SOCIAL INFLUENCES THAT MOTIVATE STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN AN
UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS PROGRAM AT A NON-SELECTIVE INSTITUTION

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the social factors that influence business student persistence at a less-selective undergraduate institution. While research has shown that ability to pay and academic preparedness strongly influence undergraduate students’ persistence decisions (Braunstein, McGrath, & Pescatrice, 2000; Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Kaighobadi & Allen, 2008; Madgett & Belanger, 2008), they are not the sole factors in student withdrawal decisions at less selective schools. Studies have shown that alternative factors, such as social conditions, play a major role in student motivation to persist throughout four-year undergraduate programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Wentzel, 1998; Shelton, 2003; Tinto, 2006; Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009; Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). In an effort to better understand these alternative factors, this case study focused on third and fourth-year student descriptions of the social conditions that impact engagement, persistence, and degree completion within a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective institution. Findings from the data analysis showed that three major themes emerged from the data when linking social conditions to student persistence; Support Systems, Connected Learning, and Efficacy Expectations. These themes exhibit the various social factors that students find to be important and influential to their persistence decisions. With this data, educational leaders at four-year undergraduate institutions should be able to update and enhance their institutional strategies aimed at improving student persistence by acknowledging the relevance and importance of social conditions in student motivation and retention. Suggestions for practice and implications for future research are detailed at the conclusion of this paper.

Keywords: motivation, persistence, retention, social conditions, less-selective institutions, business programs, self-determination theory, support systems, connected learning, efficacy
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Joseph Reilly. You are the reason that I completed this.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Problem Statement

Improving persistence and subsequently, degree completion, in four-year undergraduate programs is a national imperative, as the U.S. Department of Education (2015a) has reported that only 59% of first-time, full-time students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree in 2007, completed that degree at the same institution by 2013. Moreover, students who enrolled in programs at less selective degree-granting institutions have poorer completion rates, with only 34% graduating within six years from institutions with open admissions policies (U. S. Department of Education [NCES], 2015b). This overriding issue is closely linked to student motivation and social conditions, as the decision to persist or withdraw can stem from various social and motivational influences (Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Shelton, 2003, Deci & Ryan, 2008b).

While research has shown that ability to pay and academic preparedness strongly influence undergraduate students’ persistence decisions, there is a lack of research on other factors that influence student persistence (Braunstein, McGrath, & Pescatrice, 2000; Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Kaighobadi & Allen, 2008; Madgett & Belanger, 2008). In an effort to better understand these alternative factors, this study focused on the social conditions that motivate students to persist throughout a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective school. Social conditions, for the purpose of this study, can be interpreted as the degree to which the environment affects student autonomy, competence, relatedness, and ultimately, decision-making.

Since the 1970’s, motivation and persistence in undergraduate programs have become a focal point in higher education research. Tinto (1975, 1993, 1998), Pascarella and Terenzini
(1979, 1980), and Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2008a) brought attention to the conversation, with numerous educational scholars continuing to contribute to that growing body of research (Ames, 1990; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Shelton, 2003; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005; Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard & Aguilar, 2011; Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). There is, however, a lack of existing research on how social conditions contribute to student motivation to persist within four-year undergraduate business programs. When an understanding of social factor influence is paired with more traditional factors such as academic preparedness and ability to pay, a more detailed and complete understanding of student persistence can be achieved, and more precise strategies for improving student persistence established.

**Research Problem**

Among first-time, full-time undergraduate students who completed their degrees at the same four-year institution where they started in 2007, the six-year graduation rate was 58% at public institutions, 65% at private nonprofit institutions, and 32% at private for-profit institutions (U. S. Department of Education [NCES], 2015). This data illustrates the persistence issue that exists today among students attending four-year postsecondary institutions. Further, with over 40% of first-time, full-time students choosing to withdraw prior to graduation from the institution where they started their postsecondary studies, research has shown that graduation rates are lowest at less selective institutions (U. S. Department of Education [NCES], 2015). The U.S. Department of Education reports that at four-year degree-granting institutions with open admissions policies, only 34% of students completed a bachelor’s degree within six years, while in comparison, schools with a 25% or lower acceptance rate have six-year degree completion
rates of 89%. It is apparent that institutional acceptance rates may correlate with motivation to persist and degree completion.

Student persistence at less selective undergraduate programs is a significant problem of practice that needs to be understood. While highly selective schools attract students that are most academically prepared, it is not academic preparation nor the ability to pay that are the sole factors in student withdrawal decisions at less selective schools (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2005; Hoxby, 2009; Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012). Social conditions pertaining to campus integration, connectedness to faculty and staff, and first year experience play major roles in student motivation to persist through four-year undergraduate programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Rovai, 2003; Shelton, 2003; Tinto, 2006; Wentzel, 1998). Therefore, it is necessary and relevant to investigate student motivation and its effect on persistence within a four-year undergraduate program at a non-selective school.

Justification of Research Problem

Student motivation in the classroom is a perpetual issue within undergraduate programs and is a well-documented problem of practice in education today (Ames, 1990; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005; Pintrich & Zusho, 2007). While this is an overriding issue that should not be ignored, it can be difficult for educational leaders to address this problem when they do not fully understand the factors that promote or suppress student motivation. While test scores may indicate academic preparedness, they do not allow leaders to gain insight into the motivation of the student (Ames, 1990). Student behavior today is influenced by an array of internal and external socially-related motivational factors, such as faculty interaction, campus integration, diversity in the classroom, first-year experience, and family pressure and support (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1998;
Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Wentzel, 1998; Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Madgett & Belanger, 2008; Arana et al., 2011). Further, the intrinsic notions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness can help to predict human behavior by linking motivation to social conditions (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008a).

It was relevant for a new study to concentrate on the social conditions that impact engagement, persistence, and degree completion within a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective institution. With available data from this study, educational leaders at four-year undergraduate institutions, especially those that offer business programs, should be able to update and enhance their institutional strategies aimed at improving student persistence by acknowledging the relevance and importance of social conditions in student motivation and retention.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

While an extended amount of literature exists on student persistence in higher education (Pascerella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1998, 2006; Berger, 2001; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Rovai, 2003; Shelton, 2003; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005), and specifically on persistence among students who enroll in various business courses (Bennett, 2003; McLaren, 2004; Brookshire & Palocsay, 2005; DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Kaighobadi & Allen, 2008), there is a lack of academic writing that focuses explicitly on student persistence within *business programs* at non-selective four-year institutions. Additionally, the motivational factors that influence student persistence and withdrawal decisions in postsecondary programs have been well documented (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992; Braunstein, McGrath, & Pescatrice, 2000; Bennett, 2003; Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Madgett & Belanger, 2008), but there have been few scholarly articles that set aside ability to pay and academic preparedness to strictly hone in
on the social factors that impact student persistence and degree completion. This research intended to fill the gap in the literature in part to contribute new knowledge to the scholarly conversation about retention and completion, particularly in undergraduate business programs.

In order to improve student learning and success, it is crucial that the social conditions that influence student motivation to persist in undergraduate business programs are understood.

**Relating the Discussion to the Audience**

Educational leaders at smaller, private, less selective, four-year postsecondary institutions that offer business programs and are located in the New England area are the prime audience for this study and should particularly value this research. Specifically, Deans and Directors of Admission seeking to improve persistence and retention through the improvement of student motivation will find this information rather beneficial. Industry organizations may also find this study useful as social conditions and motivational influences that affect individual behavior and productivity are explored.

**Positionality Statement**

The concept of positionality can often be complex, especially when biases exist (Fennell, 2008). In doctoral research, it is important to try to remain as neutral as possible when communicating with participants and analyzing data. As an adjunct instructor at the graduate and undergraduate levels, this author is exposed to students who are extremely dedicated, but also those who clearly lack motivation in their educational endeavors. Countless hours can be spent examining the psychological nature of students to attempt to understand what motivates them to become active learners and to persist in their programs. However, the fact remains that all students learn differently and encompass various motivational influences, yielding a potentially infinite number of ways to motivate a student.
This author chose to investigate motivation to persist in undergraduate business programs because he is an undergraduate business instructor who wants to better understand how students think and process as a group and as individuals. With this information, he can better encourage and support students to help them realize their full human potential as learners and citizens. In addition, this data could prove extremely beneficial to educational executives, academic advisors, counselors, and scholar-practitioners within the author’s academic community.

**Biases and ethical considerations.** This author works as an adjunct instructor at three colleges in the Boston, MA area, so it was most feasible to choose one of those sites to be the host of the doctoral research. Since the research was student-focused, the author elected to interview an array of business students at the institution. To avoid bias, this author ensured that no current or former students of his participated in the study. The reason for this was that students who know the researcher may have altered their responses based on what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear from them. Responses should not have been tailored to meet any needs, as the data needed to be completely anonymous, accurate, and unbiased. Once permission was received for the researcher to inquire with the purposeful sample of students, it was noted that all data analyses, discussions, and results would be made available to the respective academic community upon completion.

When approaching the eligible student participants, they were made aware that taking part in the study was not mandatory, as it was completely voluntary. Additionally, students knew that if they agreed to participate in this research study, their individual responses would be completely confidential and that no harm would come to them in any way. After agreeing to partake in the interview, but prior to answering the first question, the participants fully understood the purpose of the research, and were aware that they could opt out at any time. They
understood that the doctoral study on student motivation to persist within four-year undergraduate business programs would ultimately be used to acknowledge, assess, interpret, and comprehend the problem of practice so that the institution could attempt to rectify any motivational deficiencies that may exist. The students were also aware that at the conclusion of the study, general results and recommendations would be made transparent for their benefit and use.

During the data collection and analysis phases, it was crucial for this author to retain a very objective perspective on all artifacts that were found and solely weigh the impact of the artifacts based on how they were presented rather than how this author interpreted them. Neutralizing preexisting perspectives is paramount in objective doctoral research, as all data collected should be independent of bias and unrelated to this author’s own prior experiences.

**Research Question**

*What social factors motivate students to persist throughout a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective school?*

**Theoretical Framework**

The study of motivational theory can play an important role in understanding why individuals behave as they do. The purpose of defining a framework is to provide theoretical insight and direction into the research of a specific topic of interest. This author chose to view the problem of practice utilizing the *Self-Determination theory*, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), as the guiding theoretical framework for this study.

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan’s 1985 book entitled, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour* was an innovative flagship piece of work within the scholarly community and among educational psychologists. Working in the Department of
Psychology at the University of Rochester, Deci and Ryan developed the Self-Determination theory which brought to light new ways of thinking in regards to human development, individual well-being, and human motivation. At the forefront of this seminal work, Deci and Ryan (1985) discuss how both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can influence an individual’s actions, and how one can look to the self-determination theory to understand the reasoning behind human behavior. The self-determination theory proposes that intrinsic motivation, or motivation derived purely from the satisfaction innate in the activity itself, is more conducive to learning than extrinsic motivation, or motivation to achieve an external reward. Further, this theory discusses how intrinsic notions of autonomy, relatedness, and competence all play decisive roles in the meaning behind human behavior.

Deci and Ryan (2008a) posit that autonomous motivation occurs when individuals identify with an activity’s value and integrate it into their own sense of self. Autonomous motivation can help energize and direct behavior, as individuals experience volition and act out of their own willful and self-motivated actions. This form of knowledge has been associated with better cognitive processing, indicated by more deep-level learning, perhaps because the individual has chosen to learn for his or her own self-endorsed reasons (Kyndt, Dochy, Raes, & Janssens, 2012). When researching why students persist in the classroom environment, it is vital to understand how autonomous motivation plays a role in the decision-making process.

Competence motivation connects with an individual’s desire to achieve both personal and academic success. The ability to accomplish difficult academic tasks can build confidence and provide an individual with a sense of self-satisfaction. Bandura (1986) proposed that individuals’ efficacy expectations, or their beliefs that they can accomplish a given task or activity, are a major determinant of activity choice, willingness to expend effort, and persistence.
While autonomy and competence help identify and explain what motivates undergraduate students in a classroom setting, the concept of relatedness, a factor of social condition, provides additional insight. Since relatedness refers to the need to establish a close and secure relationship with other people, this concept aligns very closely with student-faculty relationships and how parental or family educational accomplishments affect an individual’s motivation to persist (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013).

Extrinsically motivated behaviors are not inherently interesting. Thus, they must be externally prompted, a primary reason people are likely to engage in the behavior is that they are valued by significant others to whom they feel connected (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This sense of belongingness or connectedness to a person, group, or culture exemplifies the intrinsic need for relatedness.

Through the lens of the self-determination theory, and specifically focusing on subcategories such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, intrinsic motivation will prove to be more beneficial to learning and persistence than extrinsic motivation. Using this information, this paper will emphasize the need for educational leaders to understand why students perform as they do in the classroom and throughout a four-year undergraduate business program.

Evidence from the literature that documents prior studies on student motivation and persistence demonstrates a close alignment between social conditions and student motivation, as persistence decisions can stem from various social and motivational influences (Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Shelton, 2003). However, there is room for further investigation, particularly on how social conditions can motivate students to persist throughout four-year undergraduate business programs at less selective schools. This study was aimed at filling the identified gaps in the literature and providing new knowledge on the research topic for the purpose of aiding
undergraduate business programs to better develop their strategies for student persistence. The next chapter will review the literature related to this author’s problem of practice and research question.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the literature that discusses the context and scope of student motivation as it relates to persistence throughout a four-year, undergraduate, business program. This discussion will examine how social factors influence student persistence decisions and why social conditions deserve to be acknowledged and appreciated by educational leaders who oversee institutional strategy and seek to improve student persistence and degree completion. This chapter will inspect the depth of the literature reviewed for this study in an effort to provide the reader with sound evidence that helps to link student motivation to persistence, and outline the gaps that exist in the current literature.

Organization

To address the essential aspects that comprise the topic of student motivation to persist, this literature review will be divided into three core streams. These streams will provide the reader with various perspectives regarding significant concepts, theories, data, and research that will help to unpack, outline, and consolidate the existing literature on student motivation and its relation to persistence in four-year undergraduate programs.

After a brief opening section explaining the concept of social conditions and familiarizing the reader with the research topic, the first stream will expose the reader to motivational theory, specifically discussing the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Following will be a description of the self-determination theory being used as the theoretical framework for this paper. A thorough depiction of this framework is necessary so the reader may use a theoretical lens to help interpret the remaining portions of the paper. Aspects of the self-determination theory will be intertwined throughout each stream for the purpose of continuously linking motivation to persistence.
The second stream will consist of a comprehensive discussion on student persistence within undergraduate programs. Within the discussion, the reader will be introduced to the seminal authors and contributing scholars who have researched and published pertinent information on the topic of persistence. The concepts of integration, self-efficacy, student-faculty interaction, and first-year experience will be discussed as they influence persistence. This stream will conclude with an in-depth conversation on how informal learning aids in motivating students to persist.

The third and final stream will discuss social factors that can hinder student persistence at the college level. Failure to understand and embrace diversity in the classroom, overwhelming family pressure, lack of family support, mediocre institutional support networks, and poor teaching and advising can all negatively affect an individual’s motivation to persist and will be outlined in this section. This stream will conclude with a brief discussion of how institutional acceptance rates align with student persistence.

These three streams comprise the body of the literature review. Following the body will be the summation, which will provide an abridged analysis of the literature and will conclude with a section detailing the need for further investigation.

**Social Conditions**

As noted earlier, social conditions can be interpreted as the degree to which the environment affects student autonomy, competence, relatedness, and ultimately, decision-making. While researchers have acknowledged that academic preparedness and ability to pay have a major influence on student persistence (Braunstein et al., 2000; Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Kaighobadi & Allen, 2008; Madgett & Belanger, 2008), the focus of this study is on the social factors that motivate students to persist through their business program at a non-selective
school. An understanding of the social conditions that support need satisfaction and subsequent motivation is a pressing issue for those interested in promoting positive outcomes in educational settings (Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2005).

Social conditions influence not only what people do, but also how they feel (Deci & Ryan, 2008b), which helps to explain why such factors play a role in students’ stay or withdrawal decisions. With social contexts affecting intrinsic motivation, campus integration, faculty-student interaction, first-year experience, and institutional support will be examined during this research. This study will determine the extent to which social conditions facilitate goal internalization and motivate students to behave and persist through their undergraduate business program.

**Introduction to the Topic**

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education reported that approximately 59% of first-time, full-time students, who began seeking a bachelor’s degree at a four-year, degree-granting institution, completed that degree at the institution where they began by 2013. Among these first-time, full-time undergraduate students, the six-year graduation rate was found to be 58% at public institutions, 65% at private nonprofit institutions, and 32% at private, for-profit institutions (2015). These statistics illustrate the persistence issue that exists today among students attending four-year postsecondary institutions. The decision to persist or withdraw from an undergraduate program can stem from a culmination of numerous motivational influences, including the level of satisfaction of a student’s autonomous, competence, and relatedness needs. Consequently, it is necessary and relevant to investigate student motivation and its effect on persistence within four-year undergraduate programs.
Student motivation in the classroom is a perpetual issue within undergraduate programs and is a well-documented problem of practice in education today (Ames, 1990; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005). While this is an overriding issue that should not be ignored, it can be difficult for educational leaders to address this problem of practice when they do not fully understand the factors that promote or suppress student motivation. Understanding motivation in education is important because it contributes to achievement, but cannot be measured simply by reviewing test scores (Ames, 1990). Today, students are influenced by an array of internal and external motivational factors, many of which are socially related with campus integration, faculty interaction, first-year experience, classroom diversity, and family pressure and support residing at the forefront of this literature review. When attempting to stimulate engagement and encourage persistence, the self-determination theory stresses the importance of satisfying the intrinsic needs of the students (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Additionally, this framework helps to explain why students behave as they do in the classroom setting and throughout a four-year undergraduate program.

Motivational Theory

Before delving into the theoretical framework chosen for this study, it is appropriate to define two key concepts of motivation; intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An intrinsically motivated student is likely to display autonomy and partake in self-initiated exploratory activities (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed, rather than because of external pressures or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, a student may be intrinsically motivated to learn material in a class because he or she may be genuinely interested
in the topic and may find enjoyment from the positive experience of learning and broadening one’s mental capacity. The determination to learn is based on the internal intellectual decisions and personality, rather than the desire to receive external gratification, such as a specific grade in a course.

In contrast, extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). There can be, however, several variations of extrinsic motivation. For example, a student who does his homework only because he fears instructor sanctions for not doing so is extrinsically motivated because he is doing the work in order to attain the separable outcome of avoiding punishment. Ryan and Deci (2000) profess that similarly, a student who does the work because he or she believes it is valuable for a chosen career is also extrinsically motivated, as the individual is engaging in a behavior for instrumental value rather than because he or she finds the material to be interesting.

A student who works for extrinsic rewards such as grades is likely to engage in very different thought processes and behaviors than a student who wants to learn something new about the subject matter or improve a skill (Ames, 1990). Students who are extrinsically motivated to engage in tasks are more likely to resist the task or feel resentment towards it, as typically, they are engaging in the task due to outside pressure or because of course requirements. Further, Ryan & Deci (2000) found that the more students are externally regulated, the less they show interest, value, and effort, and the more inclined they are to blame others such as a teacher or classmate for negative outcomes. Thus, while intrinsic motivation is considered to promote psychological well-being through feelings of personal accomplishment and self-esteem, extrinsic motivation can potentially prohibit genuine interest in a learning task and discourage subjective well-being in the classroom (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007).
Vallerand and Bissonnette (1992) assessed intrinsic and extrinsic motivational styles as predictors of persistence in first-term college students, finding that those who persisted through the semester had higher initial levels of intrinsic motivation toward academic activities than the students who dropped out. The researchers determined that intrinsic motivation led to greater persistence, while extrinsic motivation did not predict or yield college persistence. In fact, it negatively related to behavior and academic outcomes. Similarly, a study conducted by Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, Matos, and Lacante (2004) (as cited in Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007), demonstrated that students placed in an intrinsically motivating condition processed reading material more deeply, achieved higher grades, and showed more persistence than students placed in an extrinsic condition. The noticeable relation between motivation and persistence is why the self-determination theory has been chosen as the theoretical lens for this research.

**Self-Determination Theory**

The self-determination theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) is a theory of motivation, personality, and development that proposes that intrinsic motivation, or motivation derived purely from the satisfaction inherent in the activity itself, is more conducive to learning than extrinsic motivation, or motivation to achieve an external reward (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). It is one of the most empirically validated theories for understanding educational motivation, and has three primary psychological needs that when satisfied, foster intrinsic motivation; autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Guiffrida et al., 2013).

Autonomy occurs when the students particularly enjoy the course or subject matter because the information and activities closely align with their interests and values. Autonomous motivation can help energize and direct behavior, as individuals act out of their own genuine,
willful and self-motivated actions. Competence incorporates the desire to challenge oneself and test one’s abilities. An individual’s internal devotion to accomplishing difficult tasks and overcoming certain obstacles can build confidence and enhance one’s level of self-efficacy. The concept of relatedness refers to the need to establish a close and secure relationship with other people (Guiffrida et al., 2013). Oftentimes, successful students tend to pursue goals, both academic and social, that are valued by others (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). For example, a goal to please one’s parents may result in the pursuit to do well academically. Similarly, a desire to connect with a faculty or staff member may also influence the student to have increased focus on their coursework. Deci & Ryan, (2008a) posit that satisfaction of these three intrinsic needs predict psychological well-being in all cultures. Studies have indicated that both autonomy and competence are positively associated with college persistence (Guiffrida et al.).

**Persistence**

Persistence is described as, “the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles, and is an important measure of higher education program effectiveness” (Rovai, 2003, p. 1). In relation to undergraduate programs, persistence can be interpreted as the length of time a student attends classes. The decision to persist throughout an undergraduate program is dependent on a myriad of important factors. Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993, 1998), a seminal scholar of persistence in higher education, proposed that student persistence is related to the degree of integration students attain within an institution. This notion essentially refers to the level that students feel they transition or “fit” into their academic and social structures within the institution. DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak (2005) suggest that the social adjustment of students plays an important factor in predicting persistence, as integration into the social environment is a crucial element in commitment to an academic institution. Additionally, academic integration
has an equally important impact on persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto (1987) notes that the more central one’s membership is to the mainstream of institutional life, the more likely one is to persist. A study by Madgett and Belanger (2008) found that students who believed they had discovered the right program and environment and who did not just “feel like a number” to the institution were more likely to continue their studies at the respective school.

**Self-Efficacy, Campus Integration and Faculty Interaction**

As seminal authors on persistence suggest, the more socially and academically involved students are in their institutions, the more likely they are to persist (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1998). However, in order for an individual to achieve academic integration, he or she must believe in one’s own abilities to achieve academic success.

Self-efficacy expectations are beliefs about one’s ability to successfully perform a given behavior (Shelton, 2003). Furthermore, people with greater self-efficacy will persist longer because they believe they are able to eventually succeed (Bandura, 1997). Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (2001) found that students who had more positive perceptions of themselves and their abilities to complete college-related tasks made fewer non-persistence decisions. This concept directly relates to competence, one of the three intrinsic needs described in the self-determination theory.

Competence motivation connects with an individual’s desire to achieve both personal and academic success. The ability to accomplish difficult academic tasks can build confidence and provide an individual with a sense of self-satisfaction. Bandura (1986) proposed that individuals’ efficacy expectations, or their beliefs that they can accomplish a given task or activity, are a major determinant of activity choice, willingness to expend effort, and persistence.
Meanwhile, social integration incorporates self-esteem and the quality of the relationships with fellow students, faculty and staff members (Bennett, 2003). Both in and out of the classroom, individuals may desire the need to affiliate, belong, or connect with a person or group of people, which can include classmates, teammates, colleagues, and faculty and staff members at an institution. This notion exemplifies the intrinsic need for relatedness, another subcategory of the self-determination theory.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) advocated that faculty members are significantly involved in students’ reported personal growth, while Bennett (2003) explained that sound lecturer-student relationships contribute to student motivation, emphasizing the vital role of the lecturer in discouraging student withdrawal. These relationships help to simultaneously build student confidence and enhance interpersonal skills. Outcomes of these relationships can include professional socialization, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and enhanced motivation for learning and persistence.

In addition to relationships built inside the classroom, Terenzini, Theophilides, and Lorang (1984) found that involvement in social life, extracurricular activities, and the frequency of non-academic contact with faculty were principal sources of influence on individual growth and persistence among freshman and junior-year undergraduate students. Seemingly, outside of the classroom, in places such as residential settings, on the playing field, at school-sponsored events, and even walking to class, social involvement influences persistence and can surely enhance one’s first-year experience.

**First-Year Experience**

A student’s level of campus integration can be largely influenced by their first-year experience. Astin (1993) explains that to understand why a student remains enrolled in a
program, it is necessary and relevant to consider the experience they have in that program. This is why educational leaders should appreciate the experience that students have during their first-year of college, as it can play a major role in withdrawal decisions. First-year experience scholars, Upcraft and Gardner (1989), discuss how the experience of the first-year student can play a deciding role in their persistence, and that diversity among the student body, if embraced appropriately, can spark informal learning and help to create a new network of friends and colleagues. “Women, students of color, first-generation students, and other nontraditional students benefit from getting to know others who share their innate characteristics and who have been successful in higher education” (Barefoot, 2000, p. 15). In order to encourage these interactions, postsecondary institutions have been challenged to keep students on campus and provide an educational environment that is conducive to active learning.

Barefoot (2000) professes that a central focus of many first-year initiatives is to increase the amount of time students spend on campus and to increase their involvement in activities or programs organized or sanctioned by the institution. This notion aligns with Astin’s (1996) earlier claim that first-year students who spend a majority of their time off campus due to work, hobby, or living situation are less likely to persist through their academic programs because these activities cause them to interact less with their fellow classmates, faculty, and staff. Thus, their first-year experience is less fruitful, exciting, and satisfying than those who spend more of their time integrating on campus. A number of highly-selective schools have experimented with first-year initiatives to enhance campus integration and improve the overall level of student intellectualism, with the creation of learning communities as a primary focus (Barefoot, 2000).
Through the use of learning communities, colleges and universities are changing the basic organization of the curriculum to achieve more student-to-student interaction and many other positive outcomes such as improved retention and academic achievement (Barefoot, 2000). In particular, living-learning programs and service learning have proven to enhance students’ first-year experience (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Barefoot, 2000; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Purdie & Rosser, 2011).

**Living-learning communities.** Living-learning communities and first-year experience courses have been found to play a major role in first-year retention (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). The purpose of a living-learning program is to focus on and enhance the student experience outside of the classroom by encouraging campus integration, providing networking opportunities, and fulfilling student relatedness needs. A living-learning program promotes student interaction and cohesion by housing students together with similar academic interests and a shared curricular experience.

Students enrolled in living-learning programs have reported easier transition to college, higher academic achievement, higher levels of civic engagement, and are more likely to be retained (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). An example of a living-learning program is the Academic Theme Floor (ATF) where students are placed in residence halls that are fully or partially dedicated to an educational theme or academic discipline. This program works to group students with similar academic interests together to improve the quantity and quality of their interactions with one another while fostering a sense of comfort and support.

Another popular living-learning program is the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program which takes a small cohort of students who all live together in the same residence hall and enrolls them in several courses together so that they can work with and support one another
both inside and outside of the classroom as they persevere through their first two semesters (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). Additionally, students in this group will likely enroll in some sort of first-year seminar together which usually focuses on an educational theme, academic discipline, or social issue that is relevant to the students enrolled in the course. Oftentimes, in addition to an instructor, there will be an undergraduate upperclassman present in this seminar to act as a mentor for the first-year students as they get acquainted to their new academic and social environment. The positive effect that these first-year seminars have on student persistence is undeniable (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Purdie & Rosser, 2011). These living-learning programs help to enhance student satisfaction and the first-year experience by providing informal education outside of the classroom, acting as a catalyst to their in-class studies.

**Service learning.** Upcraft and Gardner (1989) proclaim that service learning also influences student satisfaction and persistence decisions. Bringle and Hatcher (2000) define service learning as, “a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and allows students to reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (p. 274). Many undergraduate programs nationwide are implementing service-learning components into their first-year curriculum to encourage active learning and to stress the importance of public service and community involvement. Service learning is an exciting pedagogical tool that helps to educate students on social, environmental, and societal issues that exist outside the classroom by addressing and promoting social responsibility and citizenship. This form of real-world learning helps to provide a well-rounded educational experience for both the students and the service recipients.
First-year academic performance. In addition to living-learning communities and service learning, the academic integration and success of an undergraduate business student during the first year of college can be foretelling of the individual’s persistence. Kaighobadi and Allen (2008) suggest that the strongest predictors of overall academic success are the grades the students receive in core knowledge courses that are typically taken in the earlier semesters of a business program. A student’s early grade point average can be a result of their own involvement in the classroom and in other campus-sponsored academic activities. Tinto (2006) notes that student involvement matters most during the critical first year of college. If from the start, a student is unable to academically integrate into the curriculum and meet the deadlines and requirements set forth by the academic leaders, he or she will be less likely to persist throughout a four-year program.

Brookshire and Palocsay (2005) found that the strongest predictive variable in business student persistence is early grade point average, indicating that overall academic performance is highly dependent on a student’s abilities and opportunities to succeed and integrate during the early stages of the college experience. Nearly half of all leavers depart before the start of the second year, exemplifying exactly how important first-year experience and academic success is to student persistence (Tinto, 1998). If an individual earns poor marks during the first year of college, and does not integrate well into the college community, it can potentially foreshadow his or her chances of academic persistence.

Informal Learning

One important positive influence on students’ levels of academic and social integration is the extent of their informal contact with faculty beyond the classroom (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1979). Informal, non-class-related faculty-student contact has been linked to academic
persistence and interest in life goals (Iverson, Pascarella & Terenzini, 1984). With this, it is necessary to understand what informal communication and learning entails and why it helps to shape and foster student persistence in undergraduate programs.

While formal learning typically refers to structured, classroom-based learning, informal learning is unstructured education that happens during everyday activities (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). Informal learning is considered a complementary partner to learning from experience and therefore aligns with experiential learning which emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process (Kolb, 1984, Eraut, 2004). Thus, it resembles aspects of progressive adult education, which is learner-centered and focuses on experience, progress, and learning by doing (Doll, 1983; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Walter, 2009). This philosophy is aimed at the notion that the student can learn and evolve through human experience and casual conversation.

A student can engage in informal learning following an unplanned or unexpected event, while walking to class, dining in the cafeteria, at work, or at a school-sponsored event, and it can take place whenever people have the need, motivation, or opportunity to learn. Marsick and Volpe (1999) note that informal learning is typically integrated with daily routines, is not highly conscious, and is influenced by chance. This type of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner and occurs through observation, asking for help, conversing with others, and critical reflection (Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2011).

What makes informal learning so unique is that it is essentially invisible, as it can occur even if the learner does not recognize it to be happening. While it is common for students to casually converse with faculty members after class, the students may not realize that learning is actually taking place. Informal communication with faculty and staff help to foster important
interpersonal links between the student and the institution, which in turn leads to greater institutional commitment and an increased likelihood of persistence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1979). These informal learning opportunities help students to identify with and feel an emotional attachment to their respective institution. Rovai (2003) further notes that students’ involvement in and their attachment to their school are essential elements for success and persistence.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1979, 1980) found that informal interactions with faculty outside the classroom and perception of faculty concern for student development predicted freshman-year persistence in traditional undergraduate students. Similarly, Shelton (2003) found that the overall feeling that faculty cared and wanted the students to succeed helped to create an atmosphere more conducive to academic success and encouraged students to persist within their programs. It is evident that the availability of faculty members outside of the classroom and their willingness to casually engage with students during “off-hours” illustrates institutional dedication to student growth and learning and plays a major role in student persistence decisions. These student-faculty informal interactions extend and reinforce the formal academic experience by fostering student’s academic and social integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979).

**Social Factors that can Hinder Persistence**

An abundance of scholarly literature has highlighted various social determinants that influence student dropout decisions, such as failure to appreciate and embrace diversity in the classroom, overwhelming family responsibilities and pressure, lack of an effective institutional support system, and poor teaching and advising (Tinto, 1998, 2006; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001; Madgett & Belanger, 2008; Terenzini, Theophilides, & Lorang, 1984; Shelton, 2003; Bennett, 2003). These influencing factors will be further investigated in an effort to understand why they play a role in student non-persistence decisions.
Diversity in the Classroom

When studying motivation to persist in a course or in an undergraduate program, it is crucial to consider and appreciate student diversity. Diversity, alluding to the recognition of unique individual differences, can refer to culture, race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, marital status, and religion among other factors.

People of different cultures will typically encompass a divergent set of values which can influence how an individual perceives and interprets a given situation and the importance he or she ascribes to it (Amit & Bar-Lev, 2012). Thus, a person’s culture will play a significant role in shaping his or her behavior. This helps to explain why understanding cultural orientation is vital in determining how and why students behave the way they do in a classroom setting or in an undergraduate program.

Cultural orientation. The system of culture shapes individual and group identity and represents a collective programming of the mind, distinguishing members of one category of people from members of another (Ramthun & Matkin, 2012). Stemming from historical ethnic upbringing, students with varying cultural backgrounds will behave differently in a classroom setting because their views and values of education differ. A study by Fuligini (2001) found that both Asian and Latin American students had higher academic motivation than their European counterparts, which he attributed to their sense of obligation to the family. Additionally, it was noted that Latin American parents have instilled in their children the notion that one cannot be a good student without being a good person, while Chinese parents have implanted the impression that education entails moral striving so that their children may feel guilt or shame if they are not motivated to learn and persist (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011). It is important to respect the
fact that cultural backgrounds differ among students and that the concept of education has differing meanings in each culture.

As individuals from culturally normative groups interact with each other, the interaction forms an intercultural influence process (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Individuals lacking experience operating in this process may have difficulty understanding material, and thus may be negatively affected due to decreased motivation spawned from feelings of confusion. Rovai (2003) notes that minority students may feel lonely or isolated in the college environment, and that often times, only integration into ethnic clubs, when available, help to deescalate their anxiety and level of discomfort. This notion, in itself, can lead to dropout decisions, which can be illustrated by a recent study showing that Hispanic, first-generation students were 34.5% less likely to persist in an undergraduate program in the United States than Caucasian first-generation students (Arana et al., 2011).

Language barriers and the use of slang in class can also play an impactful role in the demotivation of multicultural students. It may not be uncommon for multicultural students in a predominantly homogeneous classroom setting to feel nervous, out of place, or uncomfortable based on varying ethnicities and a lack of cultural knowledge. This uneasy feeling can yield negative coursework production, decreased class engagement, and withdrawal decisions. Arana et al. (2011) reported that what felt like an unwelcome environment for Hispanic students in a predominantly Caucasian university hindered academic performance. Meanwhile, Kaighobadi and Allen (2008) reported that African American, Hispanic, and Asian students tend to have lower GPAs at graduation than white students, which may further convey the lesser level of comfort that minorities may feel in a college environment.
**Nontraditional students.** It is pertinent to note that cultural differences are not the only aspects that make a classroom environment diverse. Consider an 18 year-old freshman student sitting next to a 65 year-old student in the same class. This once rare occasion is not such an uncommon occurrence today. Students over the age of 24 can be referred to as nontraditional students (Hermon & Davis, 2004). While some students may be of the same race and ethnicity as the majority of a particular classroom, their age and academic status add to the diversity of the classroom atmosphere. Nontraditional students typically have different motivational influences for attending school than traditional students, such as wanting a career change, desiring a promotion at work, trying to earn a degree after many years away from education, or simply wanting to set an aspirational example for their own children. One must realize, however, that while many nontraditional students have valid motives to persist, barriers still exist for this oppressed group.

Unique obstacles occur for nontraditional students in motivation and persistence that relate to social, financial, and personal issues (Hermon & Davis, 2004; Spellman, 2007; Dougherty & Woodland, 2009; Lovell, 2011). It is not unusual for nontraditional students to be unnerved in a classroom filled with younger individuals, as the initial fear of being laughed at or made fun of can be a common sensation. Additionally, because nontraditional students often have full-time jobs, geographic barriers may also play a negative factor in classroom achievement and persistence. While traditional students may be able to walk to class within minutes, older students in the workforce may have to commute from farther distances, and after a full day of work. With this, age can certainly play a role in adding to the diversity of the classroom and can negatively affect persistence decisions.
**Student-parents.** Student-parents are another oppressed group that add diversity to the classroom, as they too are typically nontraditional students, but with dependent children. Like other diverse groups, student-parents hold different values regarding education, and they hold various reasons and motivations for attending school. Viewing motivation through the lens of a parent, many student-parents perceive post-secondary education as instrumental, as they value school as an opportunity for personal growth and an important way of modeling educational success for their children (Haleman, 2004). However, obvious barriers for student-parents exist as they embark to take on dual roles that increases responsibility for the individual and can add pressure and stress to an already busy life.

Student-parents encounter daily obligations and pressures as their level of accountability increases. Aryee, Srinivas, & Tan (2005) suggest that dual-role involvement causes an individual to be unavailable to perform all of the responsibilities and demands required in each role, thus increasing the likelihood of making non-persistence decisions.

**Family Responsibilities and Pressure**

Active social involvement in the family is traditionally viewed as a demand that reduces the availability of resources for the school domain (Wyland, Lester, Mone, & Winkel, 2013). This is evident from the previous discussion regarding student-parents and the burden that dual-role responsibilities can have on student persistence. A study by Arana et al. (2011) found that family obligations such as a new pregnancy, ill parents or children, and recently deceased family members were main causes that led to dropout decisions.

Previous family education-related accomplishments or “educational legacy” (Madgett & Belanger, 2008, p. 81) can also affect student achievement and persistence. For example, a student whose immediate family holds multiple college degrees may feel additional pressure to
follow in family footsteps, and therefore, become increasingly motivated to achieve certain grades than a first-generation student. However, because of this pressure to continue the family educational legacy, the individual may also experience feelings of overwhelm and stress which can negatively affect achievement and persistence. Further, when educated parents are alumni of the institution where their child attends, they will likely be aware of all of the resources that are available for their child, causing educational aspirations and standards to increase, potentially yielding a sudden feeling of escalated pressure on the student to perform at the level to which his or her parents have set forth.

Wentzel (1998) noted that parents’ aspirations for their children’s educational attainments are actually related to the children’s own ambitions for academic success, intellectual accomplishments, and college enrollment and persistence. Parenting attitude and behavior is likely to influence the development of a child’s standards and goals for their own academic accomplishments (Bandura, 1989). This demonstrates that a child’s intrinsic desire to achieve an academic goal is based on previous family accomplishments, or relatedness needs. However, this also infers that parents who are not college-educated or who are simply uninterested in their children’s academic pursuit could relay negative attitudes or innuendos towards the students, potentially hindering persistence. Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) found that students of educated parents who guided their children with support and helped plan postsecondary endeavors were more likely to achieve academic success than their counterparts who come from less-involved families. Similarly, Bennett (2003) found that students with university-educated parents reportedly achieved higher grades and had significantly higher levels of self-esteem and competence than those who were first-generation students. This data illustrates how and why family obligations, values, and pressure can affect motivation and persistence.
Institutional Support

Community factors have the potential to exert a significant influence on the educational outcomes that students actually achieve (Wentzel, 1998), so thus, student success is highly influenced by the universities’ support systems (Arana et al., 2011). These systems, however, are not always as supportive and strong as students need them to be. A lack of institutional support networks can greatly affect student motivation and persistence. Actions of the faculty, especially in the classroom, are key to the institutional efforts to enhance retention; and if institutional support does not occur in the classroom, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere (Tinto, 2006). It was reported that students who did not have instructors with strong teaching abilities and communication skills were less likely to persist (Madgett & Belanger, 2008), and insufficient personal interaction with faculty and staff resulted in a lack of integration (Shelton, 2003).

As discussed in the motivational theory section of this paper, a sense of belongingness or connectedness to a person, group, or culture exemplifies the intrinsic need for relatedness, and institutions that cannot satisfy these student needs will face the potential of student dropout. Students need to feel a connection with the institution and its members. As reported by Arana et al. (2011), undergraduate students who did persist through their academic programs cited faculty and university support as a major source of assistance. Conversely, students with less social support and a lack of understanding of the formal structures of the university exhibited lower persistence.

Persistence can become seriously weakened by external factors when social systems are fragile (Rovai, 2003). A study on American Indian undergraduate students found that a socially supportive network is central to their academic persistence, as the role of faculty mentoring emerged as having the strongest relationship with the decision to continue (Gloria & Robinson
Mentoring, however, is just one of the many roles that faculty members assume. They are crucial players, whether as initiators, verifiers, or potential consolidators of students’ perceived personal development (Terenzini et al., 1984), so, institutions that do not recognize the important role that faculty members play in the motivation and persistence of students may be in danger of seeing their retention numbers drop.

In addition to faculty, the support from the advising staff was noted to be one of the most important variables that influence students’ college experience and overall satisfaction (DeShields, et al., 2005). The advising staff members are typically responsible for helping students to select appropriate courses so they can graduate from their program in a given period of time. However, students who receive poor advice about their course choices have been found to be more likely to withdraw (Bennett, 2003).

During the first year of college, the interactions students experience with their peers and faculty have been shown to affect persistence (Purdie & Rosser, 2011), as institutional support networks play a major role in the motivation of students. Insufficient interactions with faculty, staff, and peers accelerate a low sense of community, which can prevent the satisfaction of the students’ intrinsic needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

**The Persistence Problem at Non-Selective Schools**

In 2007, students who enrolled in programs at less selective degree-granting institutions illustrated poor completion rates, with only 34% of students graduating within six years from institutions with open admissions policies (U. S. Department of Education [NCES], 2015). Meanwhile, competitive schools with a 25% or lower acceptance rate have six-year degree completion rates of 89%.
Selective and non-selective institutions differ in terms of mission and student body with these statistics helping to illuminate this reality (Sullivan, 2008). Research indicates that those who graduated from nonacademic curriculum tracks in high school were more likely to prefer nonselective or open enrollment institutions. Conversely, students were more prepared and had clear career goals tended to elect stronger college curriculums at more selective institutions (Lavin & Crook, 1990). Sullivan (2008) explains that there is a formidable variety of personal and academic skills and attitudes that students bring with them when they are granted admission to selective and highly selective institutions, as the very act of applying to one of these institutions suggests and requires a significant level of commitment to one’s educational future. The decision to apply to a competitive school is an important indicator for predicting persistence toward obtaining a bachelor’s degree. Touching upon Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory, one’s level of competence and self-efficacy is also considered. According to the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE), an individual student’s academic self-concept is based on both the academic achievement levels of the student and on the achievement levels of other students in the same school that the student attends (Marsh & Hau, 2003). Therefore, it is sensible that both intellectually superior and academically prepared students will likely choose to enroll in selective universities, and once there, are more likely to persist and succeed in those programs.

In contrast, open admissions programs help to attract a broad spectrum of students, and are especially critical in helping to enlarge the pool of college-educated and professional minority group of men and women (Lavin & Crook, 1990). Approximately half of all first-time open enrollment students test as underprepared for the academic demands of college-level courses and programs (Sullivan, 2008). This certainly contributes to the low graduation rate among students at non-selective schools. Since open admissions institutions enroll a larger
percentage of nontraditional students and have fewer admissions criteria, the potential for early withdrawal decisions increases (Leonard, 2002). This notion helps display the relationship between institutional acceptance rates and undergraduate student persistence.

Lavin and Crook (1990) noted that the initial concern from educational leaders about open enrollment programs were that academic standards would be swept away by the deluge of incompetent students. To this day, student persistence is of concern to educators and policymakers because large numbers of students who begin their college education in community colleges and other open enrollment programs never complete their degrees (Sullivan, 2008). This further proves why additional research was warranted on the motivational influences that affect the persistence decisions of undergraduate students enrolled in non-selective institutions.

**Summation**

After a careful review of the literature, and purposefully putting ability to pay and academic preparedness aside to specifically focus on the social factors and conditions that influence student persistence, it is evident that campus integration, student-faculty interaction, first-year experience, self-efficacy, and informal learning all play critical roles in the effective motivation of student persistence and academic commitment. Additionally, diversity in undergraduate classrooms ranging from cultural differences, to student age, to parents in the classroom, can hinder persistence if not properly appreciated and embraced by the institution. When individuals are raised in different cultures and from families with divergent educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, they may exhibit dissimilar outlooks on education, thus having differing motivational influences. Moreover, lack of both family and institutional support during the first year of school may also negatively affect persistence decisions.
When analyzing all of these factors through the theoretical lens of the self-determination theory, specifically focusing on the subcategories of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, it may be suggested that intrinsic motivation, which can be heavily stimulated by social conditions, is more conducive to learning and persistence than extrinsic factors. This position is important for educational leaders to understand when trying to decipher why students perform as they do in the classroom, and throughout a four-year undergraduate program. The investigation of the social conditions that influence student motivation is warranted, as it may help fill a gap in the literature focusing on motivation and persistence. Interpreting why individuals do what they do is a key piece of the puzzle in unveiling innovative motivational techniques within postsecondary institutions.

Further Investigation

Students who enroll in class but do not finish suffer economic loss, frustration, and disappointment (McLaren, 2004), while the institution suffers declining retention numbers, loss of monies used to recruit, enroll, and maintain the student, and a potentially damaging reputation. With over 40% of students deciding to withdraw from school they started at before earning a bachelor’s degree, it is obvious that student persistence is an overriding problem of practice that needs to be addressed head-on in a continuous effort to understand and eradicate the issue (U. S. Department of Education [NCES], 2015).

As a group, undergraduate business students embody many different intelligence levels, behaviors, lifestyles, study skills, preferred learning methods, experiences, backgrounds, and demographics (Kaighobadi & Allen, 2008). The manner in which these factors intertwine with one another makes it challenging to predict how academically and socially successful a student will be and whether or not he or she will persist through an undergraduate business
program. With this, further research into the topic of interest will undoubtedly help to uncover new information that can be used to understand motivational influences to persist throughout four-year business programs.

It has been made evident from this review that a plethora of literature exists on student motivation and persistence, however, there is a lack of existing scholarly literature on the social factors that motivate students to persist through four-year undergraduate business programs at non-selective institutions. It is for this reason that this author chose to conduct valuable primary research on this topic of interest so that he could contribute to the conversation of student persistence in undergraduate programs.

Case study analyses, the chosen methodology for this qualitative study, will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. The research paradigm, participants, recruitment and access plan, data collection and storage and analysis plan will also be thoroughly outlined.
Chapter 3 - Methodology

Methodology, Research Design and Tradition

This study endeavored to answer the following research question:

**What social factors motivate students to persist throughout a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective school?**

In order to most effectively answer this research question, this study utilized *qualitative* research that encompassed *case study* analyses. Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system over time, through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, “qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 11). The case study was the most appropriate design for this qualitative study, as the participants were all selected from the same four-year institution. Creswell (2013) notes that data collection in case study research is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information such as interviews, observations, and documents. Additionally, Noor (2008) explains that using multiple sources of evidence ultimately helps to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. In case study research, data from these multiple sources are then converged in the analysis process rather than handled individually, as “each data source acts as one piece of the puzzle, with each piece contributing to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, pp. 554).

Interviews and open-ended discussions were most appropriate to obtain insight into this research question. Qualitative interview questions related to social conditions that affect student
motivation and persistence were able to spark a conversation in which the investigator could interpret meaning behind the participants’ detailed narratives, as qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This methodology allowed the researcher to search for common themes, experiences and conclusions among the participants.

**Research paradigm.** While the positivist framework searches for one particular answer or result with a primary aim to test, control, predict, measure or confirm a hypothesis or theory, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is based on the assumption that multiple realities exist, and that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than being an externally singular entity (Ponterotto, 2005). This framework aims to explore, understand, and describe a theory or phenomenon based on results noted from past documented experiences. The investigator brackets biases as knowledge is achieved from subjective and contextualized research. Multiple responses and realities are welcomed, as the unit of analysis is the act of meaning making. “To reconstruct and understand the interviewees’ experiences and interpretations, interpretive researchers seek thick descriptions of cultural and topical arenas they are studying and try to develop an empathetic understanding of the worlds of others” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, pp. 35). As such, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is most appropriate for qualitative data collection, and was specifically appropriate for this particular inquiry into student motivation and persistence. This researcher embraced multiple responses, realities, and perspectives from the participants, and the variance helped the investigator make meaning of the shared results.

**Participants and Access**
For this doctoral research, the author studied third and fourth-year undergraduate business students at a small, private, non-selective four-year institution in the Boston, MA area. With regard to the sampling strategies in qualitative research, a maximum variation approach was utilized (Creswell, 2013). As Creswell (2013) suggests seven to twelve interviews, this study included nine participants. Since qualitative research is very labor-intensive and analyzing a large sample can be time consuming and often impractical, this small sample size provided sufficient data from which to interpret and analyze the topic of interest (Mason, 2010).

**Recruitment and access.** Being that the research was student-focused, there was a need to interview an array of students at the host institution. Before engaging in this study, various educational leaders at the respective institution were made aware of and gave permission for this study to occur. In addition to approval from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), this researcher met with the Business Department Chair, the Dean of Undergraduate Enrollment, and the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs to ensure appropriate accessibility as the research was to be conducted with current students on campus. Due to his current employment at the host institution, access was relatively easy to gain. In addition, it was noted that all data analyses, discussions, and results would be made available to the academic community upon completion.

*Purposive sampling* is the random selection of participants within a population that have the most information on the characteristic of interest (Guarte & Barrios, 2006). This study was aimed at undergraduate business students at a non-selective school, therefore this sampling technique was most appropriate. After a list of eligible participants was made available to the researcher, they were sent an electronic correspondence inquiring if they would be willing to partake in the research. The students were informed that participation was not mandatory, as it
was completely voluntary. Additionally, students were aware that their individual responses would be completely confidential from any of their peers, instructors, or supervisors, and that no harm would come to them in any way, should they agree to take part in the study.

After agreeing to partake in the study, a preliminary informed consent prefaced the interview. The participants fully understood the purpose of the research, and were aware that they could opt out at any time. They understood that the doctoral study on student motivation to persist within an undergraduate business program would ultimately be used to acknowledge, assess, interpret, and comprehend what keeps students engaged and persisting so that the institution can attempt to remedy any motivational deficiencies that may exist. The students were also aware that at the conclusion of the study, general results and recommendations would be made transparent for their benefit.

**Data Collection**

With intensive qualitative case studies that should produce rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization, or program, data credibility is vital (Stake, 1995). In an effort to enhance credibility, the data collection process for case study research typically utilizes multiple data sources, such as interviews, direct observations, archival records and physical artifacts (Yin, 2003). Interviews were the main source of data collection in this case study, and field notes, interview and observational protocols were followed appropriately. As Creswell (2013) mentions, seven to twelve individuals are sufficient for easy pattern matching and trend identification. For this study, nine participants were interviewed. Eight questions were asked, with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. This allowed seven to eight minutes per question. These interviews were semi-structured, as this technique allowed for sufficient flexibility to approach respondents differently, while still covering the same content (Noor,
Primary interviews were audio recorded to ensure an accurate account of the conversations, and they took place in a small conference room at the host campus.

Documents and artifacts were also reviewed during the data collection stage, as the qualitative researcher is expected to draw upon multiple sources of evidence to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of various data sources (Bowen, 2009). Further, it was imperative to understand how the host institution currently represented material related to engagement and persistence in print and digital form. The college website, academic catalog, admissions materials, faculty training documents, and online student resources regarding such information about the Academic Achievement Center, Academic Advising Center, the Center for Community-Based Learning, and the Center for Teaching and Learning were all appropriately reviewed.

Data Storage and Management

Since case study writers employ multiple forms of data collection, safe and sufficient storage of the data is necessary. Both Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) discuss the importance of effectively organizing data, and mention using an electronic database as a best practice for managing such information. Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) provides unlimited bins into which data can be collected and then organized, undoubtedly helping to maintain the integrity of the data during the research analysis process (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Using such a database improved the reliability of the case study as it enabled the researcher to track and organize data sources including narratives, notes, audio files, and key documents for easy retrieval at a later date (Baxter & Jack, 2008). MAXQDA was the CAQDAS that this researcher utilized for data storage and management.
Creswell (2013) recommends using a high-quality recording device for audio recording during the interviews, which were a major focal point of the data collection during this case study. Data from the audio files were transcribed by a professional transcription service, and then securely uploaded to the data analysis software. The transcripts, audio files, and data were secure at all times, as they were electronically stored in a password-protected database for easy access by the researcher.

**Data Analysis**

Once the recorded interviews were completed, transcribed, and uploaded to the data analysis software, the researcher meticulously coded, analyzed, and pattern-tracked the data collected from the purposeful sample. This required that patterns and themes were carefully extrapolated from the coded transcripts.

*Initial Coding* was utilized as a starting point in the coding process, as it is a first cycle, open-ended approach to coding involving the breakdown of qualitative data into discrete parts and comparing them for similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2012). This type of coding is intended to provide the investigator with analytic leads for further exploration, helping to aid in the creation of future themes. Saldaña (2012) explains, “many of the codes will be used repeatedly throughout, as one of the coder’s primary goals is to find these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data” (p. 5). The line-by-line initial coding, which is highly appropriate for interview transcripts, employed several *in-vivo* codes.

*In Vivo Coding* is a specific type of code that was used during the data analysis phase that essentially assigns a code to a section of data using an exact word or phrase taken directly from the participant’s own language during the interview process. This form of coding is appropriate
for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for those that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice (Saldaña, 2012). Coding with actual words used by the participants helped the researcher to attain a deepened level of understanding of the participants’ experiences and worldviews.

*Emotion Codes*, which were also used during first cycle coding, are a combination of *in-vivo* codes and emotional states and reactions of the participants that were observed by the researcher. These emotional states were not only apparent from the body language and tone of voice during the interview, but also from the vocal nuances relayed in the audio files combined with the written contents in the transcripts. Emotion coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly those exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences (Saldaña, 2012).

After first cycle coding was complete, the researcher aimed to reorganize, prioritize, and reconfigure the initial codes into a select list of broader categories and themes. When classifying the codes into themes, it is important to, “group the statements into meaning units” to aid in the interpretation process (Creswell, 2013, p. 190). With this, second cycle *Pattern Coding* helps to solidify material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis (Saldaña, 2012). Pattern coding is appropriate when developing major themes from the data, and helped the researcher to transform 275 codes into 24 patterns, three major themes and 10 subthemes. These are detailed in the chapter to follow.

**Trustworthiness and Verification**

*Clarifying researcher bias* is an imperative practice in qualitative studies, and is present in this doctoral research. Creswell (2013) explains that during this clarification, the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the
interpretation and approach to the study. In this particular case, as this researcher is a college instructor who interviewed students at the same institution where he is employed, and although the participants were not direct students of his, he still has an overarching perception of the student population at the school. Therefore, in an effort to ensure objective research, it was imperative for the investigator to neutralize all preexisting perspectives, as the data collected needed to be independent of bias and unrelated to this author’s own prior experiences. With this, initially clarifying the author’s position and potential biases were important before engaging in the respective study.

An internal threat that existed during the study was the potential of familiarity with the participants, as this researcher teaches business courses at the college where the participants are enrolled. In an effort to minimize the threat, the researcher ensured that no participants of the study are currently or have previously enrolled in a course with the researcher as the professor. However, interviewed participants may still have a vague knowledge or perception of the researcher, or may know other students who have taken classes with the researcher. This could have potentially altered the participant responses, as they could have been tailored in a manner that the participants believed the researcher wanted or hoped to hear.

*Member checking* is of vital importance in qualitative research, as participants should play a major role guiding case study research (Stake, 1995). In another effort to avoid researcher bias, the investigator divulged an initial analysis to the interview participants so they could ascertain how the researcher interpreted the raw data, and then provide feedback on the analysis so the researcher could determine if the preliminary interpretation of the data was accurate. This helped the researcher to maintain data credibility during the data analysis phase.

**Protection of Human Subjects**
The study was designed to address and understand student motivation to persist within an undergraduate business program, and consisted of one-on-one interviews. In accordance with Northeastern University’s IRB policy, numerous steps were established to ensure human participants would endure no physical or psychological harm. Additionally, all participants were treated with dignity and respect and were informed of their autonomy prior to and during the study.

Undergraduate students could be considered a vulnerable group, as they are consistently looking for advice and knowledge as they grow on a journey of experience and reflection. Further, these students at the host institution are typically younger individuals, ages 18 and older, with many coming from diverse cultural and sociocultural backgrounds. Moreover, because the students are frequently seeking support from mentors and professors, they may also potentially be overly naive and more trusting than they should be. Thus, it was important during this research to acknowledge their vulnerability and ensure the participants of their safety and confidentiality.

This researcher conducted a study with a small group of students at the institution where he is employed. Therefore, potential participants may have known him prior to the study. Due to this possibility, it was imperative to take appropriate steps to ensure that no participant had any relation to researcher in any way, which included being an advisee, a current student, or even a prior student of the inquirer. Not having an established connection with the participants helped to ensure that responses were unbiased and that the students were under no pressure or persuasion to respond a certain way. The students understood that there would be no future negative or positive consequences for them based on how they responded to the interview questions, as the interviewer would have no authority over them in any manner during or after the study.
It was made transparent to the students that they were free to speak their mind in an unbiased setting, and that everything they said, while recorded, would remain confidential, as their identities would remain anonymous. The participants were also aware that they were volunteering to assist with the study, and were allowed to terminate the interview at any time. Under no circumstances would the participants be required to answer or discuss anything that they chose not to discuss, and they had the ability to stop the interview process at any time. In no way would the participants’ thoughts, statements, or opinions affect their current or future academic status or reputation. In addition, student names, identities, and any other characteristic or statement that could potentially link a response to a particular individual, were masked with pseudonyms during the transcription process.

No participants were harmed during the interview process, which was an open-ended, question and answer discussion in a comfortable, safe setting. The students were informed of exactly what and why the study was taking place and how their responses could help benefit future students to persist through their undergraduate business programs. Further, they were made aware of their freedom to speak their mind, knowing that as volunteers, they had the power to stop at any time. The participants also knew that once the study was completed, they would be granted access to the results and analyses, and would be informed of the contribution(s) they had made to the study by viewing the tangible results.
Chapter 4 – Results and Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the qualitative study of social conditions that influence student motivation and persistence. The section begins with a description of the case, including a review of the purpose of the study, the research question, and the methodology. Findings from the document and artifact analysis follow, and then participant profiles and a detailed presentation of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the participant interviews is provided. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings.

Description of the Case - Purpose, Research Question, and Methodology

Student persistence at less selective undergraduate institutions is a significant problem of practice that warrants further investigation. While research has shown that ability to pay and academic preparedness strongly influence undergraduate students’ persistence decisions, they are not the sole factors in student withdrawal decisions at less selective schools (Braunstein, McGrath, & Pescatrice, 2000; Bennett, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Kaighobadi & Allen, 2008; Madgett & Belanger, 2008). Studies have shown that alternative factors, such as social conditions, play a major role in student motivation to persist throughout four-year undergraduate programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Wentzel, 1998; Rovai, 2003; Shelton, 2003; Tinto, 2006; Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009; Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). In an effort to better understand these alternative factors, this study focused on student descriptions of the social conditions that impact engagement, persistence, and degree completion within a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective institution. When an understanding of social factor influence is paired with more traditional factors such as academic preparedness and ability to pay, a more detailed and complete understanding of student persistence can be achieved, and more precise strategies for improving student persistence
established. This study aimed to fill the identified gaps in the literature and provide new knowledge on the research topic for the purpose of aiding undergraduate business programs to better develop their strategies for student persistence.

This study was guided by the following research question:

What social factors motivate students to persist throughout a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective school?

Descriptive case study analysis was the chosen methodology for this study, and as is typically present in qualitative case study research, multiple data sources were utilized to help provide a rich context of the phenomenon in question. Categorical aggregation and direct interpretation were utilized to analyze documents, artifacts, and participant interviews. The document and artifact analysis combined with the findings from in-depth participant interviews provide the reader with detail, context, and meaning.

**Document and Artifact Analysis**

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating both printed and electronic material, and is often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation (Bowen, 2009). Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be analyzed and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, and help provide a context within which the research participants operate. In this case study, the documents and artifacts helped to characterize how the host institution represents itself relative to engagement, motivation, and persistence, and aided the researcher in understanding the environment and culture within which the participants were immersed.

The college website, academic catalog, admissions materials, faculty training documents, and online student resources were carefully reviewed, helping the investigator to understand how
the host institution currently presented material related to engagement and persistence in both print and digital form. This data was then organized into major themes and categories.

**Connection between Document and Artifact Analysis and Major Themes**

The major themes that emerged from the document analysis were *Support Systems, Connected Learning, Efficacy Expectation, Academic Rigor, Competence* and *Engagement*.

The college website, admissions materials, faculty training documents, and online student resources all reiterated the institution’s position that students had a myriad of support systems available to them. The institution offered students career services opportunities, community relations information, contact information for tutors, a list of program-sponsored academic clubs, and access to many of the institution’s academic support centers, such as the Academic Achievement Center, the Academic Advising Center, and the Teaching and Learning Center.

The notion of student-centered learning, an intimate classroom environment, real-world learning, and applicable projects and course content embody the *Connected Learning* theme, which was prevalent on the college website, in admissions materials and in online student resources. The institution represented itself in these documents and artifacts as acknowledging and embracing the importance of connected learning in student motivation, engagement, and persistence.

The academic catalog and faculty training documents stressed both the efficacy expectations that the institution has for its students as well as the academic rigor that is involved in its undergraduate programs. The Honors program objectives and requirements, the Dean’s List requirements, details about program concentrations, the academic calendar, and early warning protocols for students in academic distress were some of the components that assisted the college in relaying academic expectations. The theme of student competence was also exhibited in the
academic catalog through narratives about the intellectual abilities, multidisciplinary thinking, and ethical reasoning skills that the students would refine through their respective curriculum.

The idea of student engagement was strongly portrayed on the college website and in admissions materials. Through a display of the calendar of on-campus events, the extensive list of athletic and intramural opportunities, details about campus size, class size, student to faculty ratio, and a narrative about student diversity on campus, the institution suggested through documents and artifacts that engagement was a major component of the student experience.

Table 1 displays how the emerging themes were deduced from document and artifact analysis.

Table 1.

*Documents and Artifacts Reviewed with Emerging Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document/Artifact</th>
<th>Relevant Content</th>
<th>Sample of Codes Used</th>
<th>Emerging Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Website</td>
<td>• Institutional Philosophy</td>
<td>• Student-centered learning</td>
<td>• Connected Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Community Relations information</td>
<td>• Connected Learning</td>
<td>• Support Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Career Services opportunities</td>
<td>• Integration</td>
<td>• Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Calendar of Events</td>
<td>• Desire to help students develop and grow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Small Business Institute</td>
<td>• Institutional Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Activities and Involvement</td>
<td>• Environment that fosters active learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Athletics information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recreation and Intramurals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Connected Learning Symposium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Student-centered learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Connected Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Catalog</td>
<td>• Honors Program objectives and requirements</td>
<td>• Intellectual skills</td>
<td>• Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Core Curriculum details</td>
<td>• Synthesis and application</td>
<td>• Academic Rigor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Service Learning information</td>
<td>• Student competence</td>
<td>• Efficacy Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Study Abroad Program details</td>
<td>• Multidisciplinary thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advising information</td>
<td>• Ethical reasoning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Program descriptions</td>
<td>• Connected Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Institutional Support options</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions Materials</td>
<td>• Fast figures and facts</td>
<td>• Intimate environment</td>
<td>• Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Close relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


College website. The college website displayed information about its core values and connected learning philosophy, illustrating the institution’s desire to support student success. In addition, the website listed numerous interactive opportunities available on campus for the students to become involved, such as intramurals, student societies, student government, and participation in the institution’s flagship event, the Connected Learning Symposium. As Table 1 demonstrates, the major themes that were extrapolated from this review were: connected learning, support systems, and engagement. These themes, and their relation to motivation and persistence will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

Academic catalog. The academic catalog is available in both print and digital form. In the catalog, one can find a detailed explanation of the core curriculum as well as a description of the objectives and requirements of numerous academic-related programs, such as the Honors program and the Study Abroad program. The catalog provided students with pertinent academic
information relative to their program. The major themes deduced from the catalog were: 

*competence, academic rigor, and efficacy expectations.*

**Admissions materials.** The researcher found that the admissions materials, such as pamphlets, leaflets, fact sheets, and direct mail collateral, focused mainly on the size of the campus, the classrooms, and the level of student-faculty interaction. The intimate classroom environment was repeatedly highlighted, as it was transparent that the notions of student engagement, faculty support, and campus integration are of high importance to the institution. Images of classroom engagement and hands-on learning were present in a majority of the materials to reiterate the institution’s focus on active learning. The major themes extracted from the admission materials were: *engagement, connected learning,* and *support systems.*

**Faculty training documents.** The training documents that were examined were taken from a New Faculty Orientation folder and strongly encouraged the faculty to push students to reach their own personal and academic potential. There was an emphasis on student efficacy, critical thinking, and academic success, with strict protocols to warn both students and their advisors of individuals who exhibit early signs of academic distress. The documents also provided faculty with tips on how to encourage active learning and engagement in the classroom. The emerging themes from the faculty training documents were: *efficacy expectations* and *support systems.*

**Online student resources.** Numerous online resources were made available to undergraduate students. Some specific resources included information about and support from the Academic Achievement Center, the Academic Advising Center, the Writing Center, the Center for Community-Based Learning, and the Cultural Center. These resources highlighted the level of institutional support that was available to the students. Most of this information was
conveniently accessible on both the school website and the student intranet website. The major themes extrapolated from these resources were: support systems and connected learning.

Following the review and analysis of the documents and artifacts, the researcher analyzed data from in-depth participant interviews, which Bowen (2009) describes as a best practice. Examining information collected through diverse methods allowed the researcher “to corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study” (p.28).

**Participant Interviews**

This researcher interviewed five male and four female third or fourth year undergraduate students enrolled in the business program at the less selective host institution. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The business program consists of seven majors, all of which were represented by the participant sample. Those majors included: Marketing, Management, Entrepreneurship, International Business, Event Management, Hospitality Management, and Resort and Casino Management. The participants were all Caucasian, and their ages ranged from 19 to 23. Seven of the nine participants were New England residents, while the other two students were from New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Six participants lived on campus, while three lived in off-campus housing.

**Participant Profiles and Responses**

To provide context to their descriptive experiences, participant profiles and several examples of their responses will follow. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant to protect their identities.
**James.** James identified as a 21-year-old Caucasian male from Rhode Island, who lived on campus and majored in Marketing. He was a fourth-year student in the business program. Out of the eight questions asked during the interview, James spent the majority of time discussing how his relationships with faculty and staff affected his desire to stay at the institution. James stated:

> Because the classes here are so small, there are lots of opportunities to connect with your professor. It’s not like at larger schools where you can’t build a relationship with anybody. The thing is- they really want to help you. They care about you. It’s more like a personal relationship.

In addition, James mentioned that he frequented the Academic Achievement Center because “the staff and the tutors are very helpful.” When asked about what aspects of the business program cause him to feel unmotivated to attend class, he explained that he dislikes classes where the course content is not relevant to his career. James stated:

> I catch myself on my phone the entire time if the teacher is just lecturing about topics that I don’t care about. I have a few classes like that. I’m just not learning anything, so I don’t really care.

James was a strong supporter of the institution’s connected learning philosophy, which will be further detailed later in the chapter.

**Thomas.** Thomas identified as a 22-year-old Caucasian male from Pennsylvania, who lived off campus and majored in Hospitality Management. Thomas explained that the three most important motivators that affected his persistence decisions were: his GPA and his confidence in his own abilities, his desire to graduate and “build up the resume,” and actual course content. Speaking about how course content from his major related to his internship, Thomas shared:
I found it really relevant. I feel that when you’re doing things at work that you already know about, it’s more of an engaging experience. While I was at work, I thought to myself how I was connecting the dots and applying what I learned in the classroom to my job. It felt really good.

As a fourth-year business student, Thomas was both excited and eager to graduate and have the opportunity to utilize his education in a real-world business setting. He discussed how faculty have helped him to grow and develop as a student who is now ready to succeed in the next phase of his life. Speaking about his relationships with faculty and staff, Thomas stated:

One of the big things I like about this school is that professors are very involved in you. Sometimes we joke about it and call this place a high school because of how involved everyone is in your life. At the same time though, I kind of love it. When teachers here see that you’re engaged, that’s when they step in and bring the best out of you. At the end of the day, I think it’s really beneficial for us.

In addition to faculty and staff, Thomas referred to his core group of friends as another “support system of sorts.” He stated that, “Oftentimes we work together and really push each other to get through this thing.” He cherished the connections he had made at the host institution, noting:

I wouldn’t be who I am today, or as confident as I am if it weren’t for the people I’ve met at this school. The connections I’ve made here will last me a lifetime, and I’m happy about that. There are some people here who I really hope are still part of my life down the road.

**Jennifer.** Jennifer identified as a 21-year-old Caucasian female from Massachusetts, who lived off campus and was a fourth-year Marketing student. When discussing her first-year
experience, Jennifer eluded to how her support group of friends affected her campus integration. She noted:

I met my friends at orientation, and we all rallied around each other and eventually moved off campus together. We lived together for four years after that. They keep me involved in school activities.

Speaking more about integration and program-sponsored extracurricular activities, Jennifer stated:

There aren’t many clubs available right now, but if you don’t get involved in something on campus, you’re bound to just hate the school and want to go home. I think it’s really important to be a part of something, mainly to keep busy.

She also mentioned how joining program-sponsored clubs “look good on the resume.” As a fourth-year student looking to graduate in the near future, Jennifer reiterated several times how she wanted her resume to look “stacked” and express the education, experience, and skills she had gained during her time in the business program.

**Katie.** Katie identified as a 20-year-old Caucasian female who majored in Management and minored in Mathematics. She was a third-year student from New Jersey who lived on campus. Katie’s primary motivator for staying in school was learning relevant and practical material that she could use in the future. She felt strongly about “doing what it takes” to enhance her career opportunities. Katie expressed:

Going to class, paying attention, and learning something new is important to me. I want to bring something to the table when I start my career. I want to have an advantage over other students like me. I think people who just go to college and don’t pay attention have no idea what they’re doing when they enter the real world.
Katie mentioned that she hated being absent from class because she felt that she would miss important and useful information. She also voiced her own efficacy expectations, stating: I want to prove my self-worth and prove that I can accomplish something major. I just want to prove to myself that I can get it done. When I skip class for whatever reason, I usually feel horrible for the rest of the day.

When speaking about her various support systems, Katie disclosed that her friends were a major reason that she decided to stay at the host institution after her first year. Similarly, when touching upon faculty support, she uttered:

My professors keep me motivated and interested in the courses that I am taking. They are always willing to lend a helping hand. One of my professor in particular actually got me to minor in math. She always motivated me and pushed me, and I am so glad she did that.

When asked about her participation in on-campus extracurricular activities, Katie mentioned how she was involved in two clubs as an underclassman, but they were both cancelled due to low enrollment. She has attended activity fairs to try to get more involved on campus, but nothing appealed to her interests. Katie expressed her hope that more business program-sponsored extracurricular activities would become available before she graduates. She noted: I like to make something of my time. I don’t want to just sit in my room and do nothing. I like to go out and be a part of something. So, hopefully there will be more opportunities to do that before I graduate.

Beth. Beth identified as a 21-year-old Caucasian female who majored in International Business. She was a fourth-year student from Massachusetts who lived on campus. Beth discussed how her family members were the primary influence on her persistence decision. She communicated that her parents continually “check up” on her and motivate her to achieve
academic success. While encouraged by them, Beth noted that she often missed her family and felt that being away from them for so long was “extremely tough.” She revealed:

Although I know I need to graduate, sometimes I just want to go home and see my family. I am very close to them. I miss them and it is really hard to be away from them sometimes.

When asked about what keeps her on campus, she discussed the friendships and connections that she has made with fellow students and faculty. She noted:

What I like about this school is you’re not just a number here. You have individual relationships with everybody. You’re an actual person with an identity. Honestly, it’s nice when people know your first name and are genuinely interested in your life. My sister doesn’t have that experience at her school.

Beth’s sense of community support and campus integration was present throughout the entire interview. One regret that Beth discussed was that she did not participate in many extracurricular activities, as they did not seem relevant to her field or personal interests.

**Liam.** Liam identified as a 23-year-old Caucasian male from Massachusetts, who lived off campus and majored in Entrepreneurship. He was a fourth-year business student looking forward to graduation. Like Beth, Liam’s primary motivator to persist throughout his undergraduate business program was his family. He mentioned that he was a first-generation college student and that he wanted to make his family proud. He stated:

My mom, my brother, my sister and my dad; without them, I don’t think I would be here today. Everything I do is for them. I feel like I am representing my family here.
In addition, Liam mentioned that his desire to prove to himself that he could accomplish a major task continually pushed him to continue his studies. Liam touched upon his connectedness to peers at the institution, noting:

Everyone here knows and respects one another. It’s small, clean, and organized. It is a great place to meet people. I love the small community because I have made so many lasting connections here.

His narrative about the connections he had made transitioned into his thoughts about the diversity on campus. Liam explained that he enjoyed the active and focused learning environment because the level of diversity “brings in more opinions and different points of view.” He noted that the on-campus community was “pretty diverse” and illustrated “a good image” for the institution.

**Jeff.** Jeff identified as a 20-year-old Caucasian male from Massachusetts, who was a third-year student, lived on campus and majored in Resort and Casino Management. Jeff was a student athlete who genuinely appeared to cherish the group of teammates and friends he had made over the course of his college career. Jeff believed these individuals were a crucial component that assisted in his integration into the campus environment. He explained that because he was on the basketball team, he was motivated to earn a certain GPA so he could continue playing on the team. He also mentioned how he and his teammates often visited the Academic Achievement Center for institutional support. When asked about what other factors prevented him from withdrawing from school, Jeff talked about his financial situation, revealing:

My parents pay for me to go here, so I had better do a good job in class and eventually graduate. It’s not a cheap school, and my parents keep reminding me about that. So, that is definitely a motivator.
When discussing his first-year experience, Jeff reiterated that his group of friends played a major role in his persistence decision. He stated:

I obviously wanted to stay here and play basketball, but I became close with a lot of kids in my dorm too. So, sports and friends definitely made my experience here a good one. Those are probably the main reasons I decided to stay.

Jeff also believed there was “a good mixture” of diversity on campus, which helps to add varying perspectives to the classroom environment.

**William.** William identified as a 20-year-old Caucasian male from Connecticut, who was a third-year student, lived on campus and majored in Marketing. Like Jeff, William was a student athlete, who discussed making close connections during his first-year at the institution. He stated:

My first year was the most fun because that is when I met all of my close friends. I would say that was the most important year here for me. Some people I lived with that year, I don’t live with anymore, but we still keep in touch and still hang out often.

William explained that a major influence to his persistence was the idea of graduating and then finding a job in his career of interest. He confidently stated:

I feel like I can go into a job interview after graduation and be perfectly fine. It’s only ten or twenty minutes of talking. I haven’t had many interviews yet, but I’m not worried about it. I know I’m ready.

William’s competence and self-efficacy were prevalent throughout the entire interview. He had no issue revealing that he did “not love the school,” but decided to persist because he just wanted to “graduate and move on to what is next.” William played one sport and was a member of three clubs. He enjoyed those experiences mainly because he met different friend groups.
Michelle. Michelle identified as a 19-year-old Caucasian female who majored in Event Management. She was a third-year student from New Hampshire who lived on campus. Michelle discussed how her large family played a major role in influencing her to persist throughout her business program. She stated:

I am the first one in my family to go to college, so they are all really supportive of that.

It’s a pretty big deal for them. My father is my biggest supporter. He pushes me the most, especially since he pays for everything.

Michelle also mentioned how it was difficult for her to be away from her family, as she is the only family member who does not live at home in New Hampshire. In addition to her family, Michelle referred to her professors and friends as other supporters that influenced her persistence decisions. She mentioned:

The connections that we have with our professors is great because they really care about us and want us to succeed. They genuinely want us to be educated and prepared for the real world.

Speaking about her group of friends, Michelle uttered:

My roommates are my best friends. We have all lived together for a few years now, so it would be really hard to leave them. They are all really supportive.

Michelle explained how coursework disconnected from her academic concentration often caused her to feel unmotivated in the classroom setting. She stated:

When I take classes that aren’t directly related to my major, I find them to be pointless and boring. They usually cause me stress and give me extra work that I don’t understand. It just seems like a waste of time. I want to learn information that I can actually use after college.
Michelle also mentioned how she felt guilty that her father had to pay for courses where
the content she was learning was not applicable to her major.

Michelle was an officer of one program-sponsored club and had a part-time admissions
job on campus. With this, she felt acclimated to the campus setting and integrated into the
community. Michelle explained:

I love what I do, and the people I work with are so awesome. I work in the office, give
tours, and answer phones. My days are really fun. I get paid, but I am constantly around
great people. It really is just a happy environment.

The positive attitude that Michelle brought to her extracurricular activities transitioned
into her self-confidence in her studies. She proclaimed, “I know that I am really smart, and I look
forward to graduating with a high GPA.”

**Emerging Themes from Participant Interviews**

The nine participant interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a
professional transcription service. The transcripts were electronically sent back to the researcher
so the data analysis phase could begin. The researcher employed MAXQDA software for an
initial analysis of the data, and then complemented the software with extensive manual coding
and analysis. During the data analysis phase, the nine interview transcripts were meticulously
examined, coded, and pattern-tracked, which yielded the extrapolation of 275 first cycle codes.

*Initial coding, in-vivo coding, and emotion coding* were employed during the first cycle coding
process. Through categorical aggregation and direct interpretation, the 275 initial codes were
reorganized, prioritized, and reconfigured into 24 second cycle patterns, from which three major
themes and ten subthemes emerged. The three major themes that emerged were *Support Systems*,
*Connected Learning*, and *Efficacy Expectations*. The remaining subthemes are listed below in
Table 2 under their respective parent themes. The second cycle pattern codes are outlined in Tables 3, 4, and 5, as well as in the subtheme narratives.

Table 2.

*Major Themes extrapolated from Participant Interviews and Sum of Codes Used*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th># of codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support Systems</strong></td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Relationships with Faculty and Staff</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Close Friendships and Connectedness to Peers</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- First-Year Experience</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Family Encouragement</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connected Learning</strong></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Relevant and Practical Learning</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Active and Focused Learning</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Program-Sponsored Academic Clubs</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Efficacy Expectations</strong></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Confidence in Abilities</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Desire to Graduate</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Desire to enhance Career Opportunities</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Support Systems**

The most prevalent theme that emerged from the data was *Support Systems*. This theme refers to the notion that the participants feel academically, mentally, and socially supported by “others.” Others can refer to family and friends, faculty and staff, or the institution itself. The data analysis showed that 125 out of the 275 extracted codes related to some form of support system that motivated the participants to persist within their undergraduate business program. As noted in Table 2, this major theme encompassed the following four subthemes: *Relationships*
with faculty and staff, close friendships and connectedness to peers, first-year experience, and family encouragement.

**Relationships with faculty and staff.** When analyzing the data, 47 initial codes fell under the subtheme, *relationships with faculty and staff*. Positive student relationships with faculty and staff, both formal and informal, play a major role in student persistence decisions. During second cycle pattern coding, 28 of the 47 codes related to either personal or professional relationships, while 19 inferred that there is an elevated level of institutional support spearheaded by faculty and staff members. Every interviewee mentioned how their relationships with faculty and staff had helped to foster their dedication to persist. Utterances such as “Professors push me” and “They are always willing to help” are examples of in-vivo codes that fell into the professional relationship pattern. “Professors care,” “I don’t want to disappoint my professors,” and “Faculty inspire students” are initial codes that relate to personal relationships with faculty. With this, Liam noted:

> The faculty have really affected me in a positive way. I feel a real connection with some of them. They’ve actually inspired me. They really care about the students and you can see it every day. They truly want to see us succeed.

Additionally, Thomas mentioned how interacting with faculty outside of the classroom in a casual and informal environment often helped “strengthen the connection” between student and faculty member, often resulting in deeper classroom learning.

In reference to institutional support, participants discussed the helpful and welcoming faculty and staff in the Academic Achievement Center and Academic Advising Center. These centers are institutional support programs aimed at encouraging learning, development, and persistence. Participants noted that the staff members “want to help” and “want us to succeed”
illustrating the institution’s desire to support its students. When referring to the Academic Achievement Center, James stated:

I go down there pretty often. I know when I go there I can always ask for help. It’s a great resource for all students. Most times when I go in there, they will know me by name and act happy to see me. So, that’s a good feeling. It kind of makes the whole “extra help” thing a lot less frustrating.

Close friendships and connectedness to peers. Developing and maintaining close friendships with others on campus, and feeling a connection to peers in the community revealed to be a significant finding in the study of student persistence. Codes that aligned with the subtheme, close friendships and connectedness to peers, appeared 29 times in the data, encompassing three second cycle patterns; support group, close friendships, and community of peers. During 14 out of the 29 references to this subtheme, participants associated their group of friends to a support group, noting that they “work together to push through” and that they “all want to see each other succeed.”

When discussing close friendships made at the school, Katie cited, “My friends are the reason I stayed here,” while Michelle noted that it would be “hard to leave my friends” when asked about withdrawing from the institution. The notion of a support system consisting of close friendships encouraged many of the interview participants to remain in their programs as long as they had, as William mentioned that he “probably wouldn’t still be here” if it were not for the friends he made in the business program.

Participants explained that in addition to their close friendships, the community of peers at the college helped to influence persistence. Liam cited:
It really feels like a sense of unity here; like everyone is on the same page. We all want to see each other grow and succeed. I mean, everyone knows each other, so that makes the community feeling easy.

Similarly, Beth noted that she enjoyed walking around campus because at the host institution, “everyone knows your first name,” which helped create a sense of solidarity on campus.

**First-year experience.** The reference to first-year experience here speaks to a student’s first year in college. Students reflected on their first year in college generally, and from that, 25 codes were extrapolated from the data. This directly inferred that the participants’ first-year experience had influenced their persistence decision, with the second cycle pattern code of social integration being cited 11 times. The Academic Theme Floor (ATF) was said to play a major role in a student’s campus integration and decision to stay. Additionally, several participants mentioned having “school pride” and “feeling at home” ever since they enrolled in the college as a freshman, exemplifying their campus integration. Meeting a “core friend group” was another pattern that garnered seven codes, while being impressed by faculty amassed four initial codes. Madison mentioned:

One of the things that stood out to me freshmen year was the faculty. I was really impressed by them. They seemed really qualified and always had positive energy. It made me feel like I made the right decision coming to this school.

Finally, there were three disaggregate codes that fell under the first-year experience subtheme; the thrill of a new experience, a new location, and the realization that “you get to be who you want.”
**Family encouragement.** The final subtheme under the *Support Systems* umbrella was family encouragement. Family encouragement refers to the support, pressure, and communication that participants felt or received from family members throughout their undergraduate program. When asked about motivators to persist, references to family encouragement yielded 24 first cycle codes. A majority of the participants who discussed their families stated that the support they received from home helped to keep them focused and dedicated to their studies. With this, family support was a second cycle pattern code cited 15 times. Participants mentioned wanting to make their parents proud, and noted that family members constantly checked in to offer words of encouragement.

The findings showed six references of the desire to leave school based on the notion that it was difficult to be away from loved ones. This data illustrated that while some students thrived academically from family support, others had a desire to leave school and return home to be with family members. Both Beth and Michelle touched upon this topic multiple times. Michelle cited:

> I do love it here, but I also love my home and my family. Sometimes it’s just tough being away. I call or text with them almost every day, but it’s not the same thing.

Lastly, a third pattern under this subtheme referenced the students’ sense of obligation to persist based on the financial support received from family members. Michelle noted that she would “feel bad dropping out” because her father paid the tuition.
Table 3.

*Second Cycle Patterns within the Support Systems Theme*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th># of codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with Faculty and Staff</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional Relationships</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Relationships</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional Relationships</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Close Friendships and Connectedness to Peers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support Groups</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Close Friendships</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community of Peers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-Year Experience</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Integration</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Met Core Friend Group</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impressed by Faculty</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Disaggregate codes)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Encouragement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to Leave</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial Support</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Connected Learning**

Connected Learning is a concept that refers to the process of infusing traditional teaching approaches with practical and active learning experiences. This learner-centered philosophy directs students to participate in activities that link course material to relevant real-world issues. When discussing factors that motivated students to persist throughout their undergraduate business programs, *relevant and practical learning, active and focused learning, and program-
sponsored academic clubs were mentioned continuously, thus designating the Connected Learning concept as the second major theme to emerge from the data, yielding 90 first cycle codes out of 275.

**Relevant and practical learning.** Relevant and practical course material helped students to feel as if they were learning for a purpose, as the coursework would likely assist them to build upon knowledge and skillsets needed for the future. The participants often referenced the idea of relevant and practical learning playing a major role in their desire to attend class, engage, and persist throughout their business programs. Challenging projects, internship opportunities, and the Study Abroad program were mentioned as both intellectually stimulating and applicable to their desired careers. 44 initial codes aligned with this subtheme, with two second cycle patterns aggregating from the data. Relevant coursework and practical learning earned 26 and 18 codes each respectively. Career relevance and real-world application highlighted the list of codes from the first pattern, while noteworthy in-vivo codes from the second pattern were “motivated by practical work” and “can use this knowledge in the future.” Katie explained:

I want to try to learn as much as possible and bring it all to the real world. When I take a course that I’m interested in, especially so far into my college education, I really try to soak in as much information as I can.

Further, when asked what factors cause the participants to be unmotivated to go to class, four of the students alluded to the notion that they disliked attending classes that were not relevant or engaging. “Boring classes” and “lecture-only” courses hinder the motivation of nearly half of the participant sample. Katie expressed her feelings on this topic:

If I don’t feel like I’m getting something from the class, I feel like I’m just wasting my time. Last year, I had a professor that just lectured, and the class did nothing else. I hated
going to that class. It was boring and I didn’t learn anything. I probably skipped that class a few times.

**Active and focused learning.** The reference to active and focused learning was dedicated to the level of student engagement and focus in the classroom setting. This subtheme yielded 32 first cycle codes, with a majority of the codes related to the intimate classroom environment and the level of diversity presented in the classroom. The intimate classroom environment garnered 21 of the 32 codes for this subtheme, with a strong mention of small classes, as it was cited 7 times. Students also noted that group projects and class activities helped “get everyone moving” and promoted an active and focused learning environment. Correspondingly, diversity was a pattern alluded to 11 times, with “various perspectives” cited as an initial code five times when this topic was discussed. Six participants expressed how diversity helped promote active engagement and involvement in the classroom. Beth mentioned:

> I’d say it’s pretty diverse. I’ve had a lot of conversations with people from diverse backgrounds. In class, you get to hear stories and opinions from people who come from other cultures, so that’s pretty cool. It’s nice to hear different perspectives.

Three participants, however, claimed that there was a lack of diversity, and had hoped for more. When discussing the level of diversity on campus, Julia proclaimed:

> I don’t think there is a ton. We have more girls than boys I know. My classes are 90% girls. But, it just seems like there is a lot of rich white kids here. I wish there were more diverse people because I like learning about that kind of stuff.

**Program-sponsored academic clubs.** Program-sponsored academic clubs refer to extracurricular program-related organizations or associations that typically receive funding from the host institution. Students had the opportunity to join these clubs to learn more about an
academic discipline and network with peers who shared similar interests. The lack of program-sponsored academic clubs available on campus was a common complaint shared by several participants. When discussing what would enhance their connected learning experience and add credibility to their business program, six participants mentioned the idea of adding new and improved program-sponsored academic clubs. This topic garnered 14 codes from the dataset. When discussing extracurricular activities, Jennifer specifically mentioned, “most clubs fail” or are cancelled due to low enrollment or turnout. Katie stated that the lack of program-sponsored clubs on campus was “disheartening.” The credibility of the business program was discussed four times, with William positing that there are “more opportunities to learn at other schools.” Several of the students believed that the addition of program-sponsored academic clubs would elevate the validity of the business program and further advocate for connected learning to take place.

Table 4.

Second Cycle Patterns within the Connected Learning Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th># of codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant and Practical Learning</td>
<td>Relevant Coursework</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practical Learning</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active and Focused Learning</td>
<td>Intimate Classroom Environment</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program-Sponsored Academic Clubs</td>
<td>Lack of Academic Clubs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program Credibility Questioned</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Efficacy Expectations

Efficacy expectations influence how people feel and think about oneself and one’s abilities to overcome certain obstacles or achieve potential accolades. The ability to accomplish difficult academic tasks can build confidence and provide an individual with a sense of self-satisfaction and self-worth. With this, Efficacy Expectations was the third major theme that emerged from the data, accumulating 60 first cycle codes, six second cycle patterns, and three subthemes. The participants’ narratives regarding their confidence in abilities, desire to graduate, and desire to enhance career opportunities highlighted their efficacy expectations and was said to influence their motivation to persist throughout their undergraduate business program.

Confidence in abilities. Confidence in one’s abilities and the belief that one can succeed can play a major role in an individual’s dedication and perseverance to completing an assigned task. Throughout the interviews, the participants referenced confidence in their abilities 32 times when discussing an intrinsic motivation to persist. Self-actualization and pride in one’s accomplishments were two patterns that emerged from the initial codes. Liam and Katie used the term, “self-worth,” while Michelle stated, “I am a leader” in the classroom setting. The notion of “I can do this” was prevalent with Beth, while Jennifer similarly cited that she wants to prove to herself that she “can get it done.” Michelle noted that she hated to miss class because she believed she was an “asset to the learning environment,” while Thomas posited that he can “do anything” because of his gained knowledge and abilities. These in-vivo codes demonstrated how the students trust their abilities and used that confidence as a driving force to persist throughout their undergraduate business program. Competence, capability, and intelligence were other codes embodied within this subtheme.
**Desire to graduate.** The desire to graduate refers to the ambition and dedication to fulfill all academic requirements of an undergraduate business program. This objective acted as a chief motivator for student persistence, as six of the nine participants directly mentioned graduation when discussing their decision to stay. Fourteen first cycle codes referenced the intention to graduate, with readiness to complete studies and desire to enter the real world as two emerging patterns. Several participants used the emotion codes “excited” and “eager.” Thomas divulged:

> It’s coming to the point where I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I am so close. I just need to persevere a little while longer. I know it will all be worth it.

Similarly, Jennifer expressed that she was “so close to the end.” The aspiration of graduating was said to help students maintain focus and composure throughout their studies, and was an accomplishment to which a majority of the participants looked forward. Participants expressed their enthusiasm to enter the real world upon degree completion and were confident that they would find a job soon after graduation.

**Desire to enhance career opportunities.** The participants referenced their desire to enhance career opportunities as a prevalent motivator to persist throughout their undergraduate business program. This subtheme referred to the idea that academic success and degree completion would help students advance in their careers after graduation. Building a resume and utilizing knowledge and experience were two patterns that aggregated from the data. Four participants alluded to the notion that graduating from college with a high GPA would help “build the resume,” thus enhancing their potential career opportunities. A fifth participant stated that he only joined various clubs on campus to make his resume “look more attractive.”

The ambition of getting a job after graduation and utilizing gained knowledge and experience were commonly communicated as influences to stay in the business program.
Thomas mentioned that he was eager to “bring something to the table” for his future employer. Similar to the emotions exuded when discussing their desire to graduate, several of the participants were enthusiastic and anxious to start their careers with the competence and knowledge procured from their education.

Table 5.

Second Cycle Patterns within the Efficacy Expectations Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th># of codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Abilities</td>
<td>Self-Actualization</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pride in Accomplishments</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Graduate</td>
<td>Readiness to Complete Studies</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to enter the real world</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to enhance Career Opportunities</td>
<td>Build a Resume</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utilize Knowledge and Experience</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of Document Analysis and Participant Interviews

After reviewing the emerging themes from the document analysis and the participant interviews, it became apparent that there was an overlap between how the institution represented itself in print and digital form and the student experience. Students reported through interviews and triangulation that support systems, connected learning and efficacy expectations played a major role in their motivation to persist. It appeared that the institutional commitment to these factors was present, as evidence from the document analysis supported the student interviews
and core findings. Thus, when the institution’s printed and digital materials provided affirmation of similar themes to the student experience, it was by design and intent.

An example of an overlapping pattern between the two data sources was the notion of support systems. While students alluded to support systems influencing their persistence decisions 125 times, the college website, admissions materials, and faculty training documents demonstrated the institution’s dedication to support its students. Likewise, as connected learning was repeatedly discussed during the participant interviews as an engagement and persistence motivator, the document and artifact analysis illustrated through codes and patterns that the institution’s online resources emphasized the learner-centered philosophy as paramount to its core mission. While participant interviews determined that efficacy expectations influence student persistence, the academic catalog detailed the institution’s dedication to academic rigor and student success. The findings suggested that the institution was committed to student persistence, as its printed and digital materials corresponded with themes that aligned with the student experience.

**Summary of Key Findings**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the social conditions that influenced undergraduate business students to persist throughout their programs at a non-selective institution. Through qualitative case study research, embodying document and artifact analyses and in-depth participant interviews, the researcher was able to identify various patterns, commonalities, and themes that linked social factors to motivation and persistence.

After analyzing the participant interviews, 275 initial codes, 24 second cycle patterns, and three major themes emerged from the data. These themes overlapped with emerging themes from the document and artifact analysis. Engagement, academic rigor, and competence surfaced
as additional themes from the document analysis, but each could be each appropriately re-categorized to align with Support Systems, Connected Learning, and Efficacy Expectations, respectively.

The first theme, Support Systems, reflected how influential the notion of “others” are to student motivation, engagement, and persistence, with faculty, staff, friend groups, peers, and family highlighting this concept. The student participants consistently reiterated their reliance on various support systems to remain motivated in their studies. Meanwhile, the institution represented itself through documents and artifacts as providing a myriad of support initiatives such as the Academic Achievement Center and the Academic Advising Center to satisfy such student needs.

The second theme, Connected Learning, referred to a student-centered learning approach in which critical thinking and understanding emerged through practical activities and active learning experiences. The study participants strongly referred to the notion of relevant and practical coursework as playing a major role in their decisions to attend class, engage in classroom discussions, and persist throughout their program. Meanwhile, the host institution exhibited its dedication to fostering this learner-centered philosophy by offering students numerous opportunities to complement their traditional classroom content with active learning experiences such as internships, service learning projects, and the Study Abroad program. Moreover, faculty and staff were strongly encouraged to implement “real-world” content into the classroom to proactively cultivate a practical and meaningful learning experience for the students. Additionally, as indicated on the college website, the institution hosted a bi-annual symposium focused solely on connected learning where students are afforded the opportunity to showcase their academic work as it applied to a real-life setting. The symposium allowed the
college community to gather in celebration of the collaborative accomplishments of students and faculty, helping to further establish the relevance of teaching and learning beyond the walls of the classroom.

The presence of connected learning was of high importance to the students, as it affected their engagement and persistence decisions. The pedagogical approach was also clearly paramount to the host institution, as the philosophy was repeatedly intimated in both print and digital formats.

The third theme, Efficacy Expectations, explored the measure of dedication and competence that was expected for students to achieve a specific level of success. The student participants conveyed their own feelings of self-worth and self-actualization in fact played a role in their persistence decisions. The students noted an intrinsic desire to achieve academic success motivated them to stay in the program. Furthermore, the determination to graduate and to enhance career opportunities, was said to help influence and foster class engagement.

Documents and artifacts helped to characterize the manner in which the institution represented itself relative to efficacy expectations. Faculty training materials, core curriculum objectives, Honors program details and requirements, and protocols and sanctions for academically distressed students, accented the expectations that the institution had for its students to reach their full human potential.

The emergence of these themes from the data analyses demonstrated that the manner in which the institution represented itself in relation to motivation and persistence aligned with the social conditions that motivated undergraduate business students to persist throughout their program. A discussion of the themes, an interpretation of the research findings, and implications for practice will be detailed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5 – Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an interpretation of the research findings. In order to frame this discussion, this chapter will begin with a review of the problem of practice and research question, and a brief explanation of the findings presented in Chapter 4. Following this overview will be a thorough discussion of the research findings as they relate to the literature review and the theoretical framework. Implications for practice will then be explored, as the researcher will provide insight into the problem of practice and propose suggestions for educational practice. This chapter will conclude with a section detailing the study limitations and implications for future research.

Review of the Problem

Student motivation to persist is a well-documented issue in education today (Ames, 1990; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005; Madgett & Belanger, 2008; Pintrich & Zusho, 2007; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1998), with research indicating that student persistence at less selective four-year undergraduate institutions remains a significant problem of practice that warrants further investigation (U. S. Department of Education [NCES], 2015). While social conditions can play a major factor in student persistence decisions, there is a lack of research on how these social factors influence student persistence in business programs at less-selective four-year institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, 1980; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Rovai, 2003; Shelton, 2003; Tinto, 2006; Wentzel, 1998). In an effort to fill this respective gap in the literature, this study focused on the social conditions that impact engagement, persistence, and degree completion within a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective institution.

The study was guided by the following research question:
What social factors motivate students to persist throughout a four-year undergraduate business program at a non-selective school?

Review of the Findings

Through qualitative case study research that embodied document and artifact analyses and in-depth participant interviews, the researcher was able to identify various commonalities and themes that linked social factors to student motivation and persistence. Specifically, three major themes, Support Systems, Connected Learning, and Efficacy Expectation, emerged from the data analysis.

The first theme, Support Systems, reflects how important personal and institutional support is to student motivation, engagement, and persistence, with faculty and staff interaction, friend groups and peers, and family encouragement highlighting this concept. The student participants consistently reiterated their reliance on various support systems to stay motivated in their studies. Likewise, the institution represented itself through documents and artifacts as providing a myriad of support initiatives to satisfy such student needs.

The second theme, Connected Learning, refers to a learner-centered philosophy in which education is embedded within meaningful practices and supportive relationships (Brown, Czerniewicz, & Noakes, 2016). This approach yields critical thinking through practical and active learning experiences. The participants strongly referred to the notion of relevant and practical coursework as playing a major role in their decisions to attend class, engage in classroom discussions, and persist throughout their program. Meanwhile, the host institution exhibited its dedication to fostering this learner-centered philosophy by offering students numerous opportunities to complement their traditional classroom content with active learning
experiences such as internships, service learning projects, the Study Abroad program, and its flagship event, the Connected Learning Symposium.

The third theme, *Efficacy Expectations*, explored the measure of dedication and competence that was expected for students to achieve a specific level of success. The student participants conveyed that their own feelings of self-worth and self-actualization in fact played a role in their persistence decisions. The students noted an intrinsic desire to achieve academic success and this motivated them to stay in the program. Further, the determination to graduate and to enhance career opportunities was said to help influence and foster class engagement. This theme also appeared in various institutional documents and artifacts.

A review of the findings suggested that the three emerging themes are of extreme importance to the study participants, as they related to motivation and persistence. Meanwhile, the host institution also acknowledged these themes, as each concept was present in numerous documents and artifacts, demonstrating how the college represented itself relative to student motivation and persistence.

**Interpretation of the Findings**

This section discusses the research findings using the literature review and the theoretical framework as a basis for interpretation. The current literature on the problem of practice helped provide meaning to the themes that emerged from the data, while the self-determination theory acted as a useful lens when linking the research findings to student motivation and persistence.

**Alignment with the Literature Review**

The three major themes that emerged from the research findings all related to specific content presented in the literature review chapter of this report. A prior review of these topics helped the researcher to extrapolate and interpret the emerging themes with a level of solace and
certitude. The notions of Support Systems, Connected Learning, and Efficacy Expectations, represented major elements of prior research on motivation and persistence.

**Support systems.** This major theme and its accompanying subthemes connected with prior literature on motivation and persistence. Arana et al. (2011) reported that student success was highly influenced by the universities’ support systems, and undergraduate students who persisted through their academic programs cited faculty and university support as a major source of assistance, while students with less social support showed lower persistence.

With regard to the subtheme, relationships with faculty and staff, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) advocated that faculty members were significantly involved in students’ reported personal growth, while Bennett (2003) explained that sound lecturer-student relationships contributed to student motivation, emphasizing the vital role of the lecturer in discouraging student withdrawal. These relationships helped to simultaneously build student confidence and enhance interpersonal skills. Outcomes of these relationships could include professional socialization, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and enhanced motivation for learning and persistence. In addition, Pascarella and Terenzini (1979, 1980) found informal interactions with faculty outside the classroom and perception of faculty concern for student development predicted freshman-year persistence in traditional undergraduate students. Similarly, Shelton (2003) found that the overall feeling that faculty cared and wanted the students to succeed helped to create an atmosphere more conducive to academic success and encouraged students to persist within their programs.

While Gloria and Robinson Kurpius (2001) posited that the role of faculty mentoring had the strongest relationship with the decision to continue, other research revealed the support from advising staff was noted to be one of the most important variables that influence undergraduate
students’ overall satisfaction in their respective programs (Kadar, 2001). Additionally, Shelton (2003) noted that having insufficient personal interaction with faculty and staff could result in a lack of campus integration.

The concept of integration refers to the level that students feel they transition or “fit” into their academic and social structures within the institution. This notion strongly aligned with the subtheme, *close friendships and connectedness to peers*. Tinto (1975) proposed that student persistence was related to the degree of integration students attained within an institution. DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak (2005) suggested that the social adjustment of students played an important factor in predicting persistence, as integration into the social environment was a crucial element in one’s commitment to an academic institution. Tinto (1987) further explained that the more central one’s membership was to the mainstream of institutional life, the more likely one was to persist. In addition, prior research has shown that involvement in social life and extracurricular activities were principal sources of influence on individual growth and persistence among undergraduate students (Terenzini, Theophilides, & Lorang, 1984). When discussing student motivation to persist throughout their undergraduate business program, social integration was a first cycle code deduced from the interview data 11 times.

A student’s level of campus integration could be largely influenced by their *first-year experience*, another subtheme that emerged from the research findings. Contributing to Upcraft and Gardner’s (1989) proclamation that the experience of the first-year student could play a deciding role in student persistence, Madgett and Belanger (2008) found that students who believed they had found the right program and environment during their first year were more likely to continue their studies at the respective school. Rovai (2003) also noted that involvement
in and attachment to the institution during an early stage of an academic career was essential to student success and persistence.

When discussing how their first-year experience positively influenced their motivation to persist, several interview participants specifically mentioned their Academic Theme Floor (ATF), an aspect of the institution’s living-learning program. The purpose of a living-learning program was to focus on and enhance the student experience outside of the classroom by encouraging campus integration and providing networking opportunities (Purdie & Rosser, 2011). An Academic Theme Floor at the host institution was a single floor or residence hall that was fully or partially dedicated to an educational theme or academic discipline. This program worked to group students with similar academic interests together to improve the quality of their interactions with one another while fostering a sense of comfort and support. Studies have shown that students who enroll in living-learning programs have reported easier transition to college, higher academic achievement, higher levels of civic engagement, and were more likely to be retained (Purdie & Rosser, 2011).

**Connected learning.** The concept of connected learning is an educational approach to learning that stresses how student learning and development are embedded within social relationships and cultural contexts (Brown, Czerniewicz, & Noakes, 2016). This philosophy essentially encourages students to understand course content as it relates to their personal lives and the world around them. This approach to learning was a repeated theme discussed in the participant interviews, and was represented by the institution in the document and artifact analysis. Previous literature on this topic helped to explain why this progressive learning philosophy was of such high importance to both the students and the institution (Doll, 1983; Lundeberg & Moch, 1995; Walter, 2009; Brown et al., 2016).
Knowles’ (1984) fifth tenet of andragogy covers the assumption that motivation is greatest when it is intrinsic and when the new knowledge is relevant to real-world situations (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2009). This coincided with the research findings, as the interview participants referenced relevant and practical learning 44 times, and active and focused learning 32 times when discussing motivation to persist. Connected learning infuses classroom ideas and concepts with direct experience, relevant projects, and real-world situations. With a connected learning approach, ideas are not something given, but they are created and developed by the students (Doll, 1983). The philosophy is centered upon the belief that students will work harder in their courses and have a better chance of academic success if they are engaged and interested in what they are learning. With this, many colleges and universities are changing the basic organization of the curriculum to achieve more student-to-student interaction among other positive outcomes such as academic achievement and improved retention (Barefoot, 2000).

The connected learning philosophy resembles aspects of progressive adult education, which is learner-centered and focuses on experience, progress, and learning by doing (Doll, 1983; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Walter, 2009). This philosophy is aimed at the notion that the student can learn and evolve through human experience and casual conversation. John Dewey (2001), a pioneer of progressive education, introduced thoughts about “new education,” which encouraged students to utilize the experiences and knowledge they have gained outside the classroom inside the school itself. Another progressivist, Johann Pestalozzi (1969), believed that a collaborative and engaging atmosphere would enhance student interpersonal skills and promote creative thinking. Both education scholars foreshadowed what would become known as connected learning, as they believed in intertwining textbook material with real-world experience.
Efficacy expectations. This research found that study participants referenced their efficacy expectations 60 times when discussing their motivation to persist through their undergraduate business program. This supported Bandura’s (1986) analysis that efficacy expectations are a major predictor of activity choice, willingness to expend effort, and persistence.

Self-efficacy is a critical determinant of the life choices people make and can determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist (Bandura, 1982; Pajares, 2006). Brookshire and Palocsay (2005) found that the strongest predictive variable in business student persistence is early grade point average, indicating that overall academic performance is highly dependent on a student’s abilities, confidence, and opportunities to succeed during the early stages of the college experience.

As self-efficacy is concerned with judgements of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations, those who have a high sense of efficacy visualize success scenarios that provide positive guides and supports for performance (Bandura, 1982, 1993). This concept was illustrated in the research findings, as participants noted their desire to graduate and to enhance career opportunities 28 times during the interviews. This demonstrates how persisting students used their beliefs in their own abilities as a driving force to achieve academic success. Bandura (1993) found that seeing oneself gain progressive mastery strengthens personal efficacy, fosters efficient thinking, and enhances performance attainments. Both the study participants and the institution represented efficacy expectations as a crucial component to academic success and persistence, which was why the concept appropriately emerged as a major theme from the data analysis.

Alignment with the Theoretical Framework
The study of motivational theory plays an important role in understanding why students behave the way they do in their respective undergraduate programs. The purpose of defining a framework is to provide theoretical insight and direction into the research of a specific topic of interest. This author chose to view the problem of practice and conduct his research utilizing the *Self-determination theory* as the guiding theoretical framework for this study.

**Self-determination theory.** Self-determination theory is an empirically validated theory for understanding educational motivation, and proposes that intrinsic motivation, or motivation derived purely from the satisfaction inherent in the activity itself, is more conducive to learning than extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This theory advocates that when three primary psychological needs, *relatedness, autonomy,* and *competence,* are satisfied, they foster intrinsic motivation (Guiffrida et al.). The research findings indicated that all three of these needs strongly encouraged motivation and persistence among business students at a less selective four-year undergraduate program.

**Relatedness.** The concept of relatedness, a factor of social condition, refers to the need to establish a close and secure relationship with other people (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). This psychological need exemplifies one of the major themes that emerged from the data analysis. *Support Systems,* the overarching theme that garnered 125 first cycle codes, chronicled the students’ intrinsic desires to pursue goals, both academic and social, that are valued by others (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). In particular, the subtheme, *relationships with faculty and staff,* which was alluded to 47 times during the interviews, truly symbolized how pertinent a role relatedness plays in student motivation to persist. Since extrinsically motivated behaviors are not inherently interesting and thus must be externally prompted, a primary reason people are likely to engage in the behavior is that they are valued by significant others to whom they feel
connected (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A student’s eagerness to achieve academic success in order to make family members proud illustrates the intrinsic need for relatedness. Additionally, a student’s desire to be socially integrated on campus, and maintain a sense of affiliation and belongingness, which the host institution acknowledged and attempted to foster through various institutional support programs and first-year experience initiatives, also represents the valuable notion of relatedness.

**Autonomy.** Autonomous motivation is willful, self-directed enthusiasm that occurs when individuals identify with an activity’s value and integrate it into their own sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). Thus, autonomy occurs when the students particularly enjoy the course or subject matter because the information and activities closely align with their interests and values. This notion directly correlates with connected learning, the second major theme extrapolated from the research findings. The connected learning philosophy directs students to engage and participate in activities that link course material to issues that are relevant in their personal lives and the world around them. Study participants referenced relevant and practical learning 44 times when discussing what factors motivated them to attend class, engage in class discussions, and persist throughout their business program. Students also mentioned that they were unmotivated to attend classes that did not align with their self-interests. The research findings demonstrate that autonomy can be linked to connected learning, as the students chose to learn for their own self-endorsed reasons, which was a practice positively associated with college persistence (Guiffrida et al.).

**Competence.** Competence motivation connects with an individual’s aspiration to achieve both personal and academic success. Competence incorporates the desire to challenge oneself and test one’s abilities, as the individual’s internal devotion to accomplishing difficult tasks and
overcoming certain obstacles can build confidence and enhance one’s level of self-efficacy. Therefore, this psychological need appropriately aligned with efficacy expectations, the third major theme developed from the data analysis. Efficacy expectations, which were referenced 60 times in the participant interviews, are beliefs about one’s ability to successfully perform a given behavior, and can provide an individual with a sense of self-satisfaction and self-worth (Shelton, 2003).

Many of the study participants vocalized how their own competence and intrinsic desire to achieve academic success motivated them to stay in the business program. The determination to graduate and enhance career opportunities was also said to help influence class attendance and engagement. This research complements prior studies that have shown that students who had positive perceptions of themselves and their abilities made fewer non-persistence decisions (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001). Conversely, people with greater self-efficacy persisted longer because they believed they were able to eventually succeed (Bandura, 1997).

**Implications for Practice**

The findings from this study advance the scholarly conversation on student motivation and persistence in undergraduate programs. The research findings provide valuable insights into the problem of practice, as social conditions have proven to play an influential role in student persistence at a less-selective undergraduate institution. Factors such as relationships with faculty and staff, institutional support, and family encouragement, as well as relevant and practical learning, confidence in one’s abilities, and the desire to graduate can affect persistence decisions. With this, support systems, connected learning, and efficacy expectations all carry merit as social motivators of student persistence. This data is meaningful to education scholars, industry practitioners, and executives at postsecondary institutions, as it offers further explanation to why
individuals behave the way they do in a social and academic setting. The research findings should provide educational leaders and decision-makers at four-year undergraduate institutions with updated knowledge that will help enhance their institutional strategies aimed at improving student persistence.

After interpreting the research findings using the literature review as a guide to understand the data and the theoretical framework as a lens from which to view it, this author has composed a set of specific suggestions for practice to help influence student motivation and persistence in an undergraduate business program. Each recommendation aligns with one or more of the emerging themes from the data analysis.

**Suggestions for Practice**

**Increase the number of program-sponsored academic clubs.** By increasing the number of on-campus, business-related extracurricular activities, students may enjoy a more fruitful connected learning experience, and may be less inclined to leave campus for family or employment-related reasons. Data from the participant interviews illustrated that six of the nine students were not currently satisfied with the number of program-sponsored academic clubs on campus, as the topic garnered 10 first cycle codes. However, the participants did mention that they would participate in new clubs if the opportunity were to arise. It appeared that students believed the number of program-sponsored clubs available was insufficient, and the lack of club availability was evidence of a deficiency in how the institution represented itself. This was further evidence of a weakened social condition.

Prior research shows that family involvement was a main cause that lead to student dropout decisions (Arana et al., 2011; Wyland et al., 2013), and students who spent a majority of their time off-campus, were less likely to persist through their academic programs (Astin, 1996).
With the case study findings indicating that some students yearn to leave campus for family-related reasons, but also complained about the lack of available business-related extracurricular activities, it is sensible for the institution to rectify both of these issues by increasing the number of on-campus program-sponsored academic clubs.

While connected learning knits together academically oriented, peer-supported, and interest-powered contexts (Brown et al., 2016), new program-sponsored-academic clubs would help complement and magnify an already fruitful business program. Tinto (1975, 1998) also professed that it was critical for the institution to keep its students integrated on campus, which these new academic clubs would support.

**Update the curriculum with relevant, applicable, and engaging courses.** This suggestion is grounded in the findings that demonstrate that connected learning strongly influences persistence decisions. Brown et al. (2016) explain that connected learning takes place when courses help to translate student interests across academic, civic, and career-relevant domains. The research findings demonstrated that relevant and practical course content was a major factor that influenced student persistence, while courses that were viewed as useless and boring hindered class attendance and engagement. Six out of the nine interview participants specifically cited relevant content as a driving force that motivated them to attend, engage, and persist. With this data, the institution should look to decipher which course offerings have consistently low enrollment, and ascertain whether those courses lack pertinent, updated course material. If so, it may be sensible for the institution to consider replacing the outdated courses with newer, relevant, applicable, and stimulating courses that closely aligned with student concentrations. This should enhance the student learning experience and improve the way that the institution represents itself relative to engagement and persistence.
Offer students an informal meet-and-greet series with faculty and staff. The interview participants exhibited a strong emphasis on student-faculty interaction when discussing influences to persist, while the institution also represented itself as an environment that fosters connectedness, support, and engagement. The relationships between the students and the faculty and staff have proven to influence engagement and persistence, as every single interview participant expressed how the interaction and support from faculty and staff inspired and encouraged them to achieve academic success. With this, it would be in the best interest of all stakeholders for the institution to consider offering students an informal luncheon series with various business faculty, potentially once a month, to foster positive working relationships and increase interaction. This suggestion would particularly benefit students who are more timid or apprehensive in the classroom setting, by allowing them an opportunity to engage with faculty and staff in a casual environment. This interactive setting would accentuate the institution’s desire to support its students while also satisfying the students’ relatedness needs. Failure to improve social conditions would demonstrate a deficiency in how the institution represents itself, which could ultimately result in the demotivation of student persistence.

Encourage faculty to attend student-centered extracurricular activities. This suggestion is grounded in the findings that demonstrate that support systems strongly influence persistence decisions. With the research findings highlighting the importance of the students’ relationships and informal interaction with faculty and staff, it is imperative for the institution to continue to nurture such relationships. Therefore, in collaboration with the Student Activities department and the Campus Activities Board (CAB), the business department chair should strongly encourage faculty to attend club meetings, intramurals, sporting events, and other on-campus activities each semester to increase faculty visibility on campus and further promote
student-faculty interaction. Aligning with the data collected from the document and artifact analysis, as well as from all nine of the participants’ intimations that the faculty actually care about the success and well-being of the students, this initiative of showing interest in student life outside of the classroom would help to further cultivate that notion and reiterate the concept of institutional support.

**Increase the number of school-sponsored social activities at the beginning of each year.** With the study findings illustrating that close friendships and connectedness to peers plays a major role in student persistence, it is vital for the institution to ensure that students are networking and exercising all of their social options on campus. By increasing the number of school-sponsored social activities at the beginning of each year, this would help to provide more opportunities for first-year and transfer students to connect with their peers and potentially build close and long-lasting friendships. Three interview participants specifically expressed that the beginning of their first-year experience was paramount to their persistence decisions, as that was when they met their close group of friends. The addition of social programs should also help facilitate campus integration, which Tinto (1975, 1987) notes is a predictor of student persistence. One could argue that good institutions are those that seek to improve how they represent themselves. The way the student participants expressed their experiences and relatedness needs suggests that improvement in how the institution represents itself relative to social engagement may help to increase motivation and persistence. Social engagement may be the gap between how the institution represents itself and how the students experience the phenomenon. Thus, the institution should seek to improve the social environment to ensure that it is one that effectively supports student needs.
Invite industry professionals to the classroom to assess student work. This recommendation is grounded from the findings that fall under the themes of Connected Learning and Efficacy Expectations. The suggestion is to have business instructors invite industry professionals into the classroom to observe mid-semester or final projects, and have the guests provide useful and constructive feedback allowing the students to gain an understanding of where their knowledge, research and presentation skills stand prior to entering the business world. This outside, real-world perspective should help raise the efficacy of accomplished students, and encourage those who are less proficient to pursue an elevated level of competence. Additionally, this would exemplify connected learning, as the students would literally learn how their coursework was applicable to a real-world business setting. This was exactly the sentiment that garnered 44 first cycle codes during the participant interviews. Inviting business professionals to class would likely help to increase class attendance and persistence.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to investigate what social conditions motivated students to persist throughout an undergraduate business program at a less selective school. Social conditions can be interpreted as the degree to which the environment affects student autonomy, competence, relatedness, and ultimately, decision-making. While a myriad of research has been conducted on student motivation to persist (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1998; Ames, 1990; Zimmerman et al., 1992; Lepper et al., 2005; Madgett & Belanger, 2008; Pintrich & Zusho, 2007) there is a lack of existing research that examines the social conditions that influence student persistence within a business program. This study answered the research question, as three major themes emerged from the data when linking social conditions to student persistence; support systems, connected learning, and efficacy expectations. These themes
exhibited the various social factors that students found to be important and influential to their persistence decisions. Further, this study demonstrated that the social factors were informed by institutional statements. In this case, the host institution was explicit about its commitment to students in regards to engagement and persistence. One could argue that good institutions state their perspective on student commitment and then ensure that faculty behavior is manifest. Institutions that fail to inform could be viewed as weaker than those that do.

Through the lens of the self-determination theory, and specifically focusing on relatedness, competence, and autonomy, and their connections to social conditions, this research demonstrates that intrinsic motivation is more beneficial to learning and persistence than extrinsic motivation, as the internal desires for relatedness and support, competence and self-efficacy, and relevant and practical learning, dominantly affect student persistence decisions.

**Study Limitations**

By design, this case study had limitations. To start, the participants interviewed for this study represent several limitations. In order to ensure trustworthiness and the protection of human subjects, the researcher attempted to minimize the internal threat of familiarity with the participants by ensuring that no participants of the study are currently or have previously enrolled in a course with the researcher. By eliminating all students who had a connection to the researcher, the pool of third and fourth-year business students who were eligible to participate in the study was drastically diminished. Additionally, because third and fourth-year business students were purposely chosen for this study, some transfer students who may have been in college for three or four years may only be considered “sophomores” or second-year students at the host institution, and thus were not asked to partake in the study. Finally, the study
participants represented a homogeneous sample, as all nine interviewees were Caucasian. This was not by intent or design, but may have resulted in the sample lacking a diverse perspective.

Data acquired from the document and artifact analyses could also represent limitations. Although documents can be a rich source of data, Bowen (2009) warns researchers to be cautious in their investigation, as documents should not be treated as necessarily precise, accurate, or complete recordings of events that have occurred. For example, while the college website listed various activities, clubs, and intramurals that existed on campus, this does not necessarily mean that the activities are still operational. Likewise, just as admissions materials displayed images of highly diverse classrooms, it does not imply that every class on campus is diverse. While faculty-training documents encouraged faculty to push students to achieve academic success, this does not signify that every faculty member cares about or pushes his or her students.

**Implications for Future Research**

While this study focused solely on social conditions and their relation to student persistence, future research can compare the influence of social factors with academic preparedness and ability to pay. This research may help determine how truly important social factors are when paired with other college persistence motivators. The findings may also provide readers with a more detailed and complete understanding of student persistence from which additional institutional strategies for improving persistence could be established.

The business program within the undergraduate institution was the bounded system used for this case study. This particular program was chosen because the researcher is an instructor in the business program at the host institution, and thus, was a primary stakeholder of the research findings. Future studies may utilize different programs or majors within the institution, a combination of several majors, or all of the majors at this or other institutions. Studies of this
magnitude may provide scholar-practitioners with valuable data that contributes to the persistence conversation.

The participants interviewed in this study were third and fourth-year business students who discussed what social factors motivated them to persist to where they are now, and ultimately, to graduation. A future study could investigate the social factors that motivate first and second-year students to determine if the same conditions that motivate upperclassmen also motivate underclassmen. Knowledge from this study has the potential to help education scholars discover if and when a motivational variance occurs. With this information, institutional executives could potentially implement strategies to nurture the motivational transition that students experience as they advance through their undergraduate program.
References


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Appendix A: Interview Questions for Participants

Preamble – Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. My goal is to understand what motivates college students to keep pushing toward graduation.

1. Tell me about a time when you were excited and motivated to be at the college and in the business program.

2. If you had to list the three most important things that motivate you while in school, what would they be? *Follow up question:* In contrast, what factors might cause you to feel unmotivated to go to class or to continue on with your degree?

3. You are a business major – are there any aspects of the business program itself that motivate you to continue your studies?

4. Have your relationships with faculty, staff, and other fellow students on campus affected your desire to stay enrolled in the institution? (*Relatedness* from theoretical framework)

5. During your time in the business program, have you accomplished any difficult academic tasks that have helped you to build confidence in your abilities? (*Competence* from theoretical framework)

6. Was there anything memorable about your first-year experience that played a role in your decision to stay at the institution? (*FYE* – and social conditions)

7. What if any, extracurricular sports, clubs, or school-sponsored activities or programs are you involved in? *Follow up question:* How do these activities make you feel about your enrollment in the institution? (*Integration and social conditions*)

8. How do you feel about the student diversity in your classes? *Follow up question:* Does diversity in the classroom affect your level of engagement in any way? (*Diversity and social factors*)
Appendix B: Recruitment Email

Subject Line: Opportunity to Participate in Research Study on Student Motivation

Dear Student,

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about student motivation. This study is being conducted by Dr. James Griffin (advisor) and Matthew Reilly (Doctor of Education candidate) for Northeastern University in Boston. This study will be conducted at Lasell College and will require 7-12 students to take part in one (1) hour-long face-to-face interview.

You have received this email because you meet the general eligibility criteria which necessitates being a third or fourth-year student enrolled in the Business program at the host institution.

The purpose of this research is to understand the social conditions that impact student engagement, persistence, and degree completion in four-year undergraduate business programs at non-selective schools.

All research participants will receive a $10 gift card to Dunkin Donuts.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please reply to this email stating your interest and provide appropriate contact information. Please understand that agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not enroll or obligate you to participate in any study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and should you choose to participate in the study, you may opt out at any time. Additionally, your participation or lack of participation in this study will not affect your status as a student at the host institution in any way, and any feedback or data gathered from your participation in the study will remain confidential and anonymous.

For further information about this research study, please contact Matthew Reilly at Reilly.ma@husky.neu.edu or Dr. James Griffin at jam.griffin@northeastern.edu.

Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Matthew Reilly
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Northeastern University, Education Department
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. James Griffin, Matthew Reilly
Title of Project: Understanding Social Conditions that Motivate Students to persist throughout Undergraduate Business Programs at Non-selective schools

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

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to participate in this study because you are a third or fourth-year student enrolled in the Business program at the host institution, and you have not had Professor Matthew Reilly as an instructor in your academic career.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand the social conditions that impact student engagement, persistence, and degree completion in four-year undergraduate business programs at non-selective schools. Data from this proposed study should provide educational leaders with sufficient knowledge that will help to update and enhance their institutional strategies aimed at improving student persistence.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to attend one (1) one-hour interview session where you will be asked a series of questions about student motivation and what drives you to persist throughout your undergraduate business program.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed in a small, quiet conference room in the Lasell College library, although you may choose an alternative location if that would make you feel more comfortable. The interview will take about one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts that you will experience during the research study. If for any reason, you feel anxiety or discomfort during the interview process, you may simply terminate the interview with absolutely no repercussions.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study will benefit the academic community and should provide educational leaders at this institution and others with sufficient knowledge that will help to update and enhance their institutional strategies aimed at improving student persistence.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. That means no one will know that the answers you give are from you. All information you provide will remain confidential. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

- The identity of each participant will be protected through the use of pseudonyms known only to the researcher.
- Data will be collected and maintained on a single laptop password protected by the researcher.
- Data will be stored and managed using Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), which provides unlimited bins into which data can be collected and then organized.
- High-quality audio tapes will be used during the interview process, and will be electronically stored in a password-protected database only accessible to the researcher.
- All digital recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Note: In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

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

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Matthew Reilly at Reilly.ma@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. James Giffin at jam.griffin@northeastern.edu.
Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be given a $10 gift certificate to Dunkin Donuts as soon as you complete the one-hour interview.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
The only cost you may incur would be your own travel costs to commute to the interview.

I agree to take part in this research.

----------------------------------------------------------
Signature of person agreeing to take part in research

----------------------------------------------------------
Printed name of person above

----------------------------------------------------------
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

----------------------------------------------------------
Printed name of person above
Appendix D: IRB Approval from Northeastern University

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: August 22, 2016  IRB #: CPS16-07-04
Principal Investigator(s): James Griffin
Matthew Reilly
Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University
Title of Project: Understanding Social Conditional that Motivate Students
to Persist throughout Undergraduate Business Programs at
Non-selective Schools
Participating Sites: Lasell College
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: AUGUST 21, 2017

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

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

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630