is important for retention and time-to-degree, seniors are just as important for increasing college graduation rates and assisting these students in their personal and economic success. In the era of increased college and university accountability and with graduation rates on every website, it is important that universities are successfully graduating their students (Bailey et al., 2006). Thus, colleges need to continue their outreach to upper-level students, with frequent check-ins regarding students' academic progress and social integration. Many of the participants in this study felt abandoned in their last year, which created a distrust in the academic and advising process, and the researcher’s professional experience proves that seniors are often ignored once they have been retained after their first-
year. For example, at CSP, first-year students are required to see their academic advisor every semester. After students’ first years, students are able to forgo seeing their advisor and little proactive outreach is done to any students beyond their first-year. This study shows that this needs to change, and a communication plan should be developed for students at all class standings.

CSP needs to diminish the impact external factors have on degree completion. Advisors and others on campus need to create outreach strategies and programs for specific student populations, such as students working full-time and parenting students. As Bean (1980) states, institutional policies and procedures strongly impact how external barriers play a role in student success and impact student attrition. For example, if CSP created a grant program for college seniors in need of financial assistance in their last semester, they may be able assist more students in completing their degrees. Also, working with students who have obtained a career opportunity before graduation and assisting these students in earning their final credits in more flexible and creative ways may increase the graduation rate at CSP.

Finally, as the HERI (2016) CIRP Freshman Survey Results for 2015 and findings of this study prove, students are going to college to get a job. And, in the case of many of the participants in this study, they are in a hurry to complete their degree and enter the workforce. Thus, creating pathways that allow students to complete their degree in a timely manner and acknowledge the fact that a career is the end goal of many students may help to engage both the students and the faculty and staff at CSP. Also, communicating the links between college coursework, campus involvement, and employment success can assist students at all levels with reaching their career goals and being more motivated to earn their bachelor's degree.
**Implications for Future Research**

When the researcher explained her research to individuals both within and outside of higher education, many people stated that they knew someone who was within a course or two of graduation and dropped out of college. While these stories are simply anecdotal, it does say to the researcher that many individuals do feel that late college departure is a phenomenon that has been experienced by people in colleges throughout the nation. Thus, interest in conducting more research on late student departure is essential to better understand this phenomenon and to create ways to ensure students complete a college degree after so much time and money has been spent on obtaining this degree.

Within an IPA study, future research needs to be conducted utilizing a more homogenous sample than the sample from this study. For example, a future study can focus on late departure students who are all first-generation and from a private, selective institution. The goal of conducting a study with a more homogenous sample is to gain a stronger sense of the themes related to a specific groups' decision-making processes and to better view the “psychological variability within the group, by analyzing the pattern of convergence and divergence which arises” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 50). Also, conducting homogenous studies at specific types of institutions (i.e. private, public, selective, open access) with specific groups of students (i.e. first-generation, low-income, legacy students) can later lead to comparison studies to assist in drawing conclusions related to the decision-making processes of all late departure students.

Future research can also be conducted utilizing a case study model. While the researcher considered utilizing a case study model for her study, she felt as though her problem of practice was so under researched that IPA became the best research tradition for this study. IPA goes "back to the things themselves...rather than attempting to fix experiences in predefined or overly
abstract categories" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 40). In the case of late college dropouts, no solutions have been created to fix this issue because so little research has been done on this student population. However, with this study and the four other senior attrition studies noted throughout this paper, future research can now begin to find solutions to this late departure issue through using a case study method that possibly uses survey data and interviews. A case study “is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases” (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). While it may take several studies before a case study can be utilized with senior attrition students, it is believed that a case study approach can eventually help to find a solution to the late departure puzzle.

One specific area that arose from this study that requires further inquiry is the finding that seven of the ten participants found some kind of personal or career success, even temporarily, without a bachelor’s degree. As stated in Chapter 2, economically, a bachelor's degree really matters. Individuals who obtained a bachelor's degree earned almost double per year compared to individuals who began college and dropped out, and the unemployment rate is almost a percentage point lower for those earning a bachelor’s compared to those who started and did not finish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). However, one major question arose from this economic statistic: were the students that started college and did not finish as far into completing their degree as the participants in this study? Studies that focus specifically on the career opportunities of late departure students can help answer this question and many more in relation to how to best serve students who are presented with career opportunities late into their college career.
Conclusion

The decision-making processes of the students interviewed in this study were quite varied, leading to four superordinate themes and eleven sub-themes: Timely Degree Completion (Career and Salary Motivation, Outside Responsibilities, Lack of Social Integration), Distrust in the Academic Process (Uselessness of Coursework, Poor Academic Advising Experience), Barriers to Final Degree Completion (Starting a Family, Financial Issues, Legal Trouble, Mental Health Concerns), and Success without a Bachelor’s Degree (Family, Employment and Graduate School Opportunities). The significance of this study is based on the decision-making process of former traditional, college-aged students from CSP who were within a semester of degree-completion and dropped out of college. This study provides a firsthand account into the participants’ lived experiences in relation to their time at CSP and decision to depart.

While the findings of this study are quite varied, this study is significant because it contributes to a major gap in the college student retention literature related to late student departure. This study does not attempt to solve this late departure puzzle. Instead, it aims to highlight the problem of practice and add to the small body of literature on late student departure. It also hopes to begin a significant conversation on creating policies and procedures at CSP that can lead students within of semester of earning a bachelor’s degree to cross the finish line and earn their degree.

This study opens the door for further research on senior dropouts, and much more research must be conducted before a fix can be made to help prevent late college departure. In the United States, a bachelor’s degree is a key factor for social mobility and economic success (Caison, 2005). For higher educational institutions, assisting seniors in degree completion can raise their very public graduation rates and assist their alumni in obtaining future economic
success. Thus, more studies that focus on college seniors and do not ignore this under researched population is a win-win for both colleges and its students.
References


Appendix A - Recruitment Letter

Dear <FIRST NAME>,

My name is Renee Rerko, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts and the current Director of Academic Advising at Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota (CSP). I am writing to invite you to participate in my research project. My research hopes to study students who left CSP when they were extremely close to completing their final degree requirements. I am very interested in exploring how students came to the decision to leave CSP before obtaining their bachelor’s degree.

If you choose to participate in my research study, you will be invited to take part in two interviews. These interviews will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. It will also be possible to utilize Skype, or another equivalent online program, as a mode of communication for conducting these interviews. Your participation in my study will be kept confidential, and I would be happy to share my results with you once the project is complete. I have attached an Informed Consent Form to this email for your review. This form would need to be signed by you if you choose to participate in the study.

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research nor are there any foreseeable risks for your participation. By volunteering to participate, you will be contributing to an understanding of why students depart CSP when so close to obtaining their bachelor’s degree, which could prove beneficial to future CSP students by possibly helping CSP create a smoother degree completion process.

Please contact me at rerko.r@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating or want to know more about this investigation. Also, let me know by June 1, 2015 a date, time, and place that would be convenient for you to meet to conduct the interview.

Thank you again for your time and willingness to volunteer for this project. Again, feel free to contact me at rerko.r@husky.neu.edu or 612-916-9776 if you have additional questions regarding this project. You may also contact the Principal Investigator and my advisor for this research, Dr. Ronald Brown, Ed.D., at ron.brown1@neu.edu or 617-435-8166.

Sincerely,

Renee Rerko
Appendix B – Signed Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigators: Renee Rerko, Doctoral Student
Principal Investigator: Ronald Brown, Ed.D.
Title of Project: Not Crossing the Finish Line: An Exploration of the Reasons Students at Concordia University, St. Paul Get Within Fifteen Credits of Graduation but Do Not Complete Their Bachelor’s Degree

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 person 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 research project because you have been identified as a previous, traditional student at Concordia University, St. Paul (CSP), who departed CSP when you had less than 15 credits remaining before completing your bachelor’s degree.

Why is this research study being done? 
The purpose of this study is to better understand the decision-making process of traditional, undergraduate students at Concordia University, St. Paul who dropout when they are so close to earning their bachelor’s degree.

What will I be asked to do? 
If you decide to take part in this study, you will be invited to participate in two, audio-recorded interviews.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take? 
Two interviews will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. It will also be possible to utilize Skype, or another equivalent online program, as a mode of communication for conducting this interview.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me? 
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research? 
There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, you will be contributing to an understanding of why students depart school when so close to obtaining their bachelor’s degree, which could prove beneficial to future CSP students by possibly helping CSP create a smoother degree completion process.
Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

Audio recordings from the interviews will be stored on the researcher's password protected iPhone and will be destroyed as soon as they are uploaded to the researcher's computer. All electronic data from the audio recording and interview transcripts will be kept on the researcher's password protected computer until the conclusion of the research, at which time, these files will be deleted.

Any identifying characteristics of the participants will be removed from the report and pseudonyms will be used during the data collection to identify each participant’s data. The signed, paper Informed Consent Forms will be scanned into the researcher's computer and then shredded. They will be deleted from the researcher’s computer after this study has concluded.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, Renee Rerko, at 612-916-9776 or rerko.r@husky.neu.edu.
You may also contact Ronald Brown, Ed.D., the Principal Investigator at 617-435-8166 or ron.brown1@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, 617-373-4588, irb@neu.edu
You may call anonymously if you wish.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

I agree to take part in this research.

___________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part        Date

_____________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix C - Assurance of Principal Investigator

Northeastern University
Institutional Review Board

Investigator(s): Ronald E. L. Brown, EdD and Renee Reiko

Title of Proposal: Not Crossing the Finish Line: Why Seniors at CSP Depart When So Close to Degree Completion

To give assurance, please read and initial each statement, then sign below.

**P.1.** I have read and understand Northeastern University's Policies and Procedures Concerning the Protection of Human Subjects and the Federal Wide Assurance. I give my assurance that I, and all members of the research team, will adhere to the policies in this research.

**P.2.** I assure that no participants will be recruited or enrolled, and no data will be collected, without current, written approval from Northeastern University, and other sites as required.

**P.3.** I assure that the rights and welfare of all participants will be protected according to the procedures approved for this project by the NU IRB.

**P.4.** I assure that all risks or discomforts to subjects will be clearly explained, and that I will demonstrate how risks are outweighed by potential benefits to the subject or by the importance of the knowledge to be gained.

**P.5.** I assure that the informed consent of all participants will be obtained by methods that meet the requirements of Northeastern University’s policy and assurance procedures.

**P.6.** I assure that no changes in research activity will be initiated without prior NU IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazard to the subjects.

**P.7.** I assure that I will report any problems involving risks to human subjects or others promptly to the Office of Human Subject Research Protection.

**P.8.** I assure that there are no financial or other relationships (e.g., stock ownership, advisory board, speaker’s bureau, honoraria) that might be viewed as creating a conflict of interest.

Signature: ______________________________ Date: ______________________

Principal Investigator / Faculty Advisor

For student research, the faculty advisor is the principal investigator for the study and is primarily responsible for the ethical conduct of the research. Faculty must review and approve student research prior to submission for NU IRB review. Student investigators must sign this Assurance also.

Signature: ______________________________ Date: 4/28/15

Student Investigator

**DEPARTMENT CHAIR/PROGRAM DIRECTOR SIGNATURE (Required)**

I am aware that this protocol is being submitted to the Northeastern University IRB. I do not make any assertions about human subject protections for this research project.

Signature: ______________________________ Date: ______________________

Department Chair or Program Director

Please return completed form to Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection with the exception of forms from faculty and students of the College of Professional Studies, which should be submitted to Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator for CPS.

Nan C. Regina, Director
Northeastern Univ., Human Subject Research Protection
360 Huntington Avenue, Mailstop: 490 Renaissance Park
Boston, MA 02115-5000
Tel: 617.373.4588; Fax: 617.373.4595; n.regina@neu.edu

CPS forms only
Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Tel: 617.373.4588; k.skophammer@neu.edu

NU HSRC - Rev. 4-21-2015
Appendix D - Interview Protocol

Pseudonym: _________________________________________________________

Introductory Protocol:

You are being invited to participate in this research project because you have been identified as a previous, traditional student at Concordia University, St. Paul (CSP), who departed CSP when you had less than 15 credits remaining before completing your bachelor’s degree. This research is focused on understanding the decision-making process of students who left college when so close to completing their degree. I hope to gain information on how you, as a student, made this decision.

Because I want to ensure the accuracy of our discussion, I would like to record the audio from our discussion. I will be the only person with access to the recorded information and transcripts. To meet the requirements of Northeastern University, I have a form for you to read through and sign. This document states that all information will be confidential, your participation is voluntary, you may withdraw from this study at any time, and that we will not inflict any harm on you.

Do you have any questions before you sign the informed consent?

During this interview, I will be asking several questions. Feel free to provide any information that you feel is important. Do you have any questions at this time?

Background Questions

Personal background.
- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- How would you describe your high school academic performance?

Family background.
- How many siblings do you have?
  - Did any of them attend college and/or earn a college degree?
- Did your parents or guardians attend college and/or earn a college degree?

College aspirations.
- When did you know you wanted to attend college?
- Why did you want to attend college?
- How did you come to the decision to attend Concordia University, St. Paul?
Questions Related to Experience at CSP

Introductory Statement: I would like to hear about your experiences at CSP, in your own words. I will be asking you to express experiences that you have encountered.

Describe your initial academic goals when entering CSP (i.e. get a 4.0, Dean's List, graduate). Describe your initial social goals when entering CSP (i.e. make new friends, join a club). Describe any responsibilities outside of being a student (i.e. working full-time, playing a sport) that you had when you began your college career at CSP. How would you describe how you fit into CSP academically (i.e. a good GPA, happy with major, supportive advisor)? How would you describe how you fit into CSP socially (i.e. made friends, joined clubs/organizations)? Overall, before you left CSP, describe how you felt about your experience at CSP. Describe any outside barriers that you came into contact with during your time at CSP (i.e. had to work more, started a family). How do you come to the decision to depart CSP when you were within one semester of degree completion? Would you describe your reasons for departure as more academic, social, or external? In what way?

Reflection Questions

Given what we have discussed during this interview, where do you see yourself going in the future? If you could go back and do it over again, is there anything you would change? What advice would you give to future CSP students?

Second Interview

This second interview will be much more open-ended than the previous interview. I will be drawing upon some of your statements from the previous interview to ensure a productive conversation. I will go over informed consent one more time and ensure you still interested in participating in this study. Do you have any questions before we begin?