ACADEMIC ADVISING PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT RETENTION RATES IN TWO-YEAR COLLEGES IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The academic advising practices of two-year colleges with high retention rates was examined using general inductive qualitative study. Participants were all managers or deans who oversaw the advising practice at their college. The colleges interviewed were all located in the Southeastern United States. The study uncovered five key findings: (a) early identification and intervention of high-risk students; (b) increased communication with students, particularly at significant dates for enrollment; (c) implementation of support coaches; (d) training of faculty and staff who serve as advisors; and (e) mandatory advising sessions for students. The findings validated the importance of academic advising in improving and sustaining retention rates. Implementing these practices in other two-year colleges may help improve institution retention rates and student success.

Keywords: two-year colleges, academic advisement, retention, qualitative study
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The primary purpose of two-year colleges changed as higher education services to students expanded due to increased enrollment. Originally, two-year colleges provided community members with career and technical training to serve their community (Wells, 2008). In the Fall of 2014, two-year colleges enrolled over 6.7 million students, which is 39% of post-secondary student enrollment according to the U.S. Department of Education (2015b). Many students attend two-year colleges to help them transition from high school to four-year universities. Two-thirds of the 2004 first-time freshman class enrolled with the intention of pursuing a bachelor’s degree (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). By 2006, 39% of these students left school without completing a degree program (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Two-year college retention is a significant problem that educators must address in order to better serve students and help them be successful.

Academic advising improves student retention in certain contexts (Drake, 2011; King, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Gaps remain in the research regarding two-year colleges and their use of academic advising. Much of the research on advising and its impact on retention at two-year colleges focused on the relationship between faculty and students (Hanover Research, 2014; King 1993; Schwebel, Walburn, Jacobsen, Jerrolds, & Kylce, 2012) and on the functions of advising (Allen & Smith, 2008). Little research addressed the practices and interventions of academic advisement.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (2015) data since 2005 revealed an increase in the use of academic advising by two-year college students. CCSSE is an assessment tool utilized by community colleges as a benchmarking instrument, diagnostic
tool, or a monitoring device (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016). Throughout the United States, two-year college presidents publicly endorsed academic advising as being crucial to institutional mission (Drake, 2011). College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2012) recommendations for retention include academic advising as a way to improve student-faculty interaction and academic performance. The proposed research study will identify the practices and interventions of academic advisement that may improve retention at two-year colleges.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

The research problem is a lack of knowledge regarding best advising practices and interventions that may improve student retention in two-year colleges. Two-year colleges serve the local needs of their communities, and are different from four-year colleges in some ways. Yet, the criteria for assessing two-year colleges and four-year colleges are similar. A common statistic to assess college effectiveness is retention rate (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012).

Article VII of Act 629 South Carolina legislation requires public colleges and universities in South Carolina to maintain institutional effectiveness programs to report their retention rates to the governor and General Assembly each year (Wyman, 1997). This legislation helps the State link funding of colleges to their institutional performance. One of the main performance measurements in this funding equation is retention (Wyman, 1997).

Retention is an important topic for colleges across the United States (Hingorani & Askari-Danesh, 2014; Schuetz, 2005; Summers, 2003; Tinto, 2013). Retention efforts increase positive graduation rates that lead to state and federal funding and provide a reliable source of income from tuition (Wyman, 1997). Over the past five years, two-year colleges experienced declines in enrollment and mediocre retention rates. Most two-year college students are
transitional due to transfer opportunities at four-year colleges and career opportunities in the community (Crisp & Mina, 2012). Successful retention strategies and practices are necessary for two-year colleges.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

The National Association of Academic Advising (NACADA) stated that academic advising correlates with positive retention rates (NACADA, 2014). NACADA is a national association of educational professionals who believe academic advising is at the core of student success (NACADA, 2016). Colleges implement many resources to strengthen academic and career advising to improve retention rates (Craig & Ward, 2008). Advising is an important part of the college experience and academic success. Allen and Smith (2008) reported that advising to improve retention should integrate academic and career goals, refer students to resources, provide information about academic degrees, be individualized, and incorporate a shared responsibility to increase student involvement and participation. However, past research lacks information on how advisors should incorporate and include these practices in to their day-to-day activities. The details of advising, such as mandatory advising, email correspondence, and workshops for faculty and students are missing from the research.

**Relating the Discussion to Audiences**

Increased retention of students at two-year colleges improves learning, academic performance, and involvement for a population that is often difficult to reach (Ryan, 2013). Additional research on this topic will be beneficial. The use of academic advisement to increase retention may improve and increase interactions with students who are physically hard to reach or mobile (Bajt, 2011). Increasing the use of academic advisement to improve retention may increase retention based on the *student involvement theory* (Astin, 1984). Lastly, academic
advisement may help create a diverse community in which students feel connected and receive support from faculty, staff, and other students (Collis & Moonen, 2008).

**Significance of the Problem**

The purpose of postsecondary educational institutions is to help students earn a degree or certificate (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). Two-year colleges award associate’s degrees or certificates that assist students in transferring to a four-year institution to earn a bachelor’s degree to obtain a successful career. In October 2010, the White House held the first Summit on Community Colleges. The purpose of the summit was to share best practices that improve student outcomes (Biden, 2011). The Summit focused on how two-year college could help students earn degrees to secure jobs that have a family-sustaining wage (Handel, 2013). College for All is a federal agenda regarding higher education (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). The goal of this agenda is for all Americans to earn a post-secondary degree or certificate (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). This national initiative will increase college enrollment which will impact retention.

The Integrated Post-Secondary Educational Data System (IPEDS) collects data regarding retention rates and degree completion in the United States. According IPEDS data from 2014, retention at two-year colleges was lower than four-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). In terms of retention rates, the Community College Summit Report concluded fewer than 3 of 10 full-time students pursuing two-year degrees completed their degrees within three years (Biden, 2011). The graduation rate for a 2010 national cohort of students was 21.1% (Juszkiewicz, 2015).

IPEDS reported low numbers of transfer rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). Transfer rates from two-year colleges to four-year institutions are very important because many
students utilize community colleges as a stepping-stone to a bachelor’s degree. In 2004, the national data disclosed two-thirds of high school seniors enrolling in two-year colleges stated they intended to pursue a bachelor’s degree (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). By 2006, 39% of these students left college with no degree or certificate (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). As few as 25% of students transfer to a four-year college after enrolling at a two-year college (Handel, 2013). Completion of a college degree leads to increased economic well-being (Day & Newbruger, 2002; Dee 2004; Ross & Wu, 1996). Researching practices and interventions that improve retention is important for two-year colleges.

**Positionality Statement**

My career at Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) has driven the desire to research this topic. During my time at HGTC, the college started focusing more directly on retention in 2013. In 2013, South Carolina experienced a major gap in retention rates between four-year colleges and two-year colleges. On average, retention of freshman from Fall 2011 to Fall 2012 was 77.4% at four-year institutions but only 48.8% for two-year colleges (US Department of Education, 2014). That is a 25.6% difference between institution types. The gap sparked institutional conversations about improving retention rates.

Of the 16 two-year colleges in the state of South Carolina, HGTC tied for sixth in terms of high retention rates. The college tied with Trident Technical College, the other coastal two-year college. Because state funding depends on retention rates in South Carolina, the college immediately convened a retention committee to research and recommend practices to improve the overall retention rate of HGTC.

Academic advising is an important component of the college experience. The primary reason for academic advising is to help students understand program requirements for graduation
and degree completion. Advisors also serve as advocates for students and help guide them to resources that will help them be successful in and out of the classroom (McMahan, 2008). The present research study examines the advising practices and methods used by community college advisors at two-year institutions with high retention rates.

**Researcher’s background.** I was a first generation college student within my family. I was motivated and determined to acquire my college degree to better myself and to prepare for a successful career. My college had a mandatory advisement requirement for all semesters, but it was my motivation and determination that drove me to seek out my academic advisor early in my college career. I had a great relationship with my academic advisor, but I still consulted with other faculty and staff about my academic progress and used additional support services such as career counseling. I sought out these experiences because I wanted to understand my opportunities, and I wanted to be a successful student in terms of grade point average. With the assistance of advisors, faculty, and staff, I graduated with honors and completed a dual degree in psychology and history.

I pursued working with youth and becoming a mentor due my positive experiences with advising relationships in college. In my first professional position, I worked as a youth coordinator at Service Over Self (SOS). SOS was a non-profit organization in a rural area of South Carolina that provided volunteer opportunities, leadership training, and teen pregnancy prevention to middle and high school students in the county. The organization served all types of students regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status. After working for three years as a youth coordinator, I then pursued a position as a new student advisor at a two-year college. I am passionate about starting new college students on clear and direct paths to help them reach their goals.
As an advisor, I researched advising styles, methods, and practices. Due to my hard work and reputation with students, I received a promotion to director of advising at HGTC. This was a new position at the college, and I established my role within the institutional framework. My new position required me to serve on the Student Process Improvement Team at HGTC. The purpose of this team is to review retention strategies. Some of the strategies reviewed by the team included new student orientation, career counseling, and academic advising. The main sources of data for the reports at HGTC are graduation exit surveys and student satisfaction surveys. Through my involvement, I reviewed academic advising data as it pertains to retention at HGTC.

**Personal bias.** My personal experience and knowledge may influence certain conclusions in the present research. Based on my understanding of academic advising, I believe the purpose of advisement is to help students obtain their degrees. However, I also believe that student motivation influences whether or not students seek advisement. Advisement is not mandatory for students at HGTC. My personal relationship with my academic advisor in college was positive and successful. Therefore, in my opinion, academic advisement and self-motivation helped me acquire my degree and may do the same for other students. To address my positionality and to present an accurate and thorough assessment of data, certain practices will need to be in place. I researched retention rates and advising with a specific direction (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). A review of the literature will confirm or deny my personal beliefs regarding potential research conclusions.

**Challenges related to positionality.** Colleges have different academic advising styles and practices, and I demonstrate a *capital view* of academic advising at the two-year college level (Carlton Parsons, 2008). According to Carlton Parsons (2008), having a capital view helps
“illuminate differences among groups, but also celebrates certain group distinctions as invaluable assets and advocates their uses as resources in improving a group’s status” (p. 1128). I will identify group commonalities and report these commonalities in relation to retention using the capital view. It is important to have this viewpoint because advising commonalities may juxtapose staff and faculty advisors or concepts such as mandatory or discretionary advising (Carlton Parsons, 2008). The present study examines many viewpoints to provide accurate and thorough research findings. I include an inclusive representation of advisement and its impact on student retention (Briscoe, 2005). My understanding of the challenges faced by two-year colleges will assist in representing this group without marginalizing them based on national rates and practices.

**Summary.** My personal experiences made me a strong advocate for enhancing academic practices at two-year colleges. My positionality towards academic advising may result in a more positive view of data, but I believe my lack of experience as an administrator of advising grounds my perspectives in the research. Daily advising practices emerged from analysis of successful two-year college advisors’ data, and these practices may help other administrators increase retention rates in the community college setting.

**Research Question**

The present research explores advising practices and interventions that support high retention rates. Two-year colleges seek ways to improve retention to help students succeed and improve institutional effectiveness. The research question addressed in this study is as follows:

What common advising practices and interventions do two-year colleges with higher retention rates in the southeastern United States utilize?
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model that informs this research is Seidman's (2012) *retention formula*. Seidman is executive director of the Center for the Study of College Retention and conducted several research projects regarding two-year colleges and retention. His model provides academic institutions with ways to improve retention rates through practices that work within various academic programs and with varied student types.

Seidman based his *retention formula* on Vincent Tinto's *theory of attrition* (Tinto, 1982). Seidman (1991) integrated admissions with academic counseling. Seidman (1991) linked counseling intervention techniques with the admissions process, which positively affected students. Linking these processes provided a highly satisfying experience for students, integrated students with the college and college services sooner, and resulted in a higher retention rate compared to students admitted through standard methods (Seidman, 1991). Seidman advocated for colleges to develop and integrate consistent programs and practices to serve students (Seidman 1993, 1995). He stated a two-year college was an "educational melting pot" (Seidman, 1995, p. 247). Because of the diversity of students and support services at colleges, Seidman developed his model as a way for academic institutions to improve their retention rates and effectiveness.

Seidman's (2012) model for retention, also known as Seidman’s *formula and success* model, stated “Retention equals Early Identification plus (Early plus Intensive plus Continuous) Intervention” (p. 268). Seidman (2012) introduced this concept through the following equation: \( \text{Ret} = \text{Early ID} + (E + \text{In} + C) \). Seidman’s formula provides colleges with a course of action to improve retention rates for all student types (Seidman, 2012). Seidman (2012) defined retention as "student attainment of academic and/or personal goal(s)" (p. 270). Improved retention
involves early identification, early intervention, intensive intervention, and continuous intervention (Seidman, 2012).

Early identification involves the assessment of student skill levels (Seidman, 2012). This assessment usually occurs during admission through standardized assessment and academic review. Identifying students’ academic skill level early in their time at the college allows advisors to intervene before students begin to struggle academically.

Early intervention should occur as soon as possible (Seidman, 2012). Early intervention can begin before the student takes any courses at the college. Early identification is key to the success of Seidman’s formula. Seidman (2012) stated, “intervention should continue until the student has demonstrated that the deficiency has been overcome” (p. 273). Early intervention is necessary to allow time to effect change.

The third factor is Seidman’s model is intensive intervention. Seidman (2012) identified intensive intervention as intervention that is intrusive and strong enough to warrant the desired change. This may involve daily meetings with a student that last two or more hours. The key element of success in intervention is for the “experience to be powerful enough to be effective and make desired change in the student’s academic and/or personal behavior” (Seidman, 2012, p. 273).

Continuous intervention, the fourth and final step of the model, involves intervention that persists until change has occurred (Seidman, 2012). Time limits for intervention should only apply to academic issues, and personal issues should not have time limits set on intervention practices (Seidman, 2012). Setting time limits on personal issues only adds to the stress levels of students, and additional stress does not help students succeed.
Seidman (2012) suggested the advisors “identify a student in need of assistance academically and/or socially as early as possible, assess student needs, prescribe interventions, and monitor, assess, and adjust interventions where necessary” (p. 274). Seidman’s model is a successful retention model for colleges (Seidman, 1991). In community colleges in Texas, for example, researchers concluded that colleges that practiced early identification and continuous intervention had higher retention rates than colleges that did not demonstrate these practices (Young, 1999). Silverman (2010) concluded that students placed into skills groups and given the skills to be successful maintained enrollment at significantly higher rates than those students not placed in skills modules. Since 2000, the Universidad del Este in Puerto Rico used Seidman’s model and increased retention by 16% in the first year (Seidman, 2012). These results show the model is effective and will be useful in closer examination of two-year college retention rates.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Retention in two-year colleges influences the economic and educational welfare of the United States (Wells, 2008). As the reasons for attending two-year colleges in the United States diversified, so did retention problems (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Retention studies increased and evolved; it is often difficult for colleges to decide what method is best to implement in order to improve their retention rates (Crisp & Mina, 2012). The literature review includes research on two-year college missions and factors that impact retention rates.

This literature review examines the practices of academic advisement as a method to improve student retention at two-year colleges. Three main subjects informed this examination. The first subject I researched was two-year college retention rates. Retention rates are important to two-year colleges because they reflect the overall effectiveness of the college (Berger et al., 2012). The second subject was the type of students who attend two-year colleges and possible challenges in reaching them. In order to implement any practice or policy involving students, it is important to understand the students themselves. The third subject is the practice of academic advisement and its impact on retention. Understanding this practice and linking it to higher education retention is important to ground the present research. The literature review concludes with a summary of how academic advisement may improve retention rates in two-year colleges.

Purpose of Two-Year Colleges

Two-year colleges originally served as educational extensions after students completed the K-12 system to obtain further training in order to build a better workforce (Wells, 2008). High school based community colleges began to better serve their students and local communities (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016c). As local needs changed, so did the mission of two-year colleges.
After World War II, two-year colleges grew rapidly. Economic transformations and the GI Bill created a greater need for higher education options (AACC, 2016b). President Truman signed the Truman Commission in 1948 creating a “network of public, community based colleges to serve local needs” (AACC, 2016b). Over the past sixty years, two-year colleges increased to 1167 colleges in the United States, over 1600 if including branch campuses (AACC, 2016a). According to the AACC (2016a), two-year colleges represent approximately 25% of all higher educational institutions in the United States.

Even though the scope and focus of two-year colleges is somewhat different from four-year colleges, organizations compare them to one another in terms of graduation rates. Community college graduation rates are how many students complete the requirements for an associate’s degree (IPEDS, 2016). In Tinto’s (1993) earlier research, it was noted that students enrolled at two-year colleges to complete an associate’s degree, yet only 38.7% were graduating or receiving a degree. At the time, Tinto (1993) indicated that the population at two-year colleges and students’ multiple outside interests (family, jobs, etc.) were barriers to success as a college student.

President Obama highlighted the need to improve higher education access and degree attainment in his educational agenda. President Obama encouraged all Americans to receive post-secondary training or education so that American would have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (White House, 2016). Two-year colleges must strengthen students by creating educational and career pathways and by working with each state to help make college affordable (White House, 2016). Two-year colleges must improve their retention rates to improve student success in the obtainment of transfer and career paths.
Two-Year College Retention Rates and Factors Impacting Retention

Since the early 1900s, two-year colleges provided education at a low cost to many students. In 1948, President Truman commissioned two-year colleges nationwide to serve the local needs of their communities. Since this time, two-year colleges thrived and expanded their focus to the needs of their evolving constituents. Two-year colleges are often in the national spotlight because of the degrees and training they provide to Americans. Student academic outcomes and institutional effectiveness contribute to students earning their secondary degrees. In 1992, the U.S. government reauthorized the Higher Education Act of 1965 to allow states to evaluate public institutions based on their effectiveness (Wyman, 1997). One indicator of institutional effectiveness and performance is retention (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999). Retention rate definitions and time-periods vary depending on who is collecting the data and why. Researchers define retention as degree completion or attainment, first day of college to graduation, or first year to second year persistence. These definitions usually apply to four-year colleges. The graduation rate defined by the Department of Education is widely known to be a poor measure for two-year colleges (Juszkiewicz, 2015). Even though it is a poor measurement, retention continues to be the statistic that determines two-year college effectiveness.

Two-year college retention and transfer rates since 2005 are low. Three main factors influence retention at two-year colleges: open access, academics, and faculty involvement (Crisp & Mina, 2012). Two-year colleges have an open-admissions policy to enroll and assist any student who has a desire to learn. Two-year colleges offer programs including academic, transfer, single-focus, and short programs tailored to meet local business and industry needs; therefore, the student body is very diverse (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). In trying to develop a behavioral typology of community college students, Bahr (2010) noted a high percentage of
drop-in students. These students enrolled for a short time and attended community college to complete a task (i.e. courses needed for medical school) or they wanted to test-drive higher education (Bahr, 2010). Experimental students demonstrate the various sub-groups within the student population at two-year colleges (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). The open access mission of two-year colleges often results in lower retention rates (Craig & Ward, 2008).

Open access results in a diverse student population in terms of academic performance. Academic performance and social connectedness influence retention (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008). Two-year colleges have commuter students because they do not provide housing. Academic integration plays a significant role in student retention at colleges where students commute (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton & Lien, 2000). Students attending two-year colleges typically have other life concerns that take priority over education, and express an appreciation for colleges that recognize and value their time (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). In recognizing students’ time and satisfaction, an individualized approach to retention delivers substantial results because it influences the best predictors of retention, student attitude, and motivation (Levitz et al., 1999). Retention determines student satisfaction and success (Levitz et al., 1999). Therefore, retention studies have potential to impact factors outside of the college environment (Jensen, 2011). These internal and external factors influence college effectiveness and performance.

Faculty interaction also influences retention rates. High levels of student satisfaction leads to greater faculty-student interaction (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; McArthur, 2005). Excellent undergraduate education occurs at colleges that maximize student engagement efforts (Pascarella, 2001). Astin (1984) analyzed the differences between the two-year and four-year colleges to develop student involvement theory. Astin (1984) recognized that students’ chances
of dropping out are higher at two-year colleges and the involvement between faculty and students was minimal. Astin (1984) concluded that frequent student interaction with the strongest connection to involvement which leads to retention.

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) researched the engagement styles of non-traditional students, and found these students put more energy into building relationships outside of the formal teaching environment. Their results indicated that students who have “never engaged in interaction with the members of the community” are at risk of not succeeding (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011, p. 47). Wyman (1997) proposed that colleges increase retention rates by securing sufficient funding and resources to improve institutional and academic support for students. The challenge is knowing what resources or practices to fund. State funding depends on retention, so the need to identify the most effective retention practices at the two-year college level is urgent.

Creating an environment that fosters student success requires an intentional effort and plan of action from the institution (McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005). With so many options for retention, some colleges decide to try them all. However, tying up resources and staff to implement several retention strategies is counterproductive to students’ college success. A more focused and cost-effective retention practice would be better suited for students and colleges. The goal of the present study is to inform two-year colleges of the best retention efforts to improve retention rates.

**Who Attends Two-Year Colleges**

There are over 1000 two-year colleges in the United States, and 95% of them have an open-admissions policy (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). This policy allows for a very diverse student population with varying degrees of college readiness and ability. Two-year colleges
support the majority of part-time and minority students enrolled in post-secondary education (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). These demographics show the diverse student population of two-year colleges. This diversity adds a level of complexity to improving student engagement and involvement, key components of retention.

A student’s desired outcome for their education relates to the time and effort they put into their educational engagement (Kuh, 2009). The more a student is involved and integrated into college or campus life, the more they increase their chances of persistence within their degree (Berger & Milem, 1999). The rate of persistence and degree completion is critical to institutional success. Colleges need to understand and work with students to implement successful and accessible tools of engagement.

Two-year colleges have the greatest involvement challenges because of their varied student types (Astin, 1984). Students from all backgrounds benefit from increased engagement in college life (Kuh, 2009). Student engagement theory is beneficial to underrepresented student populations (Berger & Milem, 1999). Two-year colleges typically serve underrepresented student populations, and most often serve students from with low socioeconomic status (SES). Students with low SES face several challenges related to engagement. Walpole (2003) suggested that low SES students have lower educational aspirations, persistence rates, and educational attainment compared to students with higher SES. Students at two-year colleges are more likely to hold part-time or full-time jobs, which detracts from their involvement in academic projects (Astin, 1984). Students with low SES have different sets of behaviors and values that influence engagement (Walpole, 2003). These factors all play into the challenges that two-year colleges face when determining methods and practices to improve student engagement.
Two-year colleges enroll a wider variety of student types than other higher education institutions, and must adapt their techniques and practices to reach new kinds of students. The majority of students enrolled in college today are millennial or net generation students born between 1982 and 1991. They are one of the larger populations in the world, making up 30% of the overall population (Bajt, 2011). These students used technology throughout their lives. The technology used during their formative years influenced how they learn and what they expect from a learning experience (Bajt, 2011). These students grew up in the digital world and expect to use virtual technology tools in their learning environments (Bajt, 2011).

The integration of technology into higher education requires colleges to revisit their practices, implementation, and organization to support these students (Amador & Amador, 2014). Students entering college embrace interactive environments, have different ways of thinking and communicating, and seek active involvement in learning (Bajt, 2011). They are visual learners, can shift their attention rapidly, respond quickly, and expect the same from their educational experience in college (Bajt, 2011). These students are more mobile and like to be able to access information on demand. Researchers define these students as mobile learners, those who use mobile devices to connect while on the move (Menkhoff & Bengtsson, 2012). Students use technology to communicate as much as, if not more than, face-to-face communication (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Technology that enables the behaviors of this generation will be most effective in improving student engagement.

To support and communicate with net generation students, colleges need to explore new technologies (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Students are accustomed to on-demand and readily accessible information and tasks. The integration of virtual technology tools may be very similar to the internet when it first entered higher education practices and processes. Higher education is
hard to imagine without internet technology. Virtual technology tools may provide higher education with superior methods of engaging students.

Institutions need to create social and cultural settings that encourage development and engagement (Rhoads & Black, 1995). In the schools that have created these settings, studies involving students with low SES found these students are more engaged academically and socially in public institutions versus private (Pike, Smart, Kuh, & Hayek, 2006). The theory of involvement states that "if adequate resources are brought together in one place, student learning and development will occur" (Astin, 1984, p. 299).

**Impact of Academic Advising on Student Retention**

Tinto’s retention model focused on institutional resources and connection to students as it pertains to student retention (Tinto, 1975, 2012). This theoretical framework guides colleges in determining practices and programs that positively influence retention. The most common practices related to college retention are student connection, orientation to college, and academic instruction (Berger and Milem, 1999; Craig & Ward, 2008; Menkhoff & Bengtsson, 2012). Tinto (2012) included *advising expectation* as part of retention and completion. Tinto (2012) stated, “students need a roadmap that guides them through the institution and the field in which they want to earn their degree” (p. 17).

Bean and Metzner (1985) reviewed studies an academic advising and found mixed and inconsistent reports. Later researchers found academic advising influenced student retention (King, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Seidman (1991) also supported a positive connection between academic advising and retention. Most two-year colleges and many retention studies focus on advising as a principal practice to improve retention. NACADA (2014) stated
that academic advising is at the core of student success, which correlates with positive retention rates.

Interactions between faculty and staff outside the classroom influence retention and degree attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). One of the main ways student-staff interaction occurs at two-year colleges is through academic advising (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987; Habley, 2003). “Advising provides the most significant mechanism by which students can directly interact with representatives of the institution and clarify their educational/career goals as well as relate these goals to academic offerings” (Voight & Hundrieser, 2008, p. 10). Academic advising connects students to faculty members, and provides a conduit for students to connect to additional resources such as tutoring and counseling.

Faculty advising increases retention because it connects academic experiences with the institution (Hanover Research, 2014). In two-year colleges, faculty members’ role in academic advising is critical to student retention (King, 1993). Faculty members serve as the primary academic advisor at two-year colleges. Therefore, their role is critical when examining retention. In a study conducted by Allen and Smith (2008), faculty and students agreed that all functions of academic advising are important. Allen and Smith (2008) concluded that a dual model of academic advising between faculty and student affairs professionals would be beneficial to the success of students. Academic advising based on student needs and expectations versus satisfaction had a significant correlation to student success (Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013). Academic advising improves retention through relationship building and connection to the college and institutional resources (Drake, 2011).

The primary role of academic advisors is to help students achieve their academic goals (Bean, 1982; Dungy, 2003). Advisors help calm students as they enter higher education by
helping them develop a plan to achieve their goals (McClennen & Waiwaiole, 2005). Academic advising links learning experiences to improve retention (Drake, 2011). As with any endeavor, having a clear direction and guidelines helps students know how to perform and be successful. Students rely on a syllabus for class expectations and outcomes, and rely on academic advising for academic expectations and outcomes. Advising programs that focus on student academic, nonacademic, and personal factors positively affect student success and retention (Fowler & Boylan, 2010).

Advising practices that focus on the creation of an academic plan improve student success (Hanover Research, 2014). CCCSE (2013) identified academic advising as a high impact practice for improving student engagement because it involves student-faculty interaction, early connections, clear academic pathways, and an academic support network. When conducting surveys with students who left college prematurely, many cited poor academic advisement as the reason (Roberts & Styron, 2010). Dedicating resources to strengthen academic and career advising is a strategy colleges implement to improve retention rates (Craig & Ward, 2008). Advising is an important part of the college experience and crucial to academic success. Advising to improve retention should integrate academic and career goals, refer students to resources, provide information about academic degrees, be individualized based on each students’ needs, and incorporate a shared responsibility to increase student involvement and participation in the academic process (Allen & Smith, 2008).

Academic advising is a critical element to student retention (Drake, 2011). Bahr (2008) concluded that academic advising was actively beneficial to student success in two-year colleges. Meetings with advisors were also important to the advisement process. Every meeting with an academic advisor increases student retention by 13% (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). Ryan
(2013) concluded that students who meet with their academic advisor regularly during the first semester were more likely to remain for the second semester. Craig and Ward (2008) recommended two-year colleges strengthen academic advising services to improve retention.

College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2015) recommendations for retention involve academic advising as a way to improve student-faculty interaction and academic performance. Research conducted on academic advising shows the benefits to retention. Motivational/empowerment models are effective because they incorporate students learning and self-awareness in the retention process (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). The motivational/empowerment model incorporates personal responsibility, positive affirmation, life planning, and self-management (Kamphoff et al., 2007). Advisors help students understand their strengths and limitations. In some studies, students reduced their credit load because they had an accurate understanding of their limitations and programs requirements (Kamphoff et al., 2007). Advising is a valid practice in retention that involves social connection between students and faculty to increase academic success.

Summary

Improvement of retention rates is an important endeavor for two-year colleges. Their missions involve preparing students for future educational and career endeavors. Academic advisement connects students with staff and faculty mentors, a support community that helps them succeed in college and in other life endeavors. Academic advising also has an impact on academic success, grade point averages, and instructor relations with students. The educational and social components of advising enrich the experiences gained from the community. These benefits, including increased retention, support the need for academic advisement in two-year
colleges. The literature review strongly suggests that academic advisement significantly improves retention rates at two-year colleges.
Chapter III: Research Design

Retention rates at two-year colleges are one determinant of college effectiveness. Many colleges seek ways to improve retention rates. Academic advising is a way to improve these rates at two-year colleges. However, little research explores the practices of academic advising that best support retention. The present research identifies the practices and interventions of academic advisement that improve retention at two-year colleges.

Methodology

According to Creswell (2015), qualitative research is the best approach when a researcher needs to “research a problem in which you do not have the variables and need to explore” (p. 16). The research question for the present study is as follows:

What common advising practices and interventions do two-year colleges with higher retention rates in the southeastern United States utilize?

The study utilizes a qualitative methodology to gather and analyze data in order to answer the research question. Seidman’s (2012) formula and success model will be the conceptual model for this research. Seidman (2012) developed the formula and success model “to identify a student in need of assistance academically and/or socially as early as possible, assess student needs, prescribe interventions, and monitor, assess, and adjust interventions where necessary” (p. 274). Burrell and Morgan (1979) identified this approach as the interpretivist paradigm. Creswell (2015) used the term socially constructed to identify a worldview in which researchers rely on participants’ views to find meaning. The present study examines advising practices through the Seidman model, using it as guide to collect data. This chapter describes the research design, data collection process, and analysis for this project.
Research Tradition

The present study examines the advising practices of two-year colleges identified as having high retention rates to suggest practices that may help other two-year colleges improve retention rates. This research uses general inductive analysis. According to Thomas (2006), the purpose of inductive inquiry is to allow findings to emerge from significant and persistent data. Common objectives of research are to identify “what is working well” in a program or practice (Thomas, 2006, p. 240). The purpose of general inductive analysis “is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in the raw data, without restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Qualitative research allows the researcher to interview experts within the field to collect data.

Utilizing inductive analysis for the purposes of this qualitative study, the researcher identified concepts and themes through interpretation of the data collected (Thomas, 2006). An inductive approach to research allows the researcher to condense extensive and varied raw text data into a summary format, establish links between the research objectives and summary findings derived from raw data, and to identify the underlying structure of experiences that are evident in the raw data (Thomas, 2006). The inductive approach allows the researcher to link the commonalities and determine factors that support or disprove the research conducted.

Research Design

The purpose of this general inductive qualitative study is to examine the advising practices of two-year colleges with high retention rates and use the data collected to interpret practices and themes that may help other two-year colleges improve advising practices and retention rates. The researcher used an inductive approach to determine the trends, patterns, and anomalies within the participants’ responses.
The study included interviews to collect data from participants. Qualitative research involves identifying commonalities and differences of various approaches (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative inquiry is best suited to the present study because the researcher may seek commonalities and differences of academic advising practices among colleges with high retention rates based on interview data.

The researcher interviewed participants with experience in academic advising at two-year colleges with high retention rates. Research involving experience is a qualitative component and adds to the richness of data gathered (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007). Qualitative research provides a way for the researcher to learn from the participants (Creswell, 2015). The researcher learned from others in academic advising about how they perceive their advising practices influence retention at their colleges.

**Participants**

The researcher used IPEDS to obtain data regarding college type and location. By using the Compare Institutions feature on IPEDS, the researcher developed a report showing the retention rates of two-year colleges in the southeastern United States. The search parameters for creating the report were *public two-year colleges, receiving federal aid, and located in the southeastern region of the United States*. The researcher selected colleges with a retention rate of 75% or higher for inclusion in the project.

The researcher identified potential participants based on positions within the college. Directors of Advisement or Retention were the primary candidates for research. The sampling strategy for this study was purposive, and included practitioners who serve as advising department managers at several public, state-funded, two-year colleges in the southeast region of
the United States. This section of the country has similar student types and organizational designs between institutions.

The desired sample of participants included six colleges. Participation was voluntary. The researcher asked participants to be a part of the study based on college retention rates in 2014. The colleges were in the top 25 colleges in the southeast region based on retention rates in 2014. Participants had varying degrees of experience with academic advising and retention efforts.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher sent an email to potential participants asking for their participation in the research project. The email message provided a brief explanation of the interview process and asked for volunteer participation with no compensation. The researcher offered to share findings. The researcher sought IRB approval based on the premise that participants would incur minimal risk by participating in this study.

**Data Collection**

The researcher conducted virtual interviews using the software Go To Meeting. The software recorded interviews for data collection and analysis. The interviews lasted no longer than 70 minutes in length. The researcher sent completed interviews to a transcription service for reading purposes.

**Data Storage**

Only the research has access to the interview data. The researcher saved all data on a desktop computer that is password protected, and saved backups files to an external hard drive locked in a safe. The researcher is the only person with access to the files. The researcher will destroy records once this thesis is complete.
**Data Analysis**

The researcher analyzed data obtained from the interviews for common themes. Data analysis led the researcher to create meaning from the data by compiling the information into groups for coding (Creswell, 2015). The researcher identified common and discrepant themes by identifying the consistent phrases, expressions, and ideas shared among participants (Kvale, 2007).

After transcription, the researcher read and reviewed all participant responses to interview question to gain a general sense of the verbal data. Open coding was the first phase in the coding process. Open coding involves incorporating single words or short sentences to label or categorize similar responses (Saldaña, 2015). The researcher took notes to reflect general thoughts and potential commonalities and discrepancies (Creswell, 2015).

The second phase of coding was theme coding, which involved developing patterns based on common factors identified during open coding (Saldaña, 2015). Single words or terms helped identify the code, and themes developed as multiple participants used the same terms (Saldaña, 2015). The researcher coded data by clustering the information based on commonalities, as well as unique and exclusive ideas reflected about advising practices in higher education. Holloway (1997) explained that thick description refers to the researcher making patterns explicit from the detailed account of field experiences shared by participants. The researcher used thick description in this study to ensure participants provided sufficient detail, and that the findings sufficiently represented emergent patterns and themes.

The final coding process was provisional coding (Saldaña, 2015). In provisional coding, the researcher compared the data to Seidman’s (2012) formula and success model in relation to
the retention of students at colleges involved in the study. Coding at the provisional stage helped
the researcher determine relevant advising practices at each college.

Creswell (2007) explained an effective three-step analysis strategy for coding and representing qualitative data.

Step #1: Data analysis in qualitative research consists if preparing and organizing the data;

Step #2: Reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes;

Step #3: Representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion. (Creswell, 2007, p. 148)

Based on this approach, the researcher displayed the patterns and responses into a narrative form after analyzing the participants’ responses and organizing responses into themes.

**Trustworthiness**

The nature of the present research topic presented a threat to internal validity due to the researcher’s years of professional experience as an academic advisor. To mitigate this threat, the researcher utilized identical open-ended questions for all interviews. At no point did the researcher share personal views or opinions regarding any of the subject matter with participants. Additionally, participants selected for the study had no current relation or affiliation with the researcher. The researcher enhanced the validity of the study as the sole person to code and cluster all of the data. This ensured a consistent approach to data analysis.
Chapter IV: Findings

This study identified advising practices that support high retention rates at two-year colleges in the southeastern region of the United States. The purpose of the study is to ascertain how an identified set of two-year colleges improved retention rates to improve institutional effectiveness. The research question that drove this study was as follows:

What common advising practices and interventions do two-year colleges with higher retention rates in the southeastern United States utilize?

The study examined advising challenges for two-year colleges and the strategies used to overcome these challenges. The researcher interviewed the advising administrators of five two-year colleges. These administrators either directed or managed the advising or retention department at each college. Each administrator answered questions and explained in their own words the advising practices and strategies employed at their college that they believe result in high retention rates. The researcher coded the data to identify emergent themes for further discussion. This chapter includes a summary of the retention and academic advising challenges, strategies, and results at each participating college. The chapter concludes with a thematic analysis that highlights common challenges, strategies, and results.

Profiles of Participating Colleges

Of the 20 colleges identified as having high retention rates (above 66% full time retention rate) in the Southeast region, five colleges agreed to participate in this study. The colleges included in this study are:

1. Central Louisiana Technical Community College, Alexandria, Louisiana
2. Haywood Community College, Clyde, North Carolina
3. Itawamba Community College, Fulton, Mississippi
4. Wake Technical College, Raleigh, North Carolina

5. West Kentucky Community and Technical College, Paducah, Kentucky

The following sections provide detailed reviews of the data collected from each college. Each profile includes a 10-year enrollment review, challenges posed at the institutions, strategies and resources utilized to overcome challenges, and the outcomes of those strategies.

Central Louisiana Technical Community College. Central Louisiana Technical Community College (CLTCC) was originally part of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System in the early 1930s (CLTCC, 2016). The system originally established itself as one college with 40 campuses, but the focus and mission of the college system expanded to increase accessibility across the state (CLTCC, 2016). In 2012, CLTCC realigned to combine six technical colleges in the region into one college with six campuses and one extension office (CLTCC, 2016). Trends in enrollment data reflect the acquisition of campuses in Alexandria, Avoyelles, Huey P. Long, Lamar Salter, Oakdale, and Shelby M. Jackson of the Louisiana Technical College system (Table 1).

With the acquisition of six campuses, CLTCC more than tripled their total enrollment in five years. Since 2006, the overall student type enrolling at CLTCC significantly changed as well (see Table 1). The first area of change is enrollment status. The majority of students enrolled in 2014 took classes part-time rather than full-time. The second area of change was age of students enrolling. In 2014, the majority of students enrolled were between the ages of 25-64, which may indicate they attended on a part-time basis due to work and/or family responsibilities. Another significant enrollment trend at CLTCC was the increase of Hispanic and other races. Even with shifting enrollment trends, CLTCC increased student retention and graduation rates. Their accomplishments in student progression through enrollment changes is commendable.
Table 1

*Central Louisiana Technical and Community College Enrollment and Retention Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Topic</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>2,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is full-time</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is part-time</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Hispanic or other race</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is male</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is female</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 18-24 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 25-64 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression Rates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time retention rate</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time retention rate</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Data from the U.S. Department of Education, 2015.*

*Progression Rates based on provisional release data because final data not yet published.*

CLTCC’s Vice Chancellor of Students Affairs and Enrollment Management agreed to participate in the study. The Vice Chancellor described CLTCC’s advising model as a hybrid model. As she said, “our admission staff would do initial advising, and we then turn them over to their department heads. The department head helps them do their schedules.” CLTCC serves over 2,000 students, and had to overcome several challenges to achieve the results they report today.

**Identified challenges.** CLTCC, like many community college in the southeast United States, overcame many challenges over the years including a budget crisis at the state level. According to the Vice Chancellor, the state’s “higher education budget is in complete crisis
mode. We've had significant cuts over the years. We've had to regroup our advising process without trying to lose the quality of our advising.”

The second challenge the college faced was how to provide services to students in a large area. The college acquired several other campuses, and their service area expanded greatly. “We have the largest geographic region of any college is Louisiana. Basically, we’re from Texas to Mississippi. We have ten parishes or counties that we serve” (CLTCC Vice Chancellor). The Vice Chancellor went on to state that this area “is over a two-hour drive, just in one direction. It really has limited us the time for students to be able to have face-to-face, one-on-one” advising.

The third challenge CLTCC recognized was a large population of students lacking interest in attending college in their service area. As the Vice Chancellor stated, “looking at data, I always realize that Central Louisiana was almost like an anomaly, in the sense that so many of the students that graduated from high school, did not go on to post-secondary.” She continued to state that students who have no college experience have a hard time navigating the college enrollment process of admissions, financial aid, and course registration. “That, to me, is the biggest obstacle, especially in an area where we still have so many first generation students. Navigating this process is hard, especially if you have no parental support to understand what you need to do.” In 2004, 36% of students enrolling in fall class were first-time college students. The challenge with these students is making sure they start on the right academic path. The college recognized the need to reach out to students and to anticipate their enrollment and retention obstacles in an effort to serve them. These challenges, along with the need to increase services while maintaining quality of service, posed a significant test to CLTCC.

Strategies employed. To overcome challenges, CLTCC decided to use three different strategies including: (a) deployment of career coaches to high schools in the area; (b) partnering
with community businesses and non-profits to fund coaches and expand program; and (c) a mandated meeting with advisors while students are in college.

*Deployment of career and transition coaches to high schools in the area.* CLTCC placed career coaches into local high schools for the first time in 2011. As the Vice Chancellor stated, “this has been our new strategy on one growing enrollment, but to also supporting retention efforts by developing and fostering relationships while these students are still in high school.” Career coaches start meeting with local students during their 8th grade year in a group setting, and continue until students are in the 11th grade. During 11th and 12th grade, career coaches meet with students on an individual basis to provide more personalized plans to get them through high school and to help them apply to a post-secondary institution. Getting students engaged early increases dual-enrollment at CLTCC, and provides students with experience at the collegiate level to help alleviate fears and apprehensions about higher education.

Career coaches do not exclusively recruit or work with the students planning to attend CLTCC. These coaches work with all students planning to attend any institution after higher school graduation including traditional academic colleges, the military, or career schools. However, if students plan to attend CLTCC, the career coaches help academic advisors understand the challenges posed by these students. When discussing the career coaches, the Vice Chancellor added, “they also help with the identification since they've established that relationship. They know some of the struggles that students have at high school or their home life, things like that. That's helping identify those challenges that they could be facing.” Since these coaches work with students for several years, they have a greater understanding of students’ strengths, challenges, and weaknesses. Career coaches help communicate that knowledge to advisors so they can create the most successful degree path for students. CLTCC
has additional measures in place to help guide students through their collegiate process from enrollment through graduation, such as mandatory advising and support services like tutoring.

*Partnering with community businesses and non-profits to fund coaches and expand programs.* For a 13-month period, CLTCC leadership did not fund the career coaches due to state budget cuts. Shortly after removing coaches from high schools, leadership realized their importance and decided to fund the program again. Today, career coaches are not funded exclusively by the college. The community embraced this initiative, and now helps to fund and provide volunteers for the program. The Vice Chancellor said, “please know it was not something that our college did single-handedly. We have several partners that have helped us while we pay for a large portion.”

When the program was re-established, CLTCC also expanded the program to include transition coaches. Transition coaches offer transitional workshops to students after they graduate from high school. Most career coaches also serve as the transition coach for their high school. The Vice Chancellor stated, transition coaches “have a specific special one-day orientation with the students from their high school right before they are to become first-time freshman.” The coaches help students make college decisions and navigate the college enrollment process.

*A mandated meeting with advisors while students are in college.* CLTCC requires advising every semester. Students must to meet with their academic advisor at least once per semester. After a student applies to CLTCC, they meet with a staff advisor for an individual session. Most staff advisors have a counseling background because CLTCC wants to start strong with a “good student connection,” according to the Vice Chancellor. These staff advisors also teach a required freshman orientation course that students take during their first semester. She
went on to add, “the orientation and the advisors have really helped us be able to educate our students so they know the whole process, and how to manage it.”

Once students register for semester courses, the school assigns a faculty academic advisor within their program of study. “Our staff would do initial advising, and we then turn them over to their department heads,” the Vice Chancellor explained. The college also places a hold on a student’s registration status for the following semester until they meet with their academic advisor. The Vice Chancellor explained she decided to utilize this strategy primarily “because of the student population we are serving. Many of them did not finish high school. They just completed their GED so we want to make certain that academically they’re on track.”

Since the advisors are also faculty who teach courses, students see them almost every other day. Some faculty members volunteer to serve as tutors. The Vice Chancellor explained that when these faculty members also serving as tutors, students “have that daily reinforcement because the instructor has been there to provide that intervention.” The advising process established at CLTCC helps continue the individualized attention and focus students received from their career coaches in high school.

**Reported outcomes.** Career coaches helped CLTCC increase enrollment and transition students more successfully to higher education practices, According to the Vice Chancellor, “I feel like as higher-educational professionals, if you do your job right, students are going to go where they are best fit. You'll automatically have a pool if you just provide accurate information to the students.” The coaches increased enrollment over the past 10 years.

Financial support from the community helped fund and expand programs supporting CLTCC student success. The data from 2004-2014 show increased retention rates and graduation rates when colleges implemented advising initiatives. The full-time retention rate increased 20%
(from 54% to 74%) and the part-time retention rates more than doubled (from 34% to 87%). In the past, CLTCC focused on the number of students enrolling each semester at the college. Through the strategies in place today, the focus shifted to students earning a degree as opposed to simply applying to the college.

I've had to reprogram the way I count numbers. Historically, it was about the yield and how many students we could get in the door, but if you change your thought process and focus on how many students you can get across the stage and get a diploma, it truly will change your entire mindset of enrollment management. (CLTCC Vice Chancellor)

This mindset shows a change in the college culture and a change in college priorities. The college’s shift in focus to student success reflects the achievements of their students.

The advising practices employed by CLTCC positively influenced students’ progress. The required orientation sessions helped teach and guide students through the entire enrollment process, and resulted in increased retention rates as reported by IPEDS. Advisors influence student success.

For a student to be able to have a clear understanding of the process from start to finish helps a student navigate and stay connected to the journey. It's almost like a GPS. If you know where you're going and how long it's going to take you to get there, you can stay on path. Those academic advisors help facilitate staying on path. (CLTCC Vice Chancellor)

Haywood Community College. Haywood Community College (HCC) opened in North Carolina in 1965 (HCC, 2016). The original name of the college was Haywood Industrial Education Center. It started with one curriculum program and 39 students (HCC, 2016). HCC operates on one large suburban campus, not including the several acres of land they possess for
the natural resources and forestry program (HCC, 2016). The college serves over 2,000 students and has over 30 programs of study (HCC, 2016).

HCC enrollment stayed consistent over the past 10 years. Overall, students attend HCC on a part-time basis, are predominately white, and predominately female (see Table 2). HCC serves a large suburban area, and their enrollment may reflect the local demographics of the suburban population. The progression rates of retention at HCC show an increase between 2004 and 2009, and they remained relatively consistent since then.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Haywood Community College Enrollment and Retention Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data Topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is White, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Black, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Hispanic or other race</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 18-24 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 25-64 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression Ratesa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time retention rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time retention rate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data from U.S. Department of Education, 2015.

a Progression Rates based on provisional release data because final data not yet published.
The Vice President of Student Services at HCC agreed to participate in this study. She started the interview by stating, “advising takes many different forms and shapes,” and then went on to describe how each step of the enrollment process at HCC includes advising or “guiding early on in the process.” The Vice President went on to describe the advising model and practices at HCC. The college offers a hybrid approach to advising in which student services staff help students gain admission to the school and “determine what program they’re going into” through career development and one-on-one discussions. Once students declare a major, the school assigns a faculty member advisor from their program or discipline. The Vice President stated this faculty advisor “will work with them throughout their program, unless they change they major.”

**Identified challenges.** HCC has a diverse student population in terms of students’ personal and academic preparation for college. Many HCC students are first generation students, and do not know how to navigate and prepare for collegiate life. In 2004, 58% of the students enrolled for the Fall semester were first-time higher education seeking students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The Vice President added, “a lot of times they haven't thought about childcare, how they're going to fit it into their work schedule, are they taking care of family member, how many children do they have, you know, they haven't thought about all the things in life that happens to them. They sometimes need some help figuring all that out.”

To prepare and inform these students, HCC provides advisement to all incoming students. During the introductory advising session, staff provides enrollment information for the student. “We feed them all this information and expect it all to connect as soon as they start class, when in reality they really don't have any idea of how it all fits together until they've experienced a little bit” (HCC Vice President). This information is important so that students know the next
steps in the enrollment process and how to prepare for the first day of classes. This information can be overwhelming, and many times forgotten.

HCC enrolls many students who test into developmental or remedial courses for their first semester. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), reported that 24% of students enrolled in public two-year colleges in 2003 for the first time, enrolled in developmental course work (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). According to the Vice President, HCC identifies students with two or more developmental courses as high-risk students, and she stated the number of students identified as high-risk at HCC “is high.” Another challenge for this student type, according to the Vice President, is making “sure they’re doing something that they’re interested in” during their first semester. “If you’re putting them in all general ed. and they’re really interested on automotive, you’re going to lose them” (HCC Vice President). Finding the right balance between academic placement and program interest is a challenge for high-risk students and advisors.

HCC needs faculty members with training in advising techniques, practices, and processes. After a student enrolls in courses for the first semester, the school assigns a faculty member within their discipline as their academic advisor. Faculty members do not learn advising techniques and practices during college. Therefore, faculty members require additional training on how to assist high-risk and high-need students. Some faculty members opposed the addition of advising training because they felt they were at HCC “just to teach,” according to the Vice President.

**Strategies employed.** Recognizing these challenges, HCC employed several practices to help students progress successfully. The four strategies developed included: (a) early
identification of high-risk students; (b) implementation of success coach; (c) mandatory advising; and (d) training for faculty advisors.

Early identification of high-risk students. HCC found that early identification of high-risk students aids student progression. Students enrolled in developmental coursework accounted for 20% of Fall enrollment in 2003 (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). HCC realized the need to assist these students. “Part of the problem is just getting to them early enough, that's what's key” (HCC Vice President). Therefore, HCC identified all students who placed into two or more developmental courses and were first-time college students. HCC also identified important periods during a student’s enrollment to encourage high-risk students. The Vice President stated, “we set up benchmarks so we know that critical points in the life of a student. Some of the important dates identified are first day of class, 10% point of the semester, and 10% date on which students are funded.” She continued, “it's really critical to keep them through the 10% for us.” After staff identifies high-risk students, they establish a communication plan and someone from HCC has to carry out the process. Academic advisors are also faculty members. HCC added success coaches to this process so that high-risk students are not lost or frustrated during the enrollment process.

Implementation of success coaches. The role of the success coach is to be a student's "go to person for all barriers," according the Vice President. HCC first implemented success coaches in 2013. The success coaches start by reaching out to incoming students prior to their first semester at HCC to “start working with them, orienting them, and finding out what their situation is and helping them, you know, find childcare, find transportation, finalize all their financial aid if they have not done that,” according to the Vice President. The college also recommends students sign up for text messaging, because the success coaches utilize Remind.com to send out important messages regarding enrollment and semester deadlines.
Success coaches help students find childcare resources, transportation options, and overcome any other obstacles. By having one person to help them through the enrollment process, students are better able to navigate the processes of registration, financial aid, and purchasing books.

Success coaches work with faculty advisors to keep students engaged in their academic courses. Success coaches help students in developmental courses that are unrelated to their discipline stay involved in campus life and connected with their faculty advisor. According to the Vice President, success coaches help students “balance what they're passionate about” with the required courses they have to take to progress. HCC ensures high-risk students enroll in a course that interests them while they take developmental courses. This keeps students engaged in the curriculum and excited about college. The fear is that if students only enroll in general education courses, they will lose interest and leave college.

Another way success coaches work with faculty advisors is to help with early identification of struggling students. Success coaches communicate with faculty members and advisors each semester. The coaches introduce themselves to faculty members teaching a student who has a success coach on the first day of class and ask faculty members “if they notice a change in her work, her attendance, her personality, or you see some challenges, please let me [success coach] know so I can intervene and help facilitate a resolution” (HCC Vice President). If a faculty member notifies a success coach of a problem, the success coach immediately reaches out to help the student. The coach communicates with the student’s academic advisor as well.

*Mandatory advising.* HCC mandates advisement before a student can register each semester. “Before they can register each semester, they have to meet with their advisor, so we block them from registering until they meet with their advisor” (HCC Vice President). The
advisor advises the student on next semester courses based on their performance and identified barriers. If a student has a success coach as well, the success coach communicates with the academic advisor regarding the student's history and challenges to date. After a year of completing courses, the success coach steps back and lets the student navigate the process with their advisor. The success coaches answer questions if needed, but they are not as deliberate and intentional in their outreach after the first year.

*Training for faculty advisors.* HCC implemented training workshops to educate advisors on advising practices and provide faculty with resources to fulfill their roles. The college culture shifted to a more unified sense of responsibility. The HCC Vice President explained, “we're all responsible for recruitment now, we're all responsible for retention, we're all responsible for completion, so we're going through a culture shift right now.” Training programs improved services and helped faculty members understand how important their roles are to the success of students.

*Reported outcomes.* According to the Vice President, “the most important relationship that a student has is the one between them and their advisor.” Academic advising is an important part of student success at HCC. Based on the benchmarks HCC established, advisors are able to report outcomes of a student’s progression and retention. Most students drop out after they attend 10% of their first semester. This is the point at which most students drop out, so HCC set this date as a pivotal point for retention.

The next benchmark HCC monitors is the successful completion of twelve credits or more. As the HCC Vice President said,
Let's see, the definition that we're going off of is did they attempt and successfully complete twelve hours in their first academic year? We've brought it up from a 65 to a 70 last year, and if the data is right, we could be close to 80% this year.

HCC also monitors successful completion 30 credits hours by first-time students. According to the Vice President,

We've determined that if we can get them 30 successful hours, they probably have figured out what it takes to be successful at that point. Our performance measures in the state of North Carolina also measure our curriculum completion, so we have a real incentive to complete that individual, whether it's a certificate, diploma, or an associate's. Consistent retention rates support these outcomes over the past five years.

**Itawamba Community College.** Itawamba Community College (ICC) originated in 1920 as an extension of the Itawamba County Agricultural High School (ICC, 2016). In 1941, the school started offering college curriculum courses. By 1973, the college expanded services to the local counties of Pontotoc and Chickasaw counties, and was renamed Itawamba Community College (ICC, 2016).

Enrollment types at ICC remained consistent since 2006. The college increased enrollment in 2009, but that number dropped in later years. The average ICC student attends on a full-time basis and is between the ages of 18-24. Table 3 provides a more detailed review of enrollment over the past 10 years at ICC.
Table 3

*Itawamba Community College Enrollment and Retention Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Topic</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
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<td>7,596</td>
<td>5,654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is full-time</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is part-time</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Hispanic or other race</td>
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<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is male</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is female</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 18-24 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 25-64 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression Rates&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time retention rate</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time retention rate</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<sup>a</sup> Progression Rates based on provisional release data because final data not yet published.

ICC’s Director of Advising agreed to participate in this study. She has six years of experience in this position, and implemented many changes during her tenure at ICC. She describes the advising model at ICC as a shared model in which they “have academic counselors that are staff, and then we have faculty advisors.” Academic counselors meet with all new students and then the Director of Advising assigns a faculty advisor based on “majors or locality” (ICC Director). The Director went on to say, in terms of advising, “there’s definitely different challenges each and every day.” The following sections highlight some of those challenges.

**Identified challenges.** During 2011 and 2012, ICC completely transformed their advising department. ICC completed an intense internal review to identify challenges faced by students,
faculty, and the college. The Director of Advising described this process as “pretty intense,” very much “like a very intense dissertation” for a six- to eight-week period. The review identified challenges that the college needed to address in order to improve advising services and help students progress.

ICC students, like many others, exhibited a lack of preparedness for college life and academics. The college has a large population of first-time college students. These students need help navigating the college process to be successful during their first semester in college. Another challenge for ICC is low placement test scores for incoming freshmen. Low placement test scores require students to take developmental coursework before they may enroll in college-level academic courses. This requirement often frustrates students and hinders progression to the next semester. Even with low test scores and a lack of knowledge about the college enrollment process, the Director stated, “almost 70% of our students take 15 or more hours as full-time students.” Due to the heavy academic load take by students, the college see a need to educate and inform students about support resources available to them.

ICC also experienced challenges with faculty members. The Director stated, “we did not have complete buy-in from our faculty, it was because they didn’t feel like there were competent enough” to serves as advisors. This was a significant problem for an advising model that relies heavily on faculty member service. According to the Director, “we have three different campuses, and then we also have e-learning population.” ICC tried to improve advising for all of these populations.

**Strategies employed.** The strategies employed at ICC to improve student progression included: (a) mandatory advising for students; (b) development of faculty training; (c) creation of an advising center; (d) mandatory college life courses; and (e) use of an early alert system.
Mandatory advising for students. Mandatory advising is one of the principal initiatives ICC implemented to help students progress. “What we do here is every student must be advised in order to register” (ICC Director). An advising session is required before each semester. Each advisor develops an advising planning form for their students. The planning form outlines includes “what courses we want them to take and what their plan is for the next semester” (ICC Director). The planning form is available in the student's online portal. In order for registration to open for the student, a student must answer questions about their advisor and the advising process and agree with the academic plan. This process keeps advisors and students informed and in agreement with the academic progress plan. The Director added this is also a way to place “some accountability on the student.”

The Director described this process as “very intense.” She said,

I've gone out and looked for a student before. You send a note, and you send emails and everything, but we really do our best to go find the student and make that face-to-face contact. I feel here at ICC that we go above and beyond, because it's so important. (ICC Director)

ICC requires advisors to communicate with students during peak times such as the beginning of the semester and during the advisement period prior to next semester registration.

Development of faculty training. ICC “developed an ongoing professional development program for all advisors that's mandatory” to help faculty members buy in to the advising model and feel competent in their roles in the advising process (ICC Director). The advising department works one-on-one with new faculty to train them on the advising process as ICC. The department also limits their advising load to five to ten students for their first semester. The Director stated,
this is done to “be sure that they are feeling comfortable with the process of advising especially if they've never been an advisor before.”

Faculty members have access to all training materials and an advising manual through the resources tab in the ICC advising portal. This is important because the college requires 12 hours of professional developmental each year and academic professional development applies to those hours. The advising department also has a recognition and rewards program for advising professional development. One of the incentives is that if faculty members attend “at least 80% or higher of your professional development, then we hand out t-shirts at the end of the year to all of our faculty and staff advisors” (ICC Director).

*Creation of an advising center.* After the intense review in 2011, ICC created an advising center. The advising center was a “centralized location for my faculty advisors and the academic counselors to come to with questions” (ICC Director). The questions posed by advisors and students during the opening weeks of the center drove the professional development training topics for the first years of its operation. The advising center at ICC is part of the student affairs department, which also houses the counseling services for the college.

*Mandatory College Life course.* Another strategy ICC implemented is a College Life course. This course is required during the first semester for students who recently graduated high school or completed their GED. According to the Director, the College Life course “reinforces the support services, study skills, note-taking. It even goes into budget, and financial and campus involvement, even talks about emotional intelligence.” The course provides students with resources to progress to the next semester.

At the end of each semester, the Director of Advising and the College Life course instructor “run a report at the end of the fall semester to see who has dropped below and gone on
the academic probation or academic warning after that first semester” (ICC Director). The students who appear on this report enroll in an Improvement of Study course during their second semester. The Improvement of Study course reinforces skills from the College Life course, and prevents students from backsliding even more.

*Use of an early alert system.* ICC utilizes an early alert system to help students struggling with academic courses. Faculty members recognize students with low test scores, missing assignments, or excessive absences. Faculty send notifications to the success center, where a “behavioral intervention team” gets involved (ICC Director). This intervention technique stops students’ hindrances from worsening.

*Reported outcomes.* ICC increased retention through these strategies. The creation of the Advising Center and mandatory advising sessions each semester influenced IPEDS data. As Table 3 shows, the retention rates for full-time and part-time students were higher than other colleges. Students at ICC appreciated the changes. According the Director, the students see a difference in their academic records and credit advising. Transfer students told the Director several times that other colleges “didn’t make us go through advising. We just had to do this and this” (ICC Director). The student satisfaction with the advising process is significant.

Training of faculty advisors influenced advisor roles and competence. Many faculty members look forward to training, and the college added a required yearly faculty evaluation. Faculty members are so engrossed in their role and in the lives of students that they want to continue to relationships with students even if they change their program of study. The Director stated, “if they develop that relationship with the student, they'll call me, and they'll figure it out because they don't want to lose that student.”
According the Director of Advising, the College Life course “has helped our retention rates tremendously as far as going on from the fall to spring because you know you lose a lot after your fall semester.” The course helps students understand the collegiate process and navigate the process successfully. The Director taught a section of the College Life course, and said she could “actually see the changes in the students because there’s such a large transition from going from high school to college or even GED to college.” She also stated, “having someone there to help answer their questions and direct them in their next steps has been a great help.” The course is an open forum, which helps students who are shy open up more.

The early alert system is effective, and ICC will expand its reporting capabilities in the coming years. They hope to have a “consolidated system” so the information from advising meetings, tutoring sessions, and the Writing Center can be seen “in one centralized online platform” (ICC Director). This will help advisors and tutors stay informed and deliver a consistent and unified message regarding students’ success plans.

**Wake Technical Community College.** Wake Technical Community College (WTCC) began as Wake County Industrial Education Center in 1958 (WTCC, 2016). As local demand grew, WTCC received its current name in 1987 and expanded course offerings to five campuses (WTCC, 2016). As Table 4 shows, WTCC is the largest college to participate in the present study with service to over 21,000 students.
### Table 4

*Wake Technical Community College Enrollment and Retention Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Topic</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
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<td>15,203</td>
<td>21,384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Status</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is full-time</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is part-time</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Hispanic or other race</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is male</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is female</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 18-24 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 25-64 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression Rates&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time retention rate</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time retention rate</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<sup>a</sup> Progression Rates based on provisional release data because final data not yet published.

The enrollment trends for WTCC show a very diverse population of primarily part-time students. Despite high diversity, WTCC retained students at a high and consistent rate over the past 10 years. The Dean of Advising and Student Success at WTCC agreed to participate in this study. She described the advising model at WTCC as a “hybrid advising model” in which “professional advisors provide the advising for all first semester students, regardless of what their major is, regardless of whether or not they have been in college before.” After students start the first semester of courses, the school assigns academic advisors. Students in career and technical programs work with a faculty member within their program of study. Transfer students work with a professional advisor throughout their time at WTCC, unless they change majors.
**Identified challenges.** WTCC has the largest student population of the colleges in this study. The volume of students and the diversity of these students present challenges for WTCC. WTCC has multiple campuses. At the very beginning of the interview, the Dean clarified that she would “speak to the overall processes, understanding that there are some nuances for some of the different campuses just based on how those campus flows work and the staffing at those.”

**Strategies implemented.** WTCC implemented several strategies to help students progress. Five of the strategies implemented included: (a) first-year experience; (b) academic curriculum review; (c) increased communication; (d) student support services; and (e) training for advisors.

**First year experience.** In 2013, WTCC implemented a First Year Experience (FYE) course for students considered at-risk. WTCC identified at-risk students as those “who are first time college and placed into two developmental subject areas” (WTCC Dean). The FYE is a requirement for at-risk students, which includes mandatory advising for the first semester, attendance at new student orientation, enrollment in the Student Success class during the first semester, required meetings with a success counselor, and mandatory academic advising for continuing semesters.

Professional advisors provide first semester advising and the FYE. At-risk students at WTCC meet with the enrollment advisor and enroll in a FYE class. The school then assigns a counselor and academic advisor. Each FYE class has a student success counselor. This counselor works with faculty members teaching FYE courses throughout the semester to help students progress to the next semester.

“Based on feedback from not only the counselors themselves, but also from the student success course instructors,” WTCC assigns success coaches based on sections of courses rather
than alphabet case load (WTCC Dean). This provides student, faculty, and coaches with a consistent and unified presence.

There's a relationship there, and they're [faculty instructors] very good about reaching out to those counselors and hearing those concerns, and then on the other side of that, the counselors are really good about following up with those instructors to say I was able to meet with them, this is what's going on, we connected him with this resource to help with some of the funding issues, or whatever the case might be. (WTCC Dean)

According to the Dean, students are “required to meet with that individual [success coach] twice during the semester, and they're also required to meet with their instructor faculty member from their student study or student success class at least once a semester.” Students meet with a success coach “at pretty critical times, around the first three weeks and prior to the midterm” (WTCC Dean). Meetings occur at pivotal times so that advisors address concerns regarding academic performance by referring students to the appropriate campus resources.

**Academic curriculum review.** WTCC improved retention by reviewing curriculum layouts and courses required for graduation. According to the Dean, “I think we've also worked to include more proactive approaches really throughout our advising processes, and that's really come from joint work with the curriculum side.” The college received the Completion by Design Grant through the Bill and the Linda Gates Foundation, which funded this strategy.

WTCC initiated the curriculum review because some students took 40-50 hours of credits unrelated to their degree for graduation. The academic department decided to eliminate some course options to provide a more prescriptive path for degree completion. “As part of that, the task there was to eliminate some of the choices and course options that students had had before to better guide them on the path to completion” (WTCC Dean). The state of North Carolina
initiated part of this strategy. The Dean stated, “our state legislature also started looking at the articulation agreement, which covers transfer of credits from the North Carolina community colleges to the universities within the University of North Carolina system.” From a state perspective, they reviewed 70 different courses listed as part of the statewide transfer agreement and reduced it to 50 courses.

WTCC established a very structured plan for student progression. According to the Dean, academics wanted “students based on their data and research, [to] start out with an English, a math, and a natural science in first semester; and to make sure that there's a humanities in first and second semesters.” The goal was to help students stay on track and potentially graduate within the two-year period.

WTCC also initiated an intrusive approach to the advising process. During the curriculum review, academics noticed that students delayed critical subjects, such as math and English, which prevented them from finishing their degree in the two-year timeframe. “The faculty gave us those recommendations, and then we worked together on how do we implement that in terms of advising” (WTCC Dean). The advising department developed an intrusive approach of advising for the enrollment process that involved enrolling students in math and English courses during the first semester along with the other program courses.

*Increased communication.* WTCC increased communications sent to students during the school year, and utilized various modes of communication. WTCC sends messages regarding academic performance, advisement and course registration, and financial aid deadlines and updates to students throughout the year. The messages reach students via social media, email, the early-alert system, and newsletters.
WTCC uses Starfish as an early alert system. The Starfish system sends students notifications regarding academic tasks completed and those not completed. Advisors have access to the system, and follow up with encouragement to students regarding their academic performance. The tutoring system also uses Starfish to reach students who need additional academic support.

The college also sends a bi-weekly newsletter distributed to students via email. The newsletter contains information regarding “upcoming financial aid deadlines, a reminder of our student success centers and where they're located, and how to find out information about their hours to workshops that are upcoming that are focused on student success” (WTCC Dean).

WTCC sends Student Health 101, a monthly digital magazine offered by a separate company. The company provides content regarding student health such as “physical health, mental health, financial health, academics, all the way around” (WTCC Dean). The Dean explained,

We are also allowed I believe it's either four to six pages of customized content in each addition, so we can put information in there about our resources, our services, new things that we're offering for students. That's another way that we share information.

*Student support services.* Due to the diversity and volume of students, WTCC offers several student clubs and support services. Some of the support services include a minority male mentoring group, programs for students in the foster care system, and a student athlete success program. The college received the Title 3 Federal Grant in 2014. With the grant, the college offered additional support services to Federal Pell recipients enrolled in English 111. English 111 is a required course for most programs at WTCC, therefore the college used this class to identify college ready students. According to the Dean, these students “demonstrated financial
need, as evidenced by approval for financial aid, first time in college students, and were college ready.” Additional support services include tutors and success coaches.

*Training of advisors.* WTCC offers several training opportunities regarding academic advisement. According to the Dean, there is a

…basic foundation of training that all staff members receive. In terms of a new staff member, they're going to start out with overview and basic training, and then move through learning about the different programs, college policies and procedures, and then moving forward in terms of observing more seasoned advisors, and then allowing the new advisor to provide the services and be observed by a supervisor or a more seasoned advisor there.

The Dean coordinates with other academic advisors to offer training that is more specialized based on need and student type. These trainings provide base knowledge for dealing with students’ unique needs and types such as athletes, international students, university transfers, and students with post-traumatic stress disorder. The college recognized the importance of training and professional development, and “instituted a policy where all professional staff members, and actually, all faculty members as well, have to complete a specified amount of professional development each year” (WTCC Dean).

*Reported outcomes.* According to the Dean, the most productive strategies are the FYE course and the academic curriculum review.

We've seen some really big successes with our first year experience program, for example they tend to persist at a greater rate. They perform better, get higher grades, and they withdraw at a lower rate than our students do who are identified as first year, but they chose not to participate. (WTCC Dean)
Due to high student to volume, WTCC cannot mandate all first-year students participate in the FYE course. There are some first-year students “who need minimal support, they can navigate the processes, they’ve got a good clear plan and they know how to reach out and access if they run into difficulties” (WTCC Dean).

The prescriptive and intrusive approach during the academic curriculum review helped advisor and students navigate the program in an efficient and effective way. This approach would not have been possible without the support of advisors. The Dean closed our interview by stating, “advising is the foundation to getting the students started and keeping them on the pathway to graduation, degree completion, transfer, whatever the student is trying to accomplish.” The revised curriculum helps this process because it is easier for both advisors and students to navigate and comprehend.

**West Kentucky Community and Technical College.** West Kentucky Community and Technical College (WKCTC) began with the consolidation of two colleges, West Kentucky Industrial College and Paducah Community College (WKCTC, 2016). West Kentucky Industrial College opened in 1909 as a teaching college for African-Americans, and Paducah Community College opened in 1932 (WKCTC, 2016). The two colleges merged in 2003 (WKCTC, 2016). WKCTC increased enrollment after the merger. WKCTC maintained enrollment and increased retention and graduation rates. Table 5 shows the enrollment growth and enrollment type at WKCTC.
### West Kentucky Community and Technical College Enrollment and Retention Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Topic</th>
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<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>6,402</td>
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<td>Enrollment Status</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is full-time</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is part-time</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is Hispanic or other race</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is male</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is female</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 18-24 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total enrollment that is 25-64 years old</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression Rates(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time retention rate</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time retention rate</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Data from U.S. Department of Education, 2015.*

\(^a\) Progression Rates based on provisional release data because final data not yet published.

The Director of Advising agreed to participate in this study. She only held this position for six months at the time of the interview, but was very familiar with the advising practices and processes of the college. She described the advising model at WKCTC as a shared model in which professional advisors work with new students and faculty advisors work with continuing students. WKCTC sets faculty advisors “according to the program” that a student selects (WKCTC Director). At WKCTC, advising is mandatory for all students each semester. During advising appointments, advisors register students for courses or grant students special permission to self-enroll after the meeting. Self-enrollment only occurs in rare and unique circumstances.
**Reported challenges.** The Director did not report many challenges faced by WKCTC. She stated, “about 20 to 25% of the student population are considered high-risk.” She defined high-risk students as “students who are Pell eligible, online in transitional courses, and those that are enrolled part-time.” These students “are known to less likely be successful” (WKCTC Director). WKCTC implemented several strategies to help at-risk students succeed.

**Strategies implemented.** WKCTC implemented three important strategies. These included: (a) advising records maintained; (b) completion coaches; and (c) training for advisors.

**Advising records maintained.** WKCTC uses an advising sheet to record advising meeting notes and recommendations for each students. The advising sheet provides demographic data about the student and consists of responses from the student regarding their program of study, career goals, transfer plans, and personal commitments such as work, care giving, and college commute.

The purpose of this sheet is that it’s done prior to the advising appointment so that they [student] can do a little bit of research about the program and the requirements, they can review the class schedule, and they can write down any questions that they may have for the advisor. (WKCTC Director)

Once students complete this form and meet with their advisor, the advisor creates a post-advising sheet. This form outlines the manner in which student would like to take courses, preferred course load, and transitional courses needed based on placement scores. Advisors use this sheet to make referrals. “If a student need to talk to someone on financial aid or undecided and may need to talk with somebody in career services, we can get that information and refer the student to the correct resources” (WKCTC Director).
Advising forms are electronic. After both student and advisor complete the initial form, the advisor uploads it into a database through the advising department. The advising department created the database, but it is available to other departments as well. The advisor also uploads the form into the early alert system, Starfish. The Director stated, “we connect that information, we would then place referrals in the system” based on the information received from the sheet. “That’s how faculty will find out about potential advisees that have concerns or barriers that they need to watch out for” (WKCTC Director). Advisors establish student learning outcomes through this process.

For instance, one of them [learning outcomes] is that they [students] will be able to articulate their career and academic goal. We are using the pre-advising sheet to assess whether or not a student can actually articulate their goal based on what they put on the advising sheet. (WKCTC Director)

Completion coaches. Completion coaches work with students if faculty members notice concerns regarding student performance. Completion coaches are part of a college-wide initiative, and both faculty and staff serve as completion coaches. Some completion coaches work with students based on specialty or by program discipline. The Director stated, “for instance, our career services person is a completion coach. She works with students who maybe undecided so she would have that list of students.”

Completion coaches are responsible for connecting students to appropriate resources based on their needs. If a student receives a notification about academic performance concerns through the early alert system, a completion coach reaches out and follows up with the student. All high-risk students identified before the first semester automatically receive a completion coach upon enrollment.
Training for advisors. WKCTC established the Central Advising Committee (CAC) to create training workshops for advisors using the train-the-trainer concept. The CAC consists of representatives from each division of the college, such as student records, financial aid, and admissions. According to the Director, “what we’re able to do is train them on what to train their division on.”

The department also trains staff and faculty advisors through professional development opportunities. The Director provided the following example.

For instance, our transfer advisor would have training on transfer advising, what techniques she uses for transfer advising, and try to help faculty better understand transfer advising and that it's not scary, so working with them. We do things, our last session that we had we did a session on prescriptive versus holistic advising or proactive advising. We do things like that. It just depends. (WKCTC Director)

Training sessions draw on questions asked by students, faculty, and advisors. This helps the advising department stay abreast of the needs of the college.

Reported outcomes. WKCTC improved student progression because of their strategies. Advising was the foundation for all of them. As the WKCYC Director said,

Advising is basically the only structured thing on campus where people are forced, or not forced, but they're mandated to meet with someone one-on-one. It has the potential to be the place where you can develop a relationship, actually talk to a student about what their goals are, and assist them in meeting those goals. If you think about that, of course students go to class; they don't necessarily have to have a one-on-one with the instructor. They don't necessarily have to talk about their career goals or their academic goals, but in advising, those conversations happen. Basically in advising you're going to see every
student, or hopefully the majority of the students who walk through the door so you have
an opportunity to make that connection to the institution. You're the face of the
institution from the beginning until the end when it gets to graduation. It's very important.
WKCTC plans to expand the completion coaches’ role in the college to connect completion
coaches and new students before classes start. Advisors believe this connection will help students plan for a successful semester before it starts.

Thematic Analysis

The following sections highlight recurring themes within the interviews. This section begins by identifying the common challenges reported by the participants. The second section identifies the common strategies implemented by college staff. The final section highlights the reported outcomes of each college that resulted from the strategies they implemented.

**Common challenges identified.** The participants identified common challenges such as:
(a) first generation college students; (b) significant populations of high-risk students; and (c) trained academic advisors.

**First generation college students.** All colleges have a population of first generation students, but two participants expressed a true challenge with this population. Both participants stated that first-generation students struggle to navigate the college enrollment process. The Vice President at HCC added these students also,

…haven't thought about childcare, how they're going to fit it into their work schedule, are they taking care of family member, how many children do they have, you know, they haven't thought about all the things in life that happens to them. They sometimes need some help figuring all that out.
CLTCC reported 30% of their Fall 2004 enrolling class as first-time college students. The Vice Chancellor at CLTCC reported that first-time college students struggle to navigate the enrollment process, and lack support and guidance at home. The Vice Chancellor stressed the importance of helping students. Educating first-time college students about processes and procedures is a challenge that HCC and CLTCC overcame in order to retain this student population.

**Significant population of high-risk students.** Three of the five participants in this study stated that high-risk students were a challenge. HCC considers students who test into developmental coursework to be high-risk. Helping students is critical, especially because 24% of enrolling classes at HCC test into developmental courses. The Director at ICC stated, “almost 70% of students take 15 or more hours as full-time students.” Such a heavy course load while in developmental classes can be very challenging to students, faculty, and staff.

**Trained academic advisors.** Several participants identified the training of advisors as a challenge. Academic advisors are key in helping students overcome challenges, but only if they feel capable to do so. The Director at ICC stated that faculty advisors “didn’t feel like they were competent enough” to serve as advisors. At HCC, the Vice President reported faculty felt they were at the college “just to teach.” HCC and ICC implemented changes to overcome the culture and doubts of faculty members. The challenge to training academic advisors is critical if it is determined that academic advising is a key component in student retention.

**Common strategies implemented.** The four common strategies implemented at the colleges in this study included: (a) completion/academic coaches; (b) mandatory advising; (c) training for advisors; and (d) identification of high-risk students.

**Completion/academic coaches.** A strategy employed at three of the five colleges in this study was the implementation of coaches to help students. Identified as completion or academic
coaches, these individuals connected students to support resources, helped them navigate the college enrollment process, and supported students through all academic and personal barriers. According to the Vice President at HCC, coaches help students “balance what they're passionate about” with their required coursework. At CLTCC, coaches reach out to students in high school. These coaches meet with students to provide individualized plans for applying and navigating the college enrollment process. At WKCTC, completion coaches are responsible for connecting students with support services. For example, a coach may refer a student to career services if they were unsure about their major. By having one person to help students through the college enrollment process, students are better able to navigate and be successful with degree progression and completion.

**Mandatory advising.** All of the colleges in this study have some form of mandatory advising. Some colleges require advising for all students and others require it only for certain student populations. The advisors are also faculty members. Faculty advisors have program knowledge and know the best way for a student to progress. At CLTCC, the Vice Chancellor explained, students “have that daily reinforcement because the instructor has been there to provide that intervention.” At WTCC, advisors build relationships with students.

There's a relationship there, and they're [faculty instructors] very good about reaching out to those counselors and hearing those concerns, and then on the other side of that, the counselors are really good about following up with those instructors to say I was able to meet with them, this is what's going on, we connected him with this resource to help with some of the funding issues, or whatever the case might be. (WTCC Dean)

At ICC, the advising process is “very intense” (ICC Director). This strategy reinforces the belief that academic advising is important for retention.
Training for advisors. The colleges in this study required training for advisors. Helping these advisors gain knowledge about support resources and college policy assists them in serving students effectively. ICC has a required faculty training component to “be sure that they are feeling comfortable with the process of advising especially if they've never been an advisor before” (ICC Director). At HCC, training sessions improved services to students and helped faculty members understand how important their role is to the college and to students. WTCC training evolved into a required professional development component at the college. This training helped faculty and staff become better ambassadors for their college and more effective at serving and helping students.

Identification of high-risk students. Another common strategy implemented at the colleges in this study was the identification of high-risk students. Identifying high-risk students helps advisors track the progression of students who typically face more barriers and have little to no support at home. Each college defined at-risk students differently. Most at-risk students lack academic preparation based on placement tests or are first-generation college students. ICC and WTCC utilize early alert systems to identify and serve high-risk students. The early alert system helps tutors and other support services intervene when students need help. The HCC Vice President stated, “we set up benchmarks so we know those critical points in the life of a student.” These benchmarks track students before they get off track.

Reported outcomes. The two common reported outcomes discussed by participants at the colleges in this study included: (a) increased retention; and (b) increased satisfaction from students, faculty, and staff.

Increased retention. All of the colleges increased retention after implementing their strategies. Student retention helps colleges with funding and state reporting. The Vice Chancellor
at CLTCC stated, “I feel like as higher-educational professionals, if you do your job right, students are going to go where they are best fit [sic].” The strategies implemented helped students navigate the college environment. Students who are more comfortable are more apt to progress and complete their degree.

**Increased satisfaction from students, faculty, and staff.** Students, faculty, and staff shared their satisfaction with the practices colleges implemented. According to the Director at ICC, students noticed a difference in their academic records and credit advising for the improvement. Student success and achievement increases retention of students. At HCC, faculty and staff reported feeling connected to students, and that they look forward to future trainings. According to the Vice President at HCC, “the most important relationship that a student has is the one between them and their advisor.” This relationship is not effective if advisors do not feel secure and capable in their role. The strategies employed by the colleges in this study helped faculty and staff feel secure in their role.
Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings of the study and how the findings answer the research question. The chapter will revisit the problem of practice, present key findings, and discuss findings in relation to the conceptual framework and literature. This chapter concludes with a review of the significance of the study, discussion of the validity and limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and the researcher’s personal comments.

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

The primary purpose of two-year colleges shifted as demand for higher education services increased. Many students attend two-year colleges to transition from high school to four-year universities. Two-thirds of the 2004 first-time freshman class in the United States enrolled in college with the intentions of pursuing a bachelor’s degree (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). By 2006, 39% of these students left school without completing a degree or certificate program (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Two-year college retention is a significant problem that researchers must address in order to better serve students and help them be successful.

Past research demonstrated positive benefits of academic advisement to improve student retention in certain contexts (King, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, there are gaps in the literature regarding two-year colleges and their use of academic advising practices. Most past research on advising and retention at two-year colleges focused on the relationships between faculty and students (Hanover Research, 2014; King 1993) or on the functions of advising (Allen & Smith, 2008). Little research explored specific practices and interventions of academic advisement at two-year colleges. The problem of this study is a lack of knowledge regarding the impact of student advising on retention. Two-year colleges serve the local needs of their communities. Even though the two-year colleges’ purpose and focus are different from four-year
colleges, their worth and accomplishments are similar to four-year colleges based on statistics such as retention rates.

In October 2010, the White House held the first summit on Community Colleges. The purpose of the summit was to share best practices that would improve student outcomes (Biden, 2011). There is a national focus on two-year college students earning degrees that will secure jobs with a family-sustaining wage (Handel, 2013). The new federal agenda regarding higher education is College for All (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). The goal is for all Americans to earn a post-secondary degree or certificate (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

IPEDS collects data regarding retention rates and degree completion across the nation. The Community College Summit Report concluded fewer than three of 10 full-time students pursuing two-year degrees achieved this goal within three years (White House, 2011). The graduation rate for the 2010 cohort of college students was only 21.1% (Juszkiewicz, 2015).

Retention is a popular topic in colleges across the nation (Schuetz, 2005; Summers, 2003). Retention efforts increase colleges’ state and federal funding and keep students who provide a reliable source of income from tuition. Data for the five colleges interviewed show declines in enrollment and high retention rates. Other two-year colleges have mediocre retention rates. Finding out how colleges with higher retention rates help students is beneficial for other two-year colleges that want to improve.

Discussion of the Major Findings

Five major findings emerged from careful the analysis of data collected from the interviews conducted with directors at five two-year colleges. These key findings include: (a) early identification and intervention of high-risk students; (b) increased communication with students, particularly at significant dates for enrollment; (c) implementation of support coaches;
(d) training of faculty and staff who serve as advisors; and (e) mandatory advising sessions for students.

**Early identification and intervention of high-risk students.** Students enrolled in developmental coursework accounted for 20% of the national Fall enrollment in 2003 (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). Early identification of these students is important. The colleges in this study implemented interventions to assist in the retention of at-risk students. Colleges identify at-risk students in different ways. CLTCC and HCC identify these students through placement test scores and registration in development courses during their first semester in college. WTCC and WKCTC automatically identify first-time college students as high-risk because they may need additional support and assistance during enrollment and their first semester in college. Interviews with enrollment coaches or advisors help identify students who may need additional assistance due to working outside of college, family life, or other external factors that could hinder college progression.

After staff identifies at-risk students, there are several opportunities for intervention and support. ICC and WTC provid intervention and support through a required academic course during students’ first semester. These courses include new student orientation, enrollment and advisement of second semester classes, and required meetings with a success counselor. The courses also offer lessons on study skills, note-taking, personal budgeting, financial aid literacy, campus involvement, and emotional intelligence. The courses provide students with the resources to progress to the next semester and throughout their degree program.

ICC offered two levels of intervention in a skills course. ICC monitors students on academic probation after the first semester of courses. These students must take a study skills
improvement course. This course reinforces the first college skills life course, emphasizing study skills and time management.

Most colleges in this study use an early alert system to intervene on a course subject level. Faculty members identify students with low test scores, missing assignments, or excessive absences. They report to the college tutoring or success center where a trained college employee becomes involved. This intervention connects students to support services such as tutoring, counseling, writing assistance, or technical assistance. Other support services that help at-risk students include student clubs and support groups. Most clubs and groups focus on special populations. These clubs provide additional support to assist students in a smaller and more individualized manner.

**Increased communication with students, particularly at significant dates for enrollment.** Communication with students is important in all aspects of their collegiate life. Communication with faculty and staff may include academic course requirements such as assignments and exams, information about support services, financial aid notifications, and campus events. The colleges interviewed deliver messages to students in various ways such as social media, email, early alert systems, and newsletters.

Messages delivered through the early alert system increase communication and support. Students receive notifications through the system regarding academic tasks completed and those not completed. Advisors and instructors access to the system to encourage students regarding their academic performance. Tutoring systems also use early warning systems to communicate with students who may need additional academic assistance.

Colleges that use newsletters either print them in-house or contract them out. The colleges interviewed stated that send newsletters via email or print. Newsletters contain
information regarding financial aid deadlines, student success centers, success workshops, and other upcoming events. WTCC utilizes an outside source, Student Health 101, as the foundation for their content. The college adds individualized and specific information about WTCC to the publication before distribution.

One participant identified critical points in a student’s life through reported data and enrollment benchmarks. Critical points included the first day of class, the 10% completion point of the semester, 10% date for student funding, midterms, next semester enrollment, and final exams. Communication during these times reduces the risk of students being frustrated and lost during the enrollment process.

**Implementation of support coaches to assist students.** Several colleges in this study use success or support coaches to provide supplemental support to students. Colleges typically assign coaches to at-risk students flagged through an early alert system. Coaches typically require a minimum of two meetings per semester in additional to meetings with academic advisors. The meetings occur at pivotal times in the semester to identify appropriate resources.

Coaches meet with students at various times throughout a student’s education. One college employs coaches to begin interaction with students while still enrolled in high school. Early intervention allows the coaches to identify high-risk students and begin intervention early on in their academic careers. Another college uses coaches before students begin their first semester. Most colleges in this study used coaches for all high-risk students.

The role of the support coach is to be a student's referral agent to appropriate resources at the college. The coaches refer childcare resources, transportation options, and any student needs. Coaches work with faculty members to keep students engaged in their academic courses. Coaches help students in developmental courses who are not yet taking courses related to their
program stay involved in campus life and connected with their faculty advisor. This keeps students engaged in their curriculum and excited about college.

**Training of faculty and staff who serve as advisors.** Several colleges implemented training workshops and programs to help educate advisors on practices and resources that will help them be successful in their roles as advisors. Training improved services and helped employees understand how important their role is to the success of students. Most colleges begin training on an individual basis when new faculty members join the department. ICC expanded training into an ongoing required professional development program for all advisors. The ongoing trainings help advisors feel comfortable with the process of advising, especially if they are new to the practice.

Training sessions include topics other than advising processes and procedures, including more specialized topics based on requested needs and student types at particular institutions. Specialized trainings provide base knowledge for addressing students’ unique needs. Another college utilized the train-the-trainer concept, and developed a committee to provide and conduct trainings to *trainers* from each area of the college. These trainers train their department staff so the entire college has a concise and consistent message regarding advising.

 Advisors receive training sessions and materials in various formats. One college offered an online training and support portal with workshops, resources, and documents to assist advisors. The online format helped reach all advisors at times and locations that are convenient for them. Another college created an advising center to help support advisors as well as students. An advising center provides a centralized location for advisors and students to get assistance with their questions or concerns.
Mandatory advising of students. All of the colleges in this study require some form of mandatory advising for students. Most colleges require a minimum of one meeting per semester, but some require more. Mandatory advising begins when students enroll at the college. Staff advisors help students enroll and register for their semester. These advisors also help with degree clarification and identification of potential hurdles based on students’ lives outside of college.

After enrollment, faculty advisors work with specific students in their program. These advisors provide program-specific advisement and help students progress. The majority of the interviewees stated this was the most important task at their college. Advising helps keep students on track, helps students seek resources based on individual challenges, and helps establish a one-on-one relationship between a college official and the student.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model for this research was Seidman's Formula and Success Model. Seidman’s models provide academic institutions with ways to improve retention rates through practices that work with numerous academic programs and student types. The model based, on Tinto's theory of attrition (1982), states, “Retention equals Early Identification plus (Early plus Intensive plus Continuous) Intervention” (Seidman, 2012, p. 268).

\[
\text{Ret} = \text{Early ID} + (E + \text{In} + C) \text{ IV}
\]

Seidman’s Formula provides colleges with a course of action for improved retention rates and applies to all student types (Seidman, 2012). Seidman (2012) defined retention as "student attainment of academic and/or personal goal(s)" (p. 270). Retention requires early identification, early intervention, intensive intervention, and continuous intervention.

Early identification involves the assessment of student skill levels (Seidman, 2012). This assessment usually occurs at time of admission through standardized assessment and academic
review of the courses completed by the student. Identifying students early allows for intervention to effect change before students begins to struggle academically. As stated in the major findings, the staff members at the colleges in this study identify high-risk students early on in the enrollment process. Most colleges identify students as they are enrolling in the college for their first semester of classes. The HCC Vice President stated, “part of the problem is just getting to them early enough, that's what's key.” Because 20% of HCC’s overall student enrollment is high-risk students, they recognized the importance of early identification. This early identification allows colleges to begin intervention techniques that will help students progress from semester to semester. The intervention techniques Seidman (2012) recommended for colleges are early, intensive, and continuous.

Early intervention should occur as soon as staff identifies high-risk students (Seidman, 2012). Early intervention can begin before students take courses at the college. Early identification is key to the success of the formula. Seidman (2012) stated, “intervention should continue until the student has demonstrated that the deficiency has been overcome” (p. 273). Early intervention is necessary to allow time to effect change. All of the colleges in this study provide early intervention though advising sessions or success coaches. They connect students with support services and resources as soon as they identify a challenge. At WTCC, the college enrolls high-risk students in a required FYE course during their first semester. The course educates students about resources available to them and helps them plan their educational goals.

Seidman (2012) identified intensive intervention as intervention that is intrusive and strong enough to warrant desired change. This may involve daily meeting lasting two or more hours. The key element of success in intervention is for the “experience to be powerful enough to be effective and make desired change in the student’s academic and/or personal behavior”
Success coaches and academic courses provide students with intensive intervention. Many of the colleges in this study have training programs in place to help educate advisors on how to provide intense intervention. At ICC, the college implemented a training and recognition program to encourage advisors to provide intense intervention for students. The advisors meet with students several times throughout the semester to intervene based on group and individual needs.

Continuous intervention persists until change has occurred (Seidman, 2012). Time limits for intervention should only apply to academic issues, and personal issues should not have time limits set on the intervention practices (Seidman, 2012). Setting time limits on personal issues only adds to the stress levels of students, and additional stress does not help a student succeed. The colleges in this study have invention plans that span the first semester or first academic year and beyond, if intervention is still warranted. CLTCC offers the most continuous intervention. With the use of career coaches at the high school level and then success coaches once students enroll, CLTCC advisors provide continuous intervention to support students. This strategy provides uninterrupted support from high school to college.

Seidman (1991) integrated admissions with academic counseling. Seidman (1991) found that linking counseling intervention techniques with the admissions process had a positive impact on students. The linkage model proved to be a highly satisfying experience for students, integrated students to the college and college services sooner, and reported a higher retention rate compared to students admitted to the college through standard methods (Seidman, 1991). The majority of the participants in this study shared this linkage practice. The colleges in this study exhibit linkage through the training material, topics, and sessions for advisors to improve and
strengthen their ability to counsel and advise students.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

In Chapter 2, the researcher presented a review of associated literature on the topics of two-year colleges and student retention. The literature review covered four topics: (a) the purpose of two-year colleges; (b) two-year college retention rates and factors impacting retention; (c) who attends two-year colleges and why they attend; and (d) the impact of academic advising on student retention. The following section examines the findings of this study compared to the areas covered in the literature review. The overall conclusion is that findings are consistent with the relevant literature.

**Purpose of two-year colleges.** Two-year colleges were originally an educational extension for students to obtain further training in order to build a better workforce (Wells, 2008). There are 1,167 two-year colleges in the United States, over 1,600 if including branch campuses (AACC, 2016a). Two-year colleges represent approximately 25% of all higher educational institutions in the United States (AACC, 2016a). President Obama encouraged all Americans to receive post-secondary training so that by 2020 American would have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (White House, 2016). To complete this task, President Obama discussed strengthening community colleges by creating educational and career pathways by working with each state to help make college affordable (White House, 2016). The data presented in Chapter 4 about the two-year colleges reflects this point. The colleges in this study have a history of technical beginnings with growth and expansion into more career- and transfer-oriented institutions.

**Two-year college retention rates and factors influencing retention.** Student outcomes and institutional effectiveness are main factors in student retention and degree completion. The
Higher Education Act of 1965 evaluates public institutions based on their effectiveness (Wyman, 1997). One indicator of institutional effectiveness and performance is retention (Levitz et al., 1999). The retention rates of the colleges in this study vary. All of the colleges in the study had at least a 66% retention rate or higher. This number is concerning when compared to four-year colleges in the same regions.

The literature review highlighted three main factors that influence retention rate at two-year colleges: open access, academics, and faculty involvement. Two-year colleges have an open-admissions policy to assist any student with a desire to learn. Two-year college student bodies are very diverse (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). A diverse student population means services to reach students need to be diverse. With open access, students come to college with varying needs, challenges, and goals. Colleges must help students at all levels in order to succeed.

Open access leads to diversity in academic performance, as well. Academic performance and social connectedness greatly influence retention (Allen et al., 2008). Students appreciate colleges that recognize and value their time. In recognizing student time and satisfaction, researchers found that an individualized approach to retention delivers substantial results because it influences student attitude and motivation (Levitz et al., 1999). Colleges provide resources to help students excel. By providing resources and advisors to help students along the way, colleges increase student success. High levels of student satisfaction result from greater faculty-student interaction (Braxton et al., 2007; McArthur, 2005). Colleges increase interaction through success coaches and mandatory advising to build relationships and support systems that help students progress toward degree completion.
Who attends two-year colleges and why they attend. There are over 1,000 two-year colleges in the United States and 95% of them have an open-admission policy (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). This policy results in a very diverse student population with varying degrees of college readiness and academic ability. Two-year colleges support the majority of part-time and minority students enrolled in post-secondary in the United States (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

The enrollment trends in Tables 1 – 5 show diverse growth plans across the colleges in this study. Most colleges have a high part-time student population attending college while also working or possibly providing for a family. Two-year colleges offer a diverse format of education platforms for workers and family providers.

Impact of academic advising on student retention. The use of academic advising by two-year college students increased in the last decade (CSSE, 2015). Two-year college presidents in the United States publicly endorsed academic advising as crucial to the institutional mission (Drake, 2011). College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2015) recommendations for retention include academic advising as a way to improve student-faculty interaction and academic performance. The data collected about the five colleges in this study support the assertion that academic advising increases student retention. All of the colleges in this study have mandatory advising components and supplement advising with academic and success coaches. These colleges are in the top 20% of the region, which shows they are doing something right in terms of retaining students.

Recommendations

The primary audiences to benefit from the present research are advising coordinators and college administrators at two-year colleges. Advising coordinators are in charge of developing practices and resources to help students and academic advisors at two-year colleges. This
research identifies practices and resources that benefitted colleges with high retention rates. College administrators could use the findings in the current study to identify practices and projects that may improve retention rates, and in turn help improve college effectiveness and funding opportunities.

Based on findings across the colleges in this study, the researcher suggests the following four strategies are more effective for increasing retention through academic advising.

1. Training for advisors
2. Early identification of high-risk students
3. Mandatory advising
4. Advising communication plan

**Training for advisors.** Effective advising departments require trained and educated advisors. Four of the five colleges in this study have training in place for advisors. The training programs provide advisors with resources to execute their job successfully. Students need to connect to someone at the college so they know where to turn to if they have questions or problems.

**Early identification of high-risk students.** The identification of high-risk students is important for any college, but early identification is crucial at two-year colleges. Two-year colleges enroll students for less time than four-year colleges. Early identification of high-risk students is essential in helping a student progress over two years, and helps advisors know which students need help connecting to resources and support as early as possible. High-risk students need additional assistance. If advisors do not know who these students are, then they are missing a crucial element.
Mandatory advising. All of the colleges in this study required academic advisement. Some colleges required advising for students they considered high-risk only, and others required it for all students enrolled. Mandating advising helps students avoid pitfalls and setbacks.

Advising communication plan. Colleges provide continuous intervention opportunities for advisors. By designing a plan to reach out to students during strategic enrollment periods, colleges connect students to their advisors and campus resources.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to examine the advising practices of two-year colleges with high retention rates to collect data to identify practices that may help other two-year colleges improve retention rates. The researcher used a qualitative research design to answer the following question: what common advising practices and interventions do two-year colleges with higher retention rates in the southeastern United States utilize? The researcher identified five major findings based on an inductive approach to data analysis. This first finding was the colleges in this study implemented early identification and intervention for high-risk students. The second major finding was the utilization of increased communication with students, particularly at significant dates for enrollment. The third major finding was the implementation of training workshops for faculty and staff who serve as academic advisors. The fourth major finding was the practice of mandatory advising at the colleges.

Significance of the Study

State funding depends on retention, and colleges actively seek ways to increase retention. The focal point of this study was to identify advising practices employed at two-year colleges with high retention rates. Through interviews conducted with administrative staff at five two-
year college, the researcher identified common practices in advising. The findings may help two-year colleges with low retention rates improve academic advising to improve their standing.

The researcher found several common practices at the colleges in this study. The first common element is the practice of mandatory advising. This ensures students are seeing a trained advisor to get assistance with course planning and progression. Another common element is the utilization of coaches to help assist advisors and provide deliberate support and intervention to students considered high-risk. Identifying high-risk students is another common element among the colleges.

The process of identification of high-risk students is a departure point between the colleges in this study. Some colleges consider all first-time students who test into developmental courses as high-risk. Another college identified at-risk students after conducting internal research on the student population. The findings of the present study support the argument for improved academic advising services and training at the two-year college to increase retention. By sharing best practices from successful two-year colleges with similar student types, this research shares knowledge that will aid all two-year colleges in supporting the students they serve.

**Limitations**

The findings of this study are informative and worthy of continued discussion and exploration. The study generated rich data with descriptive and detailed results provided from interviews. The desired number of participants for the study was six. The actual number of participants that volunteered was five. The number of colleges that participated limits the findings and conclusions because the sample was not large. Due to the voluntary nature of the research, there are colleges with higher retention rates that did not participate in the study.
Validity

Validity of the study is based on the participant contributions and the researcher’s process for acquiring and analyzing data. Participants were in the top 20 of retention rates as reported as IPEDS, and involved in supervising the advising practices at the college. This provides a strong data collection pool.

Other issues of validity included response bias and researcher objectivity. To reduce response bias and researcher objectivity, the researcher used the same interview protocol for each participant. The questions posed were clear and open-ended. Participants responded based on their experiences and situations at their college. The researcher increased objectivity by having interviews transcribed by a reliable company and by not reviewing data until all interviews were complete.

Future Research

Future studies could expand upon the present study, and collect a richer amount of data with a larger sample size or by expanding to include site visits. As governments depend more on performance measures to awarded aid, colleges are going to need to know which practices truly impact performance measures in a positive way. This will help not only the institution, but also more importantly, the student.

The first main possibility of research is centered on mandatory advising. It is unknown if all colleges that require advising have high retention rates as reported through IPEDS. If there are colleges that require advising, but have low retention rates, what are they doing differently compared to those colleges with higher rates? Therefore the effectiveness of mandatory academic advising as a single practice for colleges to improve retention rates is unknown.
If it is proven to be effective, how are colleges creating it and investigating its effectiveness? The assessment practices of advising is another opportunity for future research. What data is being collected and how colleges are collecting data could identify practices to expand and improve this process and practice. It is also unknown how colleges are funding these practices. This assessment could also help determine if funding structures are effectively and accurately covering cost and helping the college invest.

One more opportunity for research involves the impact academic coaches have as student’s retention versus and academic advisor. Academic coaches are a new phenomenon in higher education, and little research has been conducted on their effectiveness and influence on students. Another area to examine is the student perspective of coaches versus advisors. The way students perceive these roles may help ensure the desired relationship develops. Counseling is also an important component that was detailed in this study. Therefore the practices of counseling and how it supplements or is included in coaching is another idea for future research.

Lastly future research could also include a review of the training material and methods provided to advisors and coaches, and how it is similar or different from training provided to each population. Understanding the training components that are effective would help develop professional development opportunities at colleges to increase effectiveness and confidence of those administering the practices.

**Personal Comments**

This research evolved from my experiences as an advisor and director of advising at the college level. My research may help my peers identify common advising practices utilized at successful two-year colleges to help their departments and students flourish. Other colleges may be better able to implement positive changes based on the findings of this study.
When I began my position as director of advising, one of my first tasks was to make it better. However, no one told me what needed to be better, how it needed to be better, or why it needed to be better. I remember feeling very frustrated and overwhelmed. I researched NACADA and conducted a self-assessment. I implemented new practices and trainings. Some were successful and others were not. My feelings and my mistakes drove me to conduct this research. I wished I had a best practices manual of advising techniques at two-year colleges with detailed examples and results, and that desire drove this research.

In conducting this research, I acquired new ideas and practices that may help my college improve their practices and retention rates. I have rich data and examples to help advisors and administration at my college implement change. Based on the findings of this study, processes and practices may improve while awaiting buy-in from my colleagues. Buy-in is easier to obtain when comparing similar institutions. Therefore, detailed data specific to two-year colleges is useful.

This data will help me in the future in two-ways. First, I will be able to demonstrate and communicate my knowledge of advising practices to help colleges improve their services. My college recently promoted me to Director of Enrollment to develop an enrollment plan that will help improve our retention rates. My research will guide this plan and include practices that were revealed through the interview data. Second, this research process demonstrated my ability to conduct research and communicate my findings. I developed skills for research, both quantitative and qualitative. I increased my knowledge in theory and practice, and gained a network of professional contacts to assist with future challenges. The writing process helped me learn the true meaning of perseverance and determination. As Frederick Douglass stated in 1857, “without a struggle, there can be no progress”.
My hope is that this research will help colleges improve their advising practices for students. Many college practices rely on performance standards, such as retention rates, but colleges must not forget the students. Students are the reason colleges exist. Colleges need to ensure their practices help students achieve their goals and do not pose roadblocks or obstacles to success. I hope others will read this research and become agents of change at their colleges to help improve college advising and student success.
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Appendix A: Interview Process and Questions

Introduction

I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Kara Schultz and I would like to talk to you about your experiences with academic advising. Specifically, as part of my research focus, I am assessing academic advising practices that support retention at two-year colleges,

The interview should take less than 60 minutes. I will be taking some notes during the session, but I will also be recording the session because I do not want to miss any of your comments. If we have technical difficulties and get disconnected I will call you on the phone. What number should I call if I need you?

I would like to use your name and college as part of my reporting however if you would prefer your comments to remain confidential I could use a pseudonym for your name and college. Which would you prefer? Remember you do not have to talk about anything you do not want to and you may end the interview at any time.

Are there any questions about what I have just explained?

Are you willing to continue with this interview?

Questions

1. Would you describe the advising process at your college – from admission to graduation?
   Who is involved? Where/How does it occur? When do it occur?

2. What is your advisor/student ratio and how do you maintain this ratio throughout several enrollment periods?
3. Early identification of at-risk students is a technique some colleges use to help retain students. Does your college identify at-risk students? If so how and when are they identified? How do academic advisors know students are at-risk?

4. What types of assessments are used to advise students and why were these particular assessments chosen?

5. Which assessments do you think best and why?

6. Intervention is also key in retaining students. What types of intervention techniques does your college use to help students succeed?

7. For effective techniques to work, they must be intensive enough to influence change. How would you describe the effectiveness of your program and what about them makes them effective? How do you define “effective”? How do you know if they are effective – reporting, data, etc.?

8. Continuous intervention and interaction help colleges retain students. How often do your advisors interact/see students? What modes are used to meet with students – face-to-face; virtual, etc.? When do these meetings occur?

9. What intervention techniques or tools do you feel work best to retain students?

10. What effect, if any, do you think academic advising has on retention?

11. What recommendations do you have for future efforts in advising to help retain students?

Closing

Is there anything more you would like to add?

The transcription of our meeting should be complete within the next two weeks. I will send you a copy of the transcription so you may review and make any corrections necessary.

Thank you for your time.