THE CONSEQUENCES OF STUDENT RETENTION STRATEGIES:
A CASE STUDY AT METROPOLITAN COLLEGE

by

Sean M. Sullivan

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Higher Education Administration

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
December 2017
Abstract

College and university retention research indicates that institutional financial concerns, student behaviors, and organizational ethics all play a role in how educational officials make retention-based strategy decisions. However, gaps in the literature exist involving the interconnection between the acknowledgement of an enrollment issue, the corresponding creation of retention strategies, and the resulting comprehensive campus environment post-strategy implementation. This research study explored the impact of institutional retention strategies at one particular Mid-Atlantic college during a period of enrollment instability from 2010 through 2014. Specifically, this study reviewed the unintended consequences that developed as a result of the broad retention tactics used during this five-year period. Further, this research study investigated whether or not institutional values and/or operational interests were truly accounted for when designing and implementing these retention strategies. The researcher noted that these retention strategies contributed to secondary issues, which, in turn, may have undermined the institution’s original retention objectives. By investigating the comprehensive impact of institutional retention strategy implementation, this study produced information that can be used at other colleges and universities when contemplating retention initiatives and best practices.

Keywords: higher education, retention, persistence, attrition, enrollment management, student consumerism, and economic crisis
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, Dr. Neil V. Sullivan.

Little did you know, that by encouraging a young boy more than thirty years ago to one day pursue a doctoral degree, you lit a spark of inspiration that has rumbled inside of me for decades. Your career as an educator was largely defined by integrating schools across the country. We have been so extremely proud of you. However, what has stayed with me long after your passing was your sincere commitment to the betterment of others; whether that be your grandson or the disenfranchised and disregarded. Throughout this seven-year doctoral pursuit, I have often thought of you and the values you represented. It is my hope now, that armed with the degree and experiences we talked about so many years ago, I too can aid others who may be in need. You continue to inspire me, and the many lives you touched continue to benefit from your thoughtfulness and courage. We all thank you for that gift.

With love and admiration,

Sean
Acknowledgements

There have been many people throughout this doctoral journey that contributed to its successful conclusion. I must thank my professional colleagues from California, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and now Washington, D.C., for their support of what seemed years ago to be a far-fetched idea. By offering your reassurance that I would finish this degree, you helped validate my decision to pursue such an objective and gave me much-needed strength. Thank you.

This final stage of the program is undoubtedly its most difficult. It can often be a very lonely, if not solitary experience – just you and your research. However, Dr. Bryan Patterson, my thesis adviser, knew how to settle me down time and again when I was unsure of how to proceed. Thank you for your confidence in my research. To the other fantastic members of my committee – Dr. Jan Arminio and Dr. Al McCready – many thanks for helping to shape my research and for encouraging me to go deeper, in order to make my final product sharper.

I am grateful for the support I have received and felt from my parents, Michael and Christine. I may have wobbled from time to time, but you both always expressed nothing but extreme confidence in me. That made a difference. Thank you. And to my mother, Susan, one of these days, we’ll get to talk about all that I have learned and what perhaps remains to be uncovered. Do know that you’ve been with me every step of the way. I miss you.

Lastly, all of this comes back to the support I have received from my wife, Jennifer. Your constant encouragement and reservoir of patience were crucial to my ability to ultimately earn this degree. I cannot thank you enough for sticking with me. You have made a life-long goal of mine possible. And to Ryan and Olivia, two little gifts welcomed along the way, thank you for keeping your voices down and for sticking with Mommy on those many days Daddy “had to do work.” As luck would have it, Daddy can now come out and play with you.
## Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 2

Dedication ............................................................................................................................. 3

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................. 4

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................ 5

List of Tables ....................................................................................................................... 8

List of Figures ...................................................................................................................... 9

Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 10

  Statement of the Problem .................................................................................................. 10

  Significance of the Research Problem .............................................................................. 11

  Positionality Statement .................................................................................................... 12

  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 16

  Concepts of Chosen Theoretical Framework .................................................................. 17

  Definition of Key Terms ................................................................................................... 20

  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................ 21

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................. 23

  Organization of Literature Review ................................................................................... 23

  Background ....................................................................................................................... 24

  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................... 27

  Student Attrition ............................................................................................................. 33

  Today’s College Students and How They are Viewed .................................................... 45

  Retention Practices ......................................................................................................... 50

  Literature Review Summary ........................................................................................... 66

  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................ 68
Chapter 3: Research Design

Primary Research Question and Subordinate Questions ............................................. 69
Methodology.............................................................................................................. 70
Research Design Overview....................................................................................... 72
Data Collection........................................................................................................ 80
Data Management.................................................................................................... 84
Trustworthiness........................................................................................................ 87
Threats to Integrity of the Research........................................................................ 88
Limitations................................................................................................................ 90
Chapter Summary.................................................................................................... 92

Chapter 4: Results .................................................................................................... 93
Participant Vignettes............................................................................................... 93
Preliminary Analysis Findings.................................................................................. 94
Research Question Response................................................................................... 114
Key Findings............................................................................................................. 120
Chapter Summary.................................................................................................... 121

Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions and Implications...................................... 123
Introduction.............................................................................................................. 123
Interpretation of Findings, Conclusions and Implications.................................... 126
Implications for Practice........................................................................................ 137
Recommendations for Future Research............................................................... 141
Limitations of Study .............................................................................................. 144
Upon Reflection..................................................................................................... 148
Chapter Summary.................................................................................................... 151
References ................................................................................................................................. 154
Appendix A: Institutional Review Board approval from Northeastern University .............. 183
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Email ........................................................................... 184
Appendix C: Unsigned Consent Form ..................................................................................... 186
Appendix D: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement .............................................................. 189
Appendix E: Complete Interview Protocol ............................................................................. 190
List of Tables

Table 1 Themes and Associated Subthemes................................................................. 95
Table 2 Financial Factor Quotes Related to Retention Problems................................. 100
Table 3 Retention Policy Impacts Subthemes and Contributing Participants .................. 101
Table 4 Participant Quotes Associated with Student Impacts ........................................ 103
Table 5 Participant Quotes Related to Retention Strategy Outcomes ............................ 109
Table 6 Retention Strategy Formulation Subthemes and Associated Quotes .................... 110
List of Figures

Figure 1. The Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality ........................................ 33
Figure 2. Example of Study-Specific Interview Protocol ............................................................. 82
Figure 3. A Basic Working Layout Screen of ATLAS.ti Coding Software ................................. 85
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

For several decades, the prospect of unstable college enrollment numbers and increased competition for college-bound students has created tremendous pressure on institutional officials to retain the students they recruit (Ahuna, Tinnesz, & VanZile-Tamsen, 2011; Carnegie Council on Policy Studies, 1980; Crisp et al., 2009). Declining enrollment caused by student attrition one of the most significantly negative financial concerns an institution can face (Penn, 1999), and rising drop-out rates also affect a school’s ranking and reputation (Delen, 2011). In addition, institutional faculty and staff have an implied moral obligation to help students succeed once they have been admitted for enrollment (Hunter, 2006). As a result, these occurrences have made institutions “view retention of students as the only reasonable course of action to ensure their survival” (Tinto, 1993, p. 2). Due to this anxiety filled environment, college and university officials are often at risk for making “hasty” enrollment related reactions rather than seeking to recognize the underlying factors that influence student retention decisions (Hossler, 2005; Longden, 2006). Colleges and universities invest in a multitude of uncoordinated retention initiatives without evidence that supports whether the actions will produce the intended outcomes (Tinto, 2012). Achieving high rates of student participation has produced unforeseen consequences (Longden, 2006).

While current literature includes copious amounts of information pertaining to both student attrition and degree completion, the researcher found little empirical evidence detailing unanticipated strategy results, and found little documentation of the ramifications of student attrition and degree completion. Despite all the retention-related research that has been complied, Tinto (2005a) posits that little attention has been paid to “the development of a model
of student persistence that would provide guidelines for institutions for creating policies, practices, and programs to enhance student success” (p. ix). By examining the possible connections between strategy outcomes (both anticipated outcomes as well as outcomes that were unforeseen) and original retention tactics, administrators will be provided with a greater ability to create effective and comprehensive retention strategies without jeopardizing institutional objectives or compromising the best interests of their students.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Despite year-to-year retention rates and degree-completion rates serving as markers of college student success, other markers of success are a challenge to obtain without student retention (Braxton et al., 2014). These other measures of student success often relate to the expectation of college attendance held by parents, public officials, and colleges and universities (Braxton, et al., 2014). According to Braxton (2008), additional markers of college student success include concepts such as “academic attainment through student learning, acquisition of general education, development of academic competence, development of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions, occupational attainment, preparation for adulthood and citizenship, personal accomplishments, and personal development” (p. 181). Acknowledging the difficulty in attaining these markers of student success, student departure negatively impacts the stability of college and university enrollments, corresponding institutional budgets, and the public’s perception of institutional quality (Braxton, Hirschy, & McLendon, 2004).

While efforts to improve retention can help colleges appear noble, Veenstra (2009) considered such an objective a social responsibility because student attrition undermines individual, institutional and societal well-being. As Barnett (2011) posited, when dropout rates rise, a future collection of skilled, educated, and professionally competent young people is
depleted, reducing the combined capabilities not only of local communities, but of society as a whole. The work force is altered, industries are impacted and the citizenry make up is distorted. However, while institutions of higher education supply this critical service to the general public (and, by extension, to individual students), they are also asked to balance the demands of fulfilling this responsibility with the costs (both financial and otherwise) associated with providing this service. This challenging dynamic involves institutional priorities, societal needs, individual student aspirations and capabilities, and the fiscal landscape and traditional systemic structures. All of these elements represent the growing complexity of the environmental context for retention (Kalsbeek, 2013). Therefore, though there is research as to how comprehensive retention strategy has supported increased student persistence (Keller, 1989; Lang & Ford, 1988; Land & Ford, 1990; Lockie & Burke, 1999), a broad understanding of possible retention strategy implications is needed to reduce the attrition-associated costs to the individual, institution, and society (DesJardines, Ahlburg, & McCall, 1999).

**Positionality Statement**

The researcher has witnessed and participated in retention-related decisions in which the effectiveness in relation to the objectives was questionable. However, the success of these retention strategies and their effects were not reviewed through the lens of enrollment stability alone. Decisions based on the interest of increased student retention also impacted the campus community beyond sheer class size and student persistence rates. From 2004 to 2011, the researcher worked at this study’s research site (referred to throughout the study by the pseudonym Metropolitan College), and served on that institution’s judicial review board. In that capacity, the researcher joined other review board members in listening to cases related to the breaking of the college’s code of conduct. While the judicial review board could choose from a
wide variety of possible sanctions for those students found responsible for the allegation, two potential outcomes for more serious infractions were temporary suspension or indefinite expulsion.

For years, this institution’s student body numbers were stable, and judicial related decisions generally had little impact on enrollment, with enrollment numbers increasing in limited degrees from 2004 to 2007 (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013). In the events of students leaving the institution due to judicial sanction, any slight dips in student enrollment and any resulting decrease in net tuition revenue was of seemingly little operational consequence. As a result, the judicial review board, with the philosophical support of the senior administration, was free to establish high expectations for student behavior and to impose stern consequences for those who broke campus policies and/or state law. However, within four years of my tenure on the board, student enrollment at the college began to noticeably decline (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013). To counter the decline, a series of influential changes were made throughout the college by 2010, including the establishment of an institutional retention committee, the hiring of a senior level enrollment management specialist in 2008, the alteration of the college’s academic focus, and the revamping of many institutional policies to ensure that a more student-centric philosophy was strongly promoted.

Declining enrollment also initiated a review of disciplinary philosophy. Suddenly, and with administrative encouragement, transgressions that once carried severe penalties now often resulted in lesser sanctions; with students being given multiple chances to correct their behavior while remaining enrolled. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), retention rates for first-time, degree-seeking students at all four-year institutions slightly improved throughout the period of 2010 through 2014, with retention rates measuring 78.5% in
2010, and climbing to 80.5% in 2014. Metropolitan College was no exception – by 2011, the college’s enrollment levels slowly returned to stability (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013), perhaps due in part to this shift in judicial philosophy. In addition, it appeared as though the tenor of the institution had changed – moving from one in which behavioral standards were defined by the need to preserve a harmonious community, to one where students were permitted to remain at the school despite repeated violations of the community’s desired norms. Metropolitan College had successfully staved off enrollment decline, but at what cost?

What appeared to be unclear at the time was whether or not the school’s senior administration anticipated the broad impact of this changing disciplinary philosophy. From the researcher’s perspective, understanding the comprehensive impact of such policy change would be difficult to predict when designing new strategies. However, once new policies are devised, the staff members charged with implementing these changes (such as members of the judicial review board) would most likely be the first to recognize the impact of these altered regulations and procedures. The widespread understanding of the effect of these changes would most likely take considerable time to develop; for, as in the case of judicial policy alterations, these changes involved a relatively small number of students each school year. This replacing of punitive judicial decisions with more lenient educational sanctions may have been felt more immediately within the offices of the Dean of Student Affairs, Campus Safety and Residence Life, as these officials are responsible for immediately tending to the consequences stemming from the social decision making of students. However, the effect of such policy changes on the student body, as a whole, would most likely require many semesters to fully take shape and become perceptible within the campus climate. As such, though school officials responsible for creating new judicial policy may be members of one of the aforementioned offices (or receive status reports from
those within those departments), the consequences of such policy adjustments may not become fully known to senior institutional administrators for a year or more.

The research, in reflecting on his own professional experiences at Metropolitan College, is not convinced that the decisions to allow certain serious transgressors to remain in school ultimately supported healthy student growth, let alone protected the well-being of the institution. In retrospect, the researcher assumes that members of the school’s senior administration either were comfortable with the potential shift in campus alchemy caused by promoting increased tolerance, or did not anticipate that by attempting to support enrollment stabilization through alterations in judicial policy, the tenor of the student body may potentially change. Regardless, these experiences as a member of the institution’s judicial review board prompted the researcher to think much more deeply about the implications of student retention strategies.

The researcher admits to having accumulated a considerable amount of professional experience at Metropolitan College that may have shaped this study and possibly created certain biases. However, while quantitative data on institutional retention rates during this period is now available (whereas the issue was in its infancy while the researcher was on campus), most of the specific, retention based strategies that were reviewed in this study were designed and implemented following the researcher’s departure from the institution in January 2011. The researcher was a member of the school’s staff during a period of enrollment decline, but had left the institution by time the institution launched the retention initiatives explored in this study, in an effort to stabilize the student body. In addition, the researcher has had little contact with Metropolitan College officials since his departure, having moved hundreds of miles away and been employed at two other universities that have their own brand of retention issues and practices. As such, while my contextual understanding of Metropolitan College’s enrollment
instability is based largely on retrospective assumption, my intimate and experiential knowledge of the institution’s retention efforts (and their comprehensive impact) is severely limited.

In looking back at my own professional experiences (both at the research site and at other colleges and universities since that time), the researcher is uncertain as to the degree in which enrollment stabilization efforts impact campus operations and institutional decision-making. When faced with falling enrollments, how do college officials respond? How do the efforts to stamp out student attrition affect the entire campus community? And what determines the prioritization of certain enrollment objectives over others? This study explored this particular scenario – a scenario seemingly faced with greater frequency throughout American higher education every year.

Research Questions

The primary research question driving this study is: How do the effects of enrollment instability and the resultant student retention decisions impact institutional operations? The study also addresses the six subordinate questions outlined below.

1. How did institutional administrators formulate student retention strategies?
2. What were the strategies that institutional administrators used to address student retention?
3. What were the intended goals of such actions, and what results did administrators expect these retention driven practices to have prior to implementation?
4. Is there an optimal rate of annual student attrition? If so, what is it and how was it established?
5. What were the operational implications and decision-making implications of the retention strategies?
6. Do retention policies influence student welfare and programming? If so, how did they influence student attitudes toward their college or university, and how did they influence the students’ overall educational experience?

Concepts of Chosen Theoretical Framework

The seminal authors who have studied retention have focused on the factors that researchers believe influence student attrition and persistence (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987). However, as Woodard, Mallory and De Luca (2001) posited, the models put forth by these higher education scholars have tended to be linear in nature and focused predominantly on the student. In addition, according to Hossler (2005), there have been few empirical studies focused on the success of student retention programs, and little has been written about how institutions of higher learning structure and manage their retention initiatives. As a result, there is a gap in the research related to institutional focus, or a gap in defining institutional retention-based decisions on an operational level. Furthermore, how these decisions interplay with the students’ perception of institutional services and efforts can create other secondary implications. Therefore, this research study used the primary research lens of a theoretical framework – specifically the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).

The Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996) is a theoretical model that portrays the behavioral consequences of service quality as prevailing variables between service quality and the financial gains or losses from retention or defection. When service quality evaluations are low, the customer's behavioral intentions and attitudes are unflattering and the relationship between the customer and the organization being judged is more likely to be weakened or cease altogether. In the context of higher education, educational service
quality is a critical aspect of perceived quality and is likely to influence students’ affective responses (Mansori, Vaz, & Ismail, 2014), as well as their behavioral intentions (Berthon, Ewing, & Napoli, 2008; British Columbia College and Institute Student Outcomes Survey, 2003; Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996). In addition, students who more favorably perceive the value of an education program are more likely to experience higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Webb & Jagun, 1997).

According to Singh (1998), dissatisfaction related to a product or experience frequently produces consumer complaining behavior in an organization or company. In addition, according to Helgesen and Nesset (2007), service quality serves as an “intrinsic cue” in a student’s formation of a sense of satisfaction, which in turn, informs student loyalty (p. 51). In the context of a health maintenance organization, Solnick and Hemenway (1992) observed that complaining customers were four and one-half times more likely to leave the health plan voluntarily than were non-complaining customers. As such, behavioral attitudes can often be viewed as indicators of whether customers will remain loyal to an organization or choose to defect from it (Liang & Wang, 2007).

According to Guzmán (2015), practices that examine customer experience and satisfaction outcomes are essential to limiting healthcare customers’ relocation to competing organizations or brands. While Bloemer, de Ruyter, and Wetzels (1998) found little established research on the relationship between service quality and the loyalty of customers, Zeithaml et al. (1996) posited that recent research provides evidence that perceptions of service quality affect intentions to behave in ways that signify bonds with an organization (such as praising the firm, expressing preference for the company over others, or agreeing to pay a price premium). Cronin
and Taylor (1992) found a positive correlation between customer satisfaction and service quality. And similarly, Anderson and Sullivan (1990), in studying consumer approval, discovered that loyalty to a brand or organization is strongly related to satisfaction with the company or with product categories. In addition, Woodside, Frey, and Daly (1989) discovered a significant connection between overall patient satisfaction with a hospital and the patient’s intent to choose the hospital again in the future.

Viewed within an educational context, this research would indicate that when a student’s perception of institutional service quality is low, the likelihood of that student remaining enrolled at the particular school is weakened. Braxton, et al. (2014) connected this theory to the academic setting by stating that a student’s perception of an institution’s commitment to their welfare can positively or negatively influence their educational experiences. In addition, Tinto (2012) further connected the concept of student opinion of institutional quality to retention by theorizing that the perception of educational value may be a factor in whether students persist in their attendance at an institution.

This specific framework was chosen because it incorporates the variables as well as a specific and critical point of view within this specific topic of research – the cognitive formulation process of student perception, and the choice students make about whether or not remain invested in the organization or brand. Reviewing this process in the higher education environment can paint a clearer picture of the secondary ramifications that may result from broad institutional retention strategy. In addition, this framework was chosen as one that naturally supports qualitative research efforts.

This study was constructed primarily from the recollections of Metropolitan College officials and their lived experiences during a period of combating declining institutional
enrollment. This research study is largely defined by the qualitative insights yielded by asking a small group of the school’s leaders and administrators to reflect upon their past, retention-related decisions and gauge how these choices may have influenced the campus community as a whole. Zeithaml et al.’s (1996) Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality provided the context for this study’s effort to gauge both what influences the creation of retention strategy and also the broad impact of the enrollment-based initiatives. The Zeithaml et al. (1996) study was applicable in this situation because of its acknowledgment that the observations of institutional leaders on students’ perceptions of organizational service quality has an impact on operational stability. In another nonprofit context – the American theater sector – Garbarino and Johnson (1999) used this theoretical lens to investigate the importance of measuring future behavioral intentions of customers as a means of assessing their potential to remain with or to end their relationship with a particular theater company. Bettencourt (1997) applied the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality lens to the review of customer commitment to a specific grocery store chain.

Definition of Key Terms

*Academic entitlement.* This term refers to an attitude of students that is marked by the belief that they are owed something in the educational experience beyond what they might earn from their effort (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010).

*Developmental education, or remedial education.* Developmental or remedial education is the offering of coursework at higher education institutions, typically to first-year students, that is below college level (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000).

*Enrollment management.* Enrollment management is the intentional, organizational effort to control the size and characteristics of a university’s student body through proactive
institutional choices related to both student recruitment and student retention (Braxton et al., 2014).

_Institutional retention rate._ An institutional retention rate is the percentage of students within a specific cohort who continue in attendance at the institution from one academic year to the next (Reason, 2009).

_Persistence._ Persistence refers to a student measure of the progress in advancement toward degree completion (Kalsbeek, 2013).

_Retention._ Retention in an institutional measure of the rate at which students remain enrolled in a particular college or university until completion of their degree (Hagedorn, 2005).

_Student attrition._ Student attrition measures the rate at which students, for whatever reason, terminate their individual student membership in the institute of higher education in which they were enrolled (Bean, 1980).

_Student consumerism._ This term refers to a student attitude that reduces the role of the institution to a place that meets particular pre-established needs and interests of the student (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002).

_Tuition discounting._ Tuition discounting is the process of reducing the total cost of attendance through institutional financial aid offerings, including academic or merit based aid, as well as scholarships from college, community, corporate or other resources (Martin, 2004).

**Chapter Summary**

Future trends in higher education indicate that colleges and universities will need adaptable enrollment management strategies to cope with the threats of declining class sizes and financial uncertainty (Demarest, Harris, & Vance, 1989; Glover, 1986; Vander Schee, 2009). In an effort to stabilize enrollments levels, improve market position, protect incoming revenue
streams, and introduce or maintain a particular level of academic quality, universities must prioritize the creation of effective enrollment management practices and associated student retention strategies (Dolence, 1998; Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013). However, much of the previous research used to guide past and current retention practice presents an incoherent mixture of new programs, untested initiatives, and uncoordinated action (Tinto, 2012). Therefore, this hodgepodge of retention efforts often yields correspondingly incomplete and inconsistent results, and also typically does not include an extensive assessment of strategy implications – a retention based context that this specific research study chose to investigate. Tinto (1982) also theorized that static rates of student attrition may be an indicator of having reached the current limits of higher education as a whole, suggesting that it would be difficult to improve student retention rates without making far-reaching and significant changes in the higher education system as a whole – “changes that go beyond mere surface restructuring and institutional differentiation that has marked past educational changes” (p. 695). By investigating the ramifications of using retention strategies broadly, and by reviewing available outcomes-related data, educators can create increasingly effective operational policies to further inform institutional planning and improvement (Gray and Grace, 1997).

The next two sections of this study present the theoretical framework and literature review, and the qualitative research design and analysis. The literature review involves both an expanded explanation of the theoretical framework chosen for this instrumental case study, and also a thorough investigation of the literature focused on retention strategy. Specifically, the literature review consists of an examination of the existing research on student retention practices within higher education, and an inquiry into the empirical evidence of how institutional decision-making can result in unexpected complications.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Organization of Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of existing literature on the subject of student retention strategy in higher education. Zeithaml et al.’s Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality informed this study. By investigating this topic through the specific lens of this theory, the researcher provided insight into the factors that motivate an institution to make retention decisions, and how the perceived quality of a particular brand influences customer retention. (or, in this case, how the perceived quality of a particular institution influences student retention).

The researcher explored various concepts within the higher education environment, with special attention given to students chooses to persist in pursuing their degrees or opt to depart from the university before completing the degree process.

The literature review begins with an assessment of the research related to the concept of student attrition. Specifically, this research study investigated not only the historical rates of student departure, but also the factors behind students’ choices to leave prior to attaining their degrees and the effect that student attrition has on both the institution and on the enterprise of higher education itself. The literature review also addresses research related to today’s college students, specifically in order to illuminate how students may interact with their institutions and how higher education may define them.

This chapter also explores research studies dedicated to retention practices. and outlines the effective retention practices identified in the research. The literature review presents information about studies that explore enrollment management practices and their unintended consequences, and also offers insight into practices such as increasing access to higher education, discounting tuition to stabilize enrollment, lowering academic standards, and the need
for and disadvantages of remedial education. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature that has been presented, and a brief explanation of the contents of Chapter Three.

**Background**

For close to 100 years, the issue and challenge of student departure from colleges and universities has been the focus of investigative research (Braxton, 2000). The increasing importance of a college degree and the awareness of student attrition rates throughout the first half of the twentieth century led to the first studies on what would become the concept of retention (Seidman, 2005). One of the first studies on what was then termed “student mortality” was conducted in 1938 by the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Office of Education (Seidman, 2005), using data from 60 institutions throughout the country. By the beginning of the 1960’s, American colleges and universities were confronted with a series of increasing access-related challenges created by the post-World War II expansion of higher education. By the 1980’s, the study of retention had expanded rapidly, building on the contributions to topical understanding generated throughout the 1970’s. As American higher education reached the twenty-first century, retention study and practice continued to evolve and expand, quickly becoming firmly established as an educational priority on many college and university campuses (Seidman, 2005).

According to Kalsbeek (2013), universities created numerous strategic plans and committees created to address student retention, countless state and system-wide reports examined it, and campus communities are saturated in data related to it. In addition, Kalsbeek noted, many industry-based conferences have been created to discuss the issue. And an increasing number of policy and legislative groups are calling for elevated levels of accountability in higher education and consider student retention to be a vital gauge of institutional achievement. However, despite this increased attention on student retention and the wealth of information
available on the subject, Kalsbeek (2013) noted that there is still significant frustration at the institutional level about “the scarcity of usable and actionable knowledge, understanding, or insight” about retention (p. 5). He concluded that in spite of the quantity of attention paid to the subject of retention, few institutions have improved their overall rates of degree completion by any significant margin.

Braxton et al. (2014) suggested that colleges and universities must take action if they desire to increase their rates of student retention, pointing to issues including the critical nature of student persistence on the realization of student success, and the detrimental impact of student attrition on the stability of institutional enrollments, budgets, and public perceptions of institutional quality. To effectively take action, Jones and Braxton (2010) posit that total transparency is required of institutions when preparing and evaluating retention programs in order to facilitate more complete understanding of all institutional efforts to reduce student departure. The process of evaluation is a critical part of answering the question of whether a retention strategy or initiative is effective (York & Tross, 1994), and therefore it is also essential to gather a comprehensive understanding of the broad benefits and costs associated with stabilizing enrollment (Congos and Schoeps, 1997). As Noel, Levitz & Saluri (1985) pointed out, the ability to confirm that retention strategies are effective and that they are justified for future use relies on the thorough assessment of their impact. Similarly, Bai and Pan (2009) posited that evaluating the relationship between student characteristics and retention programming supports a stronger understanding of the types of retention strategies that are more effective for students with specific traits.

**Common topics of prior empirical studies.** Previous research related to retention strategies and their corresponding consequences has focused primarily on macro-level categories
within the realm of higher education. Several studies have given attention to the design of retention strategies and their potential impact on student attrition rates (Braxton et al., 2004). The research conducted by Braxton et al., (2004) assisted in the creation of retention tactics based largely on the concept of student persistence as the primary objective, while other studies have focused on the birth of enrollment management as an industry within the higher education landscape itself (Barefoot, 2004). Enrollment management practices (often implemented to improve an institution’s ability to enroll a student body mix that fulfills a variety of college or university profile objectives), have contributed to the common reconstruction of institutional staffing models and reporting structures, complete with changing spheres of decision-making authority and reconfigured policy goals (e.g. marketing and communications departments helping to recruit students, and now reporting to the school’s enrollment management office). Studies by Foster, Campbell and Twenge (2003) and by Prescott and Simpson (2004) reviewed how the rise in detrimental student behaviors (e.g. narcissism) and evolutions in institutional governance ideology influence enrollment stability and retention policy mandates, respectively. Prescott and Simpson (2004) theorized that an institutions’ failure to address student needs at the commencement of a student’s course of study can lead to class absences and to a lack of academic integration, both of which are significant contributors to eventual withdrawal. Similarly, Foster et al., (2003) revealed that some types of student behaviors that are often perceived as negative (a lack of empathy, a need for admiration, being motivated by extrinsic rather than intrinsic factors, or a pattern of grandiosity, for example) often lead to disloyalty to the institution.

While there is research relating to student retention strategies that may provide educators with insight pertaining to broad higher education-wide elements, most research has focused on
the principal effects of retention programming, with each study assessing a particular element of retention strategy or focusing on a general initiative for reducing rates of student departure (Bai and Pan, 2009). While the fact that colleges would attempt to increase retention rates is generally understood, and research has identified some of the ways that they go about the work of creating new retention-based policies and programs, the research lacks confirmed information on the long-term benefits of such operational initiatives that go beyond simply improving persistence and graduation rates. According to Tinto (2012), though a number of researchers have addressed the practical questions of what works (Braxton et al., 2004; Engstrom & Tinto, 2007; Kuh, Kinzi, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1994; Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993; Tinto & Russo, 1994), results that identify effective action to stave off student attrition remains disjointed and inadequately organized (p. 5). The researcher believes that if studies continue to leave unaddressed the connection between what administrators perceive to be in the best interests of the institution and the ways that retention-driven policies impact the student experience, educators will be faced with increasingly challenging and ethically complicated decisions without the benefit of all-encompassing data.

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Padilla (1999), there are just two possible outcomes for each student who enters a college program of study: successful completion and the obtaining of a degree, or the decision to depart from the institution prior to fulfilling degree requirements. Tinto (2012) theorized that much of the research on student departure has not been useful to those responsible for developing and implementing programs to improve retention and completion, because the research assumes that understanding why students leave is equivalent to understanding why students choose to stay and persist. While it is essential to recognize why some students fail to
complete their programs of study so that institutions and their students can be aware of things to avoid, it is also critical to understand what contributes to a student successfully completing degree requirements so that institutions and their students can be aware of things to pursue (Padilla, 1999). In terms of student success, previous research has shown that earning a degree is a multifaceted process involving many factors, including personal and institutional traits, family profile, economics status, academic readiness, student motivation, and student effort levels (Pace, 1980; Tinto, 1983). In addition, research can also characterize the background and experiences that college students bring to their respective institutions (Padilla, 1999). Padilla further posited that while educational officials can accurately describe the profiles of students who both complete their degree or fail to do so, what neither researchers nor educational officials understand is how a student, once on campus, is transformed over time into either a student who succeeds in earning a degree, or one who does not (Padilla, 1999). Furthermore, the research is also lacking in defining what may produce institutional, retention-based decisions on an operational level and how these decisions interplay with the students’ perception of the resulting institutional services. Therefore, all research efforts related to this study were conducted and then reviewed through one primary theoretical framework – Zeithaml et al.’s (1996) Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality. This framework was selected because it aligns with an important perspective within this research topic – the intellectual process of forming a perception of provided service quality as it relates to the decision about whether or not to remain invested in the organization or brand.

The potential disconnects in expectations between students and institution. Singleton-Jackson et al., (2010) stated that today’s universities “abound with marketing efforts, logos, publicity, top-heavy management, and corporate sponsored buildings and professorships”
(p. 347), and that it is, therefore, understandable that some students might view the college as simply another entity or organization competing for them as customers rather than as an institution of higher learning recruiting them as scholars. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, institutions must satisfy the needs of tuition-paying students in order to stabilize enrollments and balance university budgets.

The urgent need for institutions to remain viable in the face of increased operational costs reinforces the requirement for colleges and universities to focus heavily on financial health and income generation. With this in mind, Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar (2009), hypothesized that colleges must often choose to market to students who are increasingly likely to view their college education as they would view other economic transactions rather than as an opportunity to use their educational experience as a means for greater self-understanding and improved societal standing. Titus (2008) explained the significance of this shift in institutional logic by theorizing that “student expectations are soon based on a conception of teaching and learning qualitatively distinct from the pedagogical view of faculty” (p. 399). Lippmann et al. (2009) reinforced their argument by theorizing that students frequently internalize this consumer-driven orientation and transfer such roles and behaviors into both the classroom and institutional settings. As a result, many students begin to view themselves solely as customers, and view their instructors as providers of a particular service. They also begin to view strong grades as an expectation and as part of the educational exchange rather than as a by-product of dedicated study and the successful completion of coursework on their part (Twenge, 2006).

The theory of behavioral consequences of service quality. Lomas (2007) posited that commercial organizations frequently exhibit tremendous concern about meeting the needs and demands of their customers in order to maintain or increase their market share and profitability.
To do so, according to Dawkins and Reichheld (1990), they understand that delivering quality service is an indispensable strategy for success and survival in today's competitive environment. Beginning in the 1980s, the chief emphasis of both academic and private sector managerial efforts focused on determining how customers defined service quality meant to customers and developing strategies to meet customer expectations (Zeithaml et al., 1985). Although previous findings document the financial and strategic impact of service quality, Zeithaml et al. (1996) posited that administrators in both the public and private sectors remain focused on three primary service related questions:

1. If I invest in quality service, will it pay off for my company?
2. How will service quality pay off?
3. How much should we invest in service quality to receive the best return?

To answer these questions, researchers began to attempt to distinguish between the offensive aspects of managerial strategy (capturing new customers) and the defensive aspects of managerial strategy (retaining current customers). This concept can be easily applied to the acts of recruiting and retaining students.

According to Guzmán (2015), there are few examples within previous literature related to “the blending of higher education and practices of customer service” (p. 20). As such, Guzmán said, research that addresses service quality and student departure could make a significant contribution to the evolving operational landscape of higher education. According to Bean and Eaton (2001), positive student attitudes lead to institutional fit, loyalty, and student intentions to remain enrolled until graduation. With this in mind, the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996) is an academic model that depicts the behavioral consequences of service quality as established variables between service quality and the financial
gains or losses from brand retention or defection. This concept transfers effectively to the educational arena when reviewing student persistence and retention and the associated net tuition revenue generated. The left-hand portion of the model in Figure 1 below signifies the individual customer (in this case, student) and proposes that service quality and behavioral intentions are related. Therefore, service quality is a determinant factor for whether a customer ultimately remains with or defects from a company or organization. Starting on the left of Figure 1, the theory begins with a customer's assessment of service quality and speculates that when service quality evaluations are high, the customer's behavioral intentions are positive, which strengthens his or her relationship with the company (in this case, college or university). When service quality evaluations are low, however, the customer's behavioral intentions are negative and the relationship is more likely to be weakened or cease altogether. Should a student decide to leave the college or university that he or she is enrolled in, that school suffers consequences in the form of lost tuition revenue as well as the lost opportunity to create stronger bonds with that student that might have led to that particular student’s retention and persistence. Ultimately, according to Zeithaml et al. (1996), behavioral intentions can be viewed as indicators that signal whether customers will remain with or defect from an organization.

Though there have been multiple theoretical frameworks developed to explain student departure and persistence, the model proposed by Zeithaml et al. (1996) represents the strongest incorporation of this investigation’s most critical variable: how the discernment of quality within an organization may impact a customer’s experience with and perception of the organization itself. The combination of answers derived from reviewing retention policy creation through this lens allows for educational leaders to more fully comprehend the implications of these retention-based decisions. The usage of this framework and its connection to consumerist ideology is
appropriate in this case, because today’s college students lack a certain level of institutional
loyalty. (Barefoot, 2004). Driven by an expectation of immediate attainment, and supported by
the increased catering mentality of the university, students will frequently investigate the “best
deal” or move to “greener pastures” when faced with adversity (Barefoot, p. 12). Barefoot
concluded that this can only cause enrollment-related panic for campus officials who are already
challenged by an opinionated student body that now have the opportunity to flex its “consumerist
muscles” and transfer elsewhere with little penalty other than perhaps lost earned credit hours.

The longevity of a customer's relationship favorably influences profitability (Zeithaml et
al., 1996), which in a marketplace context means that customers who remain with an
organization for a period of years because they are pleased with the service they receive are more
likely than short-term customers to remain emotionally invested in the organization and
ultimately spread favorable word-of-mouth communication. According to Zeithaml et al. (1996),
favorable customer opinions of an organization may allow a business to charge a higher price
than others might charge since their customers place a higher value on maintaining the
relationship. Within the higher education environment, this idea this relates directly to the cost of
attendance. The university has already absorbed the initial cost of attracting and establishing its
customers (in this case, students), and the university can more efficiently serve those already
committed to the organization (i.e. enrolled) than put out to obtain new customers (Reichheld
**Student Attrition**

**Retention research.** Colleges and universities are going to need an adaptable and responsive decision-support system for enrollment managers to cope with the threats of declining enrollment in the decades ahead (Glover, 1986). According to Hossler (1984), well-conceptualized enrollment management strategies can produce a stronger institutional self-understanding and enhanced institutional health. In fact, with sufficient information about the institutional environment and appropriate data about actual and possible student recruitment markets of a college or university, Hossler argued that enrollment managers may be able to effectively manipulate the college choice process. Despite this, retention research to-date has largely focused on the characteristics of students and their external environment, with little scrutiny being given to the way the institutional experience is organized and delivered (Barefoot, 2004).
Historical rates of student attrition and institutional attentiveness. In 2012, national U.S. data compiled by the American College Testing program indicated that 26% of first-year students at four-year colleges drop out of school prior to returning for their sophomore year (Sax, Keup, Gillmartin, Stolzenberg, & Harper, 2002). However, a decade later, the same report revealed that departure rates for eligible sophomore students at four-year schools had risen to 28%. Furthermore, 45% of freshmen enrolled in two-year colleges failed to return for their second year (American College Testing, 2012). However, the rate of student departure in the United States is not a new problem or concern – student attrition rates have remained largely constant at 45% for more than a century (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1982).

After considerable focus on the issue for roughly 30 years, high attrition rates and the lack of student retention in higher education continue to be a significant problem. More than 40% of all college entrants leave higher education without earning a degree, with 75% of them dropping out within the first two years of college. And an institution can expect that close to 60% of a typical entering class will not receive a degree from that particular institution (Tinto, 1987). Habley and McClanahan (2003) conducted an American College Testing program study exploring the reasons institutions may not fully comprehend the scope of the retention issue and may not know how to effectively counter it. Perhaps surprisingly, the Habley and McClanahan (2004) report revealed a considerable lack of institutional preparation to combat enrollment instability.

Habley and McClanahan (2004) surveyed all accredited, degree-granting, two-year and four-year, public and private colleges to assess not only the frequency of particular retention practices but also the influence of those methods. The study involved contacting and seeking the participation of more than 4,000 American institutions. The two authors found that regardless of
the increased attention on college student retention, only 64.1% of the 2,200 responding institutions had identified an administrator primarily responsible for coordinating retention efforts. Just 59.4% of responding schools had set an improvement goal for retaining students between the first and second years of enrollment, and only 38.7% of responding campuses had established a goal for improved degree completion. It is logical to conclude from these findings that though much has been discussed about the college student retention issue, as of 2003, institutions were still struggling to put together intentional responses to the perceived crisis of student attrition.

Ishitani (2008) found this institutional uncertainty surprising, because student persistence rates are among the most commonly used benchmarks for organizational performance evaluation. College stakeholders heavily analyze persistence assessment measures, specifically looking to persistence rates as significant when operational budgets are dependent on student fees and tuition. Simply put, for tuition-dependent schools, a decline in student enrollment creates a corresponding reduction in funding, making it critically important for those schools to fully understand the makeup, motivations and interests of today’s college student. Meyer and Zucker (1989) theorized that for colleges and universities, consistently high withdrawal rates might constitute “permanent failure.” Therefore, should a prospective student’s perception of a particular institution be one of high student loss and general enrollment instability, the impact of that perception on the institution’s recruitment capability could be devastating. More recently, Barefoot (2004) expanded upon this argument by writing that even the published collegiate comparisons—which typically reveal first-year to second-year retention rates and graduation statistics—can create panic in the eyes of college officials at universities with average entrance exam levels that are considered weak when compared to competitors. This is a significant
change in administrative thinking, because high drop-out rates once garnered a certain level of perceived prestige as a marker of institutional status. According to Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001), an institution’s image and institutional reputation may also influence student persistence and degree completion rates.

**The breadth of American higher education.** Though the American system of higher education may be among the most open, accessible and diverse in the world (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), access and achievement for all requires a willingness to support and embrace all interested parties, regardless of race, gender, and income (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Creating this environment requires the educational system as a whole to be not only multi-faceted but also filled with beneficial opportunities across the entire spectrum of educational pursuit. Four states (Rhode Island, Tennessee, New York, and Oregon) and one city (San Francisco) recently enacted measures enabling those residents who meet eligibility standards to attend either a two-year or four-year college or university tuition-free. Louisiana, Arkansas, South Dakota, and Minnesota are also considering providing eligible citizens with similar educational access, greatly expanding the array of student capabilities within state systems. This “be all for all” requirement ultimately creates a landscape of breadth of opportunity, though perhaps lacking depth in relation to the checks and balances required to ensure that quality decisions are being made at all levels of the educational structure (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Colleges and universities have ethical responsibilities to the students they recruit, admit and enroll every semester (Wright-Sidle and McReynolds, 1999). However, do educators have the philosophical clarity and supportive evidence to make truly responsible retention-based decisions?

**Reasons behind student departure.** Yorke (2000) suggested that there are six primary reasons that students leave an institution of higher learning: (a) poor quality of student
experience; (b) unhappiness with the social environment; (c) failure to cope with the demand of the academic program; (d) wrong choice of academic program; (e) matters related to financial need; and (f) dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional condition.

According to a study by Hall (2001) involving university students in the United Kingdom (UK), few students can actually give a singular reason for withdrawal. Additionally, Foster, Houston, Knox, and Rimmer (2002) theorized that many UK students choose to externalize their reasons for departure, blaming the institution and its programs and policies rather than their own inability to manage the demands of college. Foster et al. (2002) hint at an element of immaturity and student entitlement when revealing that former students, after more time has elapsed, frequently offer different reasons for their departure prior to graduation. Unfortunately, according to Hoyt and Winn (2004), faced with mounting evidence of the increasingly complex needs of today’s student, colleges and universities frequently treat non-returning students as a single population. This, Hoyt and Winn contended, can only lead to inaccurate research findings and flawed retention programming responses. Porter (2002) found varied predictors of behavior when distinguishing between the three most common groups of students (continuing students, dropouts and transfers) rather than distinguishing between only two groups (returners and non-returners). As such, institutions must fully understand the differences in the profiles between each group in order to develop more sophisticated retention strategies (Hoyt and Winn, 2004).

Colleges are, of course, greatly challenged by the volatile financial landscape. While many institutional endowments plummeted as a result of the national economic crisis experienced throughout the early 2000s, colleges have also been affected by a series of elementary changes in the ways individual states and the federal government choose to finance higher education. According to Paulsen and St. John (2002), the federal government has moved
from using grants as the chief means of encouraging educational opportunity to using loans, which, of course, must be repaid. In addition, decreases in state support for public colleges have led to tuition hikes, ultimately placing the majority of the financial burden to pay for college on students and their families (Breneman & Finney, 1997; Mumper, 1996; Paulsen, 1991; Paulsen 2000).

Desjardins, Ahlberg and McCall (2002) theorized that the consistency of national graduation rates (roughly 50%) is widely viewed as a failure of the student, the institution or the entire system of higher education itself. Because of this, the authors posited that many state legislatures are now taking increased notice of the apparent inability of their colleges and universities to graduate a high percentage of their students, and often responding by tying institutional funding to graduation rates, among a variety of factors. According to Galambos (2009), this practice becomes problematic in light of the fact that colleges and universities are already taking significant internal measures to slow the effects of the national fiscal crisis through hiring freezes, mandatory furloughs, position elimination, and increased student recruitment efforts. These efforts have not been effective at securing financial stability, and colleges and universities must now consider raising tuition to support institutional financial stability since they can no longer depend on subsidies from federal and state agencies (Romano, 2005). The researcher believes this adds pressure on institutional officials to retain as high a percentage of students as possible.

Mortenson (2003) argued that colleges and universities are undermining their own financial well-being by choosing to focus recruitment and retention efforts on the diminishing affluent share of the market population in hopes of securing full-pay applicants, while limiting the aid-related support to the one growing sector of the population – lower income families.
Paulsen and St. John (2002) have found that there is a significant amount of student need that is not being satisfied by existing institutional, state, and federal financial practices. Specifically, the authors believed that the widespread high-tuition, high-loan approach to college financing cannot be sustained. If financial support from governing bodies continues to represent a diminished portion of institutional revenues, standards of equity would then require that appropriate amounts of need-based grants be made available to students with demonstrated need. In a call for change, Paulsen and St. John (2002) stated that the system of higher education will continue to serve “as in instrument of class reproduction” until such issues are effectively addressed (p. 231). The authors argued that should these changes not be made, only certain students will be able to afford access to higher education, thus wiping out the philosophical tenet of system equity (the idea that everyone should have the ability to pursue intellectual and personal growth through university enrollment). According to Hassel and Lourey (2005), students frequently come to college because they desire something specific—a degree, access to well-paying job, or simply to learn, for example. However, Hassel and Lourey also revealed that many of these students do not understand what is actually required to reach such a goal, which often leads to disappointment, frustration, and indifference. Altonji (1993) noted that, over time, students acquire new information about their preferences and abilities, or new professional opportunities arise, and either factor may cause alternations or interruptions in their academic career. DeBrock, Hendricks and Koenker (1996) argued that each student must decide if the value of a degree makes financial sense and whether the expected returns after dropping out are greater than the cost of actually attaining a degree.

**The effect of student departure on the institution and higher education enterprise.**

Higher education as a whole has a clear duty to serve the ever-changing and increasingly
demanding student population. Mulvey (2008) believed that once a postsecondary institution accepts a student, that institution is entering into a form of social contract with the student. As such, the author advocated the position that institutions of higher education must accept this responsibility and provide society with newly educated and well-prepared citizens who are capable of making positive societal contributions. However, Baker (1998) contended that colleges have become increasingly obstinate, with growth being the only pattern of change openly embraced. Washington-Walters and McKay (2005) questioned whether or not higher education as a system, has “the ability and institutional will to embrace a systematic process of self-reflection, assessment, and strategic planning to proactively and comprehensively respond to the challenge of student retention and student success” (p. 53). Without the administrative ability to be accountable for sound, retention-based decision-making, the legitimacy of an institution’s leadership will be questioned, and the likelihood of stabilizing enrollment will also diminish (Tinto, 2012). According to Tinto, good intentions on the part of institutional leadership, however genuine, are not adequate for guaranteeing gains in student retention. Institutions must understand the best approaches to take, as well as the best policies to enact, in order to translate their commitment to retaining students into meaningful, multi-faceted outcomes (Tinto, 2012).

College campuses represent a gateway to opportunity and future personal success. Lazerson (2010) believed that higher education has not only become “central to the American way of life” (p. 13), but is relative necessity for anyone with aspirations of long-term financial and personal stability. In addition, Pritchard and Wilson (2003) posited that the successful completion of a college degree in today’s society is paramount for individual achievement. Schuetz (2005) seconded this idea, stating that the college setting “contains, supports, and
communicates with the student, provides a backdrop for social and physical interactions, and links the student with the symbolic and the functional element of the educational experience” (p. 62). As such, while scholars can promote the benefit of attending college, the system itself is being pulled at and challenged by a diverse series of obstacles often relating to student recruitment and retention. One of the most disturbing developments in higher education is that institutions must commit progressively larger proportions of their resources toward competing for prospective students, largely because the competition for students is a struggle for stature and market power (Wellen, 2005; Astin, 2016). In this context, Frank (2002) noted that colleges and universities often find themselves engaged in a positional arms race with one another.

In 1985, Harten and Boyer wrote that “survival and self-renewal in a period of declining enrollment and resources are central problems facing institutions of higher education” (p. 206). The increasing diversity of today’s college student population, as well as the shifting social, moral, and political attitudes and values of current U.S. society, force institutions of higher learning to break away from traditional methods of operation, and instead plan and program in different ways or risk serving just a small portion of the total student enrollment (Koon, 1973). Colleges and universities are now required to respond to a highly demanding student population that may or may not be immediately prepared for successful integration into the college environment (Trout, 1997). According to Hoyt (1999), this lack of preparation creates significant challenges for college students, as well as for the staff and faculty who are attempting to help them have a positive educational experience. For example, students expect immediate educational excellence and strong grades rather than valuing the intellectual complexity that comes with the pursuit of knowledge (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Morrow (1994) wrote that this shift away from the values of learning and the move toward a culture of gratification
ultimately damages the nature of scholarship itself. However, according to Barefoot (2004),
what is perhaps most troublesome is how narrowly focused colleges and universities frequently
choose to be when responding to enrollment instability. Rather than examining how they deliver
the educational experience, Barefoot offered that when educators attempt to improve both
retention and graduation rates, they often focus on changing easily accessible, but marginal,
 aspects of the student experience, while neglecting the most critical issues pertaining to the
structure of higher education itself (such as method of educational delivery, the autonomy of the
academy, and the impact of increased access to education, for example).

It is also important to acknowledge the impact that student withdrawal may have on
institutional status. Barefoot (2004) pointed out that no modern-day college or university wants
to be known for its high rate of student attrition. Prescott and Simpson (2004) theorized that
while student withdrawal can be considered a natural part of higher education, the school’s
reputation could suffer should the public begin to perceive an institution as accepting its high
rate of non-completion as the norm. Consistently high non-completion rates can create the
perception of a school as a “survivalist” type of institution, or one prone to promoting an ethos of
“survival of the fittest” (Simpson, 2003). In competing for a dwindling supply of academically
qualified students, institutions that have “tradition, academic prestige, satisfied students,
successful alumni and substantial endowments, physical plants, and annual giving,” have a
considerable advantage (Glover, 1986, p. 16). Similarly, Glover contended that institutions with
high rates of student departure, a dependence on tuition revenue, high acceptance rates, and low
admissions yield rates are vulnerable to demographic and financial forces.

These concerns led to the creation of what Barefoot (2004) termed the “retention
industry,” complete with organizations, corporations, and individual consultants vying to provide
their insights on how colleges can retain the students who do choose to enroll (p. 11). In recent years, retention has become part of the larger study and practice of enrollment management. According to Glover (1986), enrollment management can be defined as any institutional effort to influence the number, combination, and quality of students through specific recruitment and retention strategies. Glover expanded on this concept further by revealing that highly selective institutions are primarily concerned with attracting a student body of strong academic capability but with a diverse set of appreciated characteristics. On the contrary, Glover also stated that less-selective schools tend to focus their energies on attracting students in sufficient numbers to enable the school to financially survive while also maintaining its academic standards. What is frequently lost in today’s higher education community is how retention strategy can frequently be reduced to a series of simple, practical decisions rather than driven by institutional reflection or evidence-based research (Longden, 2006). As a result, enrollment stability may become largely quantitative in nature (with finite numerical goals driving decision-making), with the best interests of the student and institution, as well as mission-based values, being the only considerations.

**Institutional response to enrollment instability.** The recent economic crisis has put a challenging twist on what is already a highly competitive student recruitment landscape, as years of financial uncertainty continue to threaten state funding, federal assistance and financial aid allocations, forcing colleges to increasingly rely on student enrollment and tuition as primary sources of revenue (Holley & Harris, 2010). Institutions are now faced with developing elaborate retention programs to maintain the students they do enroll, despite the wildly diverse capabilities and needs of its student body. However, it is crucial that colleges make these policy related decisions with sound judgment and comprehensive data instead of making retention
choices “lacking common definitions and understandings” that “lead to unclear communication, and worse, ineffective practice” (Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009, p. 407).

Rhodes, Pullen and Clegg (2010) contended that the central storyline of the organizational context at any particular time helps to define that organization’s decision-making values and restricts choices, explaining that “the dominance and repetition of narratives limit the possibilities of organizational ethics” (p. 536). Rhodes, et al. (2010) further elaborated on this theory by stating that those who exercise power often claim ethical justification for their actions. Therefore, are colleges and universities making influential campus operational decisions in order to maintain a particular reputation, financial bottom-line or exhibition of power? If so, are there campus and community related costs associated with such decision-making?

Despite the assertion that higher education must represent the highest of ethical and moral standards, there are few studies that apprise educators of the moral (if not operational) challenges of all-encompassing retention efforts. Though the reduction of unnecessary student departure should be a goal of campus decision-makers, some student attrition may be in the best interest of both the student and the institution (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1982). According to Tinto (1993), not all students are immediately prepared for the challenges of college in general or for the challenges of a specific institution, and some choose to make decisions that jeopardize the harmony of their campus community. This concept of some attrition being beneficial to both institutions and students appears to be frequently lost in the strategic decision-making that can guide retention policy creation and implementation (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993). Hovdhaugen, Frolich, and Aamodt (2013) contended that institutions typically show a general interest in reducing student departure, however their “conceptualization of the issues around departure is still not very developed” (p. 175). The authors further revealed that while institutions concerned
with student attrition do often choose to take action, their awareness of the complexity of the
student retention issue has not yet been translated into strategies that effectively guide the overall
institution. While administrators may apply ample research regarding what constitutes a
successful retention program, past research provides little information underscoring the
philosophical challenges that educational administrators face when developing a response to
enrollment instability. This information may influence administrators to narrow retention efforts
into increasingly focused models, which in turn should augment programmatic effectiveness and
reinforce decision-making virtue.

Though retention strategies are varied and retention efforts are widespread, the
effectiveness of such programming remains debatable. According to Barefoot (2004), while
college officials have historically implemented a variety of retention programs such as first-year
student seminars, learning communities, advising programs, and tutoring opportunities, retention
rates remain largely unchanged. To that point, Zepke and Leach (2007) suggest that many of the
best institutional efforts to retain students will ultimately fall short due to a college or
university’s limited sway over the circumstances outside the institution’s control that influence
attrition. Despite the external forces involved and years of effort, schools have yet to “develop a
coherent framework to guide their thinking about which actions matter most and how they
should be organized” (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). Hence, they fail to recognize the opportunity to review
internal retention practices and the priorities that guide programmatic choices.

**Today’s College Students and How They are Viewed**

According to Natale and Doran (2012), more students than ever before are interested in
pursuing a college degree, and these students are paying a larger percentage of their education
than their predecessors did. As such, the authors contend that today’s higher education
landscape is extremely competitive and filled with enrollment management strategies designed to allow institutions to remain competitive and to influence students who matriculate and persist.

**Students as consumers.** In attempting to create and then preserve stable enrollments, school officials often use controversial enrollment management practices (Natale and Doran, 2012). Specifically, school officials began promoting an ethos of supporting students as consumers for fear of losing students to attrition (Lagowski, 1981). Ciani, Summers and Easter (2008), in a study completed at a public, four-year research university, theorized that catering to this particular generation of students with such enabling behavior is a dangerous approach. The authors wrote that today’s four-year college students are more selfish, superficial, and narcissistic than those of previous generations, and consumerist outlooks ultimately contribute to the unraveling of institutional accountability systems. According to Lippmann et al. (2009), students begin to feel increasingly empowered – and even entitled – to educational success, and view their enrollment in college as part of a transactional relationship. Colleges on the other hand, begin to lose the ability to hold students accountable for fear of promoting an environment conducive for departure (Schaefer, Barta, Whitely, & Stogsdill, 2013). Snare (1997) spoke to the dangers of student consumerist thought in relation to retention strategy, theorizing that the “student-as-consumer analogy is harmful” and arguing that “it lowers quality, refocuses valuable resources, encourages passive learning, and undermines social and civic values” (p. 122).

Lippmann et al., (2009) theorized that colleges panicked by potential enrollment instability and driven by a competitive market place soon choose to promote enrollment to students as an experience to take pleasure in rather than as an educational opportunity to take advantage of. Because of this formed culture of consumption, a student’s decision to leave
college before reaching an educational goal or degree completion is seen as resting on the student alone as beyond the college’s control (Schuetz, 2005).

According to Lippmann et al. (2009), labor market conditions create a combination of amplified expectations, increased doubt, and new pressures for prospective students preparing to select a college and program of study. Specifically, Lippmann et al. (2009) contend that a college degree is no longer the guarantee of future stability that it once was. As a result, today’s student exhibits an assortment of attitudes, orientations, and viewpoints that the authors label as student entitlement. Stromquist (2007) posited that students are increasingly viewing a college education as an avenue for job acquisition rather than as an opportunity to deepen their own knowledge base. This viewpoint was touched upon by Singleton-Jackson et al., (2010) who theorized that one particular generational cohort – the “Millennials” and their attitudinal behaviors and expectations – may obscure the retention picture even further (p. 344).

**The millennial generation.** According to Rickes (2009), millennial students began to enter college near the start of this century and will continue to make up student classes until 2020 and beyond. By focusing on an entire cohort of students rather than on individuals, college officials as well as researchers can begin to develop an understanding of patterns of student behavior across the wide segment of both incoming and already enrolled student populations. This is crucial, Rickes (2009) stated, because millennial students, roughly 100 million in number, are the largest single generational group to enter higher education since the “Baby Boomers” of the 1960s (p. 7). The sheer vastness of cohort size demands a certain amount of respect and response from today’s educational leader (Rickes, 2009). Howe and Strauss (2007) theorized that Millennials, throughout the next decade, will transform higher education as profoundly as the Baby Boomers did in the 1960s – but in very different and even detrimental ways.
According to Singleton-Jackson et al., (2010), the arrival of the Millennials has greatly altered the relationship between student and institution. This is especially due to the personality characteristics shared by this particular college-going faction. The authors defined this group of students as individuals who expect to have choices and also expect to have control over those choices. Students who expect control (and therefore the ability to produce instant gratification) quickly find themselves at odds with most structures and goals within the higher education system (Lippmann et al., 2009). As Singleton-Jackson et al., (2010) concluded, and Lippmann et al. (2009) concur, if students want immediate satisfaction, while college faculty, staff, and administrators expect sustained effort in pursuit of larger educational goals, conflict can erupt.

Raskin and Terry (1988) defined entitlement as “the expectation of special privileges over others and special exemptions from normal social demands” (p. 892). A logical offshoot of the general sense of entitlement shared by many of today’s college students is, of course, academic entitlement. Greenberger, Lessard, Chen and Farruggia, (2008) described examples of academic entitlement as expecting high grades for modest effort; expecting special considerations and accommodations from professors in terms of grades; and angry reactions those expectations and apparent needs are not met. Kopp, Zinn, Finney and Jurich (2011) believe that an increased sense of entitlement creates a wide range of negative results, particularly in the classroom setting. Kopp et al. (2011) reference the work of Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, and Bushman (2004), who concluded that entitlement directly correlates with the characteristics of resentment, dominance, belligerence, greed and having difficulty in relationships. As such, student entitlement carries extreme dangers of narcissism, exploitiveness, and a superiority complex when allowed to flourish in academic circles (Campbell et al., 2004). While Wright (2008) indicated that many of today’s specialized
Retention management efforts today have the capacity to yield a higher return for money spent than enrollment efforts, he also theorized that colleges and universities actually undermine their own well-being by choosing to market to Millennial students in a capacity similar to the ways that businesses attempt to attract new consumers.

**The student/university relationship.** Edmundson (1997) attributed much of this philosophical change in student-institution relationship and broad campus direction to the shifting environment in which colleges operate. In a progressively more competitive marketplace, and where financial stability for many institutions may be uncertain, colleges believe that they must indulge students to increase enrollment numbers (Lippmann et al., 2009). To do so, institutions make academic and operational decisions about programs and policies that cater to student wishes and interests (Cardon, 2014; Edmundson, 1997). According to Wellen (2005), continuing this indulgence-based decision-making without careful control mechanisms in place can result in the destruction of the culture of higher education. To make matters worse, Lippmann et al. (2009) noted that institutional climate can significantly influence student behavior, and the increasingly part-time nature of college teaching threatens a school’s ability to stamp out academic entitlement attitudes. The authors explained stated that insufficient full-time faculty hiring opportunities makes it difficult for adjunct professors to exert control over these negative student behaviors. Part-time faculty, hopeful of gaining full-time employment and pursuing positive student evaluations in hopes of remaining employed by the department, may opt to mollify students to keep them content instead of demanding high-quality work from them. However, according to Delucchi and Korgen (2002), colleges and universities must re-establish their legitimacy as learning institutions, and this requires that they strongly convey to students that the common marketplace concept – that the customer is always right – is not always
appropriate. This can occur only when students recognize their instructors as teachers who have the intellectual authority to define and assess learning outcomes (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002).

Morrow (1994) expressed the belief that the very essence of what defines higher education will be at stake if schools continue to pander to student interests rather than expecting effort and commitment. Twenge (2006) charged that many instructors have chosen not to address student mistakes and refrained from providing their classes with challenging intellectual material for fear of damaging student self-esteem. Yet Morrow (1994) stated that if entitlement were allowed to surpass the significance of earned achievement, then institutions of higher learning would themselves have played a significant role in the demise of the objectives of higher education. Specifically, entitlement eclipses academic achievement by refuting the significance of “learning to the learner” (Morrow, 1994, p. 345). Most importantly, Morrow continued, the integrity of the academic system is lost if a culture of entitlement is allowed to reign in academic circles, if students continue to reject standards of achievement, and if the academic community fails to respond with increased expectations of commitment.

Though retention initiatives will undoubtedly be influenced by institutional enrollment philosophies, current national attrition rates give administrators little latitude for choosing not to attempt to retain all students. Barefoot (2004) found that only 47% of students entering a four-year college would have earned a degree from that same college or university in five years. Ultimately, these rates of departure severely and negatively impact the stability of college enrollments and budgets, as well as perceptions of institutional quality (Braxton et al., 2004).

**Retention Practices**

Research indicates that specific retention strategies can be effective in keeping students enrolled.
What data reveals to be effective strategy. In coordinating the wide-ranging student retention research project for ACT, Habley and McClanahan (2004) discovered that there are a number of successful retention practices currently in use, and summarized their findings into a series of four general recommendations:

1. Determine student characteristics and needs, set priorities among these areas of need, identify available resources, evaluate a variety of successful programs, and implement a formal comprehensive retention program that best meets institutional needs.

2. Take an integrated approach in retention efforts, incorporating both academic and non-academic factors into the design and development of programs in order to create a socially inclusive and supportive academic environment that addresses the social, emotional, and academic needs of students.

3. Implement an early alert, assessment, and monitoring system based on high school GPA, college entrance examination scores, course placement tests, first semester college GPA, socioeconomic information, attendance records, and non-academic information derived from formal college surveys and college student inventories in order to identify and build comprehensive profiles of students at risk of dropping out.

4. Determine the economic impact of college retention programs and the rates of student time to degree completion through a cost-benefit analysis of student dropout rates, persistence assessment procedures, and intervention strategies, thereby enabling informed decision-making with respect to the types of academic and non-academic interventions required, such as remediation and financial support.

Habley and McClanahan (2004) also found that the retention practices that made the most significant contributions to reducing student attrition could be broken up into three main
categories:

1. First-year programs: Retention practices in this category including first-year student seminars or 101-level classes (either for credit or not for credit), learning communities, extended orientation programs, and efforts to integrate academic advising with first-year programs.

2. Academic advising: Strategies in this category include advisor interventions with select student populations, increased advising staff, and the integration of advising with first-year transition programs.

3. Learning support: Retention practices in this category include comprehensive learning assistance centers or labs, reading centers or labs, tutoring programs, and summer bridge programs.

Lastly, when Habley and McClanahan (2004) reviewed reporting results of those schools that chose to submit data, seven retention practices emerged as having the greatest impact on student retention:

1. first-year seminar classes, or 101-level classes for credit (reported as effective by 13.1% of reporting institutions);

2. tutoring programs (reported as effective by 13.1% of reporting institutions);

3. advising interventions with select student populations (reported as effective by 12.6% of reporting institutions);

4. mandatory course placement testing (reported as effective by 10.7% of reporting institutions);

5. comprehensive learning assistance centers or labs (reported as effective by 10.4% of reporting institutions);
6. requiring remedial or developmental coursework (reported as effective by 9.7% of reporting institutions); and

7. pre-enrollment orientation (reported as effective by 9.2% of reporting institutions).

With roughly 2,200 of institutions responding – from a field of 4,400 accredited, degree-granting institutions – the sheer scope of the 2003 study serves as a strong barometer of national perspectives in college student retention practices.

**Enrollment management strategies as practice and their inadvertent consequences.**

Colleges and universities that aspire to achieve critical social goals frequently implement pragmatic and forward-thinking management initiatives to improve efficiency and achieve other operational objectives (Birnbaum, 2000; Burns & Wholey, 1993; Fiol & O’Connor, 2003). However, Kraatz, Ventresca, and Deng (2010) posited that these innovations often have undesired complications that undermine the fulfillment of organizational values and objectives.

Kratz et al. (2010) theorized that there is a “demonstrable tendency for organizations to alter their structures and practices in response to organizational or short-run imperatives” (p. 1524). As these changes take place, Kraatz et al., (2010) explained, values that had been effectively constructed into the social structure of the organization are often at risk of being removed, and previously established autonomies find themselves in danger of being invalidated.

As a result, the authors concluded that it is crucially important to document these unintended consequences and to establish knowledge about the forces and systems that make an organization vulnerable to their effects.

According to Dickeson (2003), colleges and universities operate at the convergence of multiple pressures, noting that they must contend with the pressure to satisfy four primary objectives simultaneously, specifically the objectives of increasing revenue, reducing expenses,
improving the academic quality of the college’s student profile, and enhancing the school’s institutional reputation. To do so, Dickeson theorized, colleges and universities often attempt a wide assortment of management techniques and approaches, some of which are proven, but many of which are not. Baum and Lapovsky (2006) point out one such organizational method – the introduction of enrollment management practices as a means to stabilize the size and scope of the student body.

Enrollment management is both an administrative structure and a set of associated practices that have come into frequent use over the last two decades (Dolence, 1998), often involving the consolidation of various administrative functions that influence the size and makeup of the student body. According to Kraatz et al. (2010), colleges and universities frequently engage in strategic enrollment-management efforts “to achieve and maintain desired enrollment levels, attract top students, and fulfill financial objectives” (p. 1522). Meeting such goals is often made easier, the authors theorized, by removing the organizational barriers separating the admissions and financial aid offices and by creating an integrated approach to enrollment-related decision making.

Perhaps surprisingly, Kraatz et al. (2010) contended that enrollment management poses an often-unrecognized threat to established values – specifically, that the newly formed enrollment-management organizational structure undermines the autonomy of critical internal processes and university stewards, thereby lessening leaders’ abilities, as well as their desires, to defend principles assigned to them. The authors conclude that enrollment management practices allow market values to unassumingly infiltrate an institution and gain a “structural and political foothold inside the organization” (Kraatz et al., 2010, p. 1523).
According to Kraatz et al., (2010), enrollment management is most commonly defined as those structural changes that take place within a particular organization. However, it is also a partial demonstration of larger and more persistent market logic that has affected institutions in many ways (Bok, 2004; Geiger, 2004). Kirp (2003) said that the present-day tendency of enrollment management professionals to apply business metaphors to the academic context has been widely noted and often criticized, contending that students are frequently recast as “customers,” financial aid is recast as a “marketing expense,” organizational identity is recast as a “brand,” and education itself becomes simply a “product.” When that is the case, Kirp noted, “the objective of the enrollment process is to improve your market position” (p. 12). Enrollment management’s visible connection to market place values indicates that it should be recognized as a disruptive innovation, because it alters the delicate order of an academic institution, and also delivers new and unfamiliar ideas and principles into that environment (Kraatz et al., 2010).

The impact of increased access to higher education. According to Coomes (2000), given the intense competition for today’s university students, institutions have come to use sophisticated marketing approaches and increasingly broad enrollment objectives to compete. This widening of participation in higher education by new student populations is considered one of the foremost challenges in higher education (Scott, 2006).

Increased access to higher education affects both newer colleges as well as long-standing universities, and has destroyed many of the differences between the two organizations (Davidovitch, Sinuany-Stern, & Iram, 2012). The authors explain that, in order to meet enrollment targets, many academic institutions have “effectively opened their gates to become heavily populated, diminishing the special aura of higher education” (Davidovitch et al., 2012, p. 102). While expanded access may assist universities in efforts to attract a larger and more
diverse group of students, the differing levels of student expectations, needs, and abilities often creates many challenges for institutional officials (Jones & Lau, 2010). As Haque (2001) contended, differences often exist both between and within a newly expanded group of students, but the majority of colleges and universities are unable to identify and support these unique needs.

McCowan (2012) asserted that increased access at a particular university may lead to a loss of quality or “of a specific ethos that characterized it” (p. 123). Trow (2000) concurred, theorizing that increasing enrollment without institutional evidence of increased financial stability threatens the quality of instruction and research. According to Trow (2000), the resulting decline in staff-student ratios produces the institutional expectation of greater productivity in the face of stagnant resources. What soon develops is “the rationalization of university life and management, the pressures of efficiency in operation and outcome, and the imposition of the criteria and language of business and industry” (p. 2). Ultimately, Trow theorized that these changing dynamics threaten the autonomy of the institution and the ability of its scholars to pursue research that does not produce immediate results.

However, increased access to higher education can also create significant and anxiety-producing changes within the culture of the university itself (Trow, 2000). The author reported that widening participation demands an increased workload for many staff and faculty members and creates a “general de-professionalization of the university teacher and lecturer,” factors that can create a significant decline in institutional morale (p. 2). Trow (2000) posited that this decrease in positive spirit – felt particularly amongst faculty members – ultimately leads to a shift of authority from the academic community to increasingly powerful university administrators. It is not a matter of administrators seizing power from academics, the author posited, but rather to
an increased need for institutional administrators to act quickly and decisively – often without the input and understanding of academic committees and individuals – to response to the increasing complexity of the student body, the specialized issues that develop, and the speed of required change (Trow, 2000). Trow contends that academic bodies can lend legitimacy to decisions and policies, but that the need for speedy and decisive administrative decisions often trumps the wisdom and quality that academic officials bring to policy creation and institutional decision-making (Trow, 2000).

According to Jones and Lau (2010), there is little doubt that widening participation in higher education requires colleges and universities to be increasingly flexible and offer more support to their students than has historically been the case. Yet, despite the fact that the objective of enrollment stability can be aided by increased access to participation, George and Hicks (2000) and Cuthbert (2006) offered that changes must be made in instruction, learning, assessment, and student support if institutions are to successfully account for their widening participation agenda and if they are to prevent significant issues from developing. According to Ortmann and Squire (2000), as university students demand more and different services as a result of increased educational access, if institutions are not fully prepared to support these new expectations, providing such service will divert resources and attention away from their primary missions.

**Tuition discounting as a means to stabilizing enrollment.** According to Martin (2002), universities frequently assume that increasing enrollment will improve financial condition, the truth is that enrollment growth can have a detrimental impact on an institution’s financial status, even in the presence of excess capacity. The cause for this startling conclusion, Martin contends,
is the reality that the amount of financial assistance required to attract and enroll additional students may cause a negative net financial impact.

Originally, tuition discounting was thought of as a method to build enrollment and increase institutional net revenue, as well as a means of shaping incoming classes of students to fit specific institutional preferences. According to Hillman (2012), many colleges and universities are making strategic use of tuition discounts based on the idea that, in theory, “aided students not only enhance institutional prestige but they can also enhance institutional revenue goals” (p. 264). Dickeson (2003) theorized that colleges discount tuition because they also desire to improve their academic profiles, increase the number of enrolled minority students, or serve more low-income families. Duffy and Goldberg (1998) stated that offering tuition discounts allows colleges to design classes of desirable students that help the colleges reach a variety of objectives.

Tuition discounting – or the act of reducing a prospective student’s overall cost of attendance through institutionally-funded financial aid in the form of non-repayable grants and scholarships – allows institutions to be increasingly aggressive in their pursuit of enrollments that are larger, better stabilized, or of a particular scope. By 2001, the average tuition discount rate for four-year private colleges was 38.2%, with roughly eight out of every 10 students receiving discounts (Hubbell & Lapovsky, 2003). Hillman (2012) stated that the colleges that do not offer some form of tuition discounting are liable to set themselves at a competitive disadvantage in today’s academic marketplace. The resulting competition for students has created what Martin (2004) terms “a frenzy” in financial aid (p. 177). Duffy and Goldberg (1998) and Redd (2000) warned of the dangers of such activity, theorizing that tuition
discounting has forced colleges and universities to compete for students on the basis of price, rather than institutional quality.

In a Lumina Foundation for Education report, Davis (2003) reported that tuition discounting results in numerous unintentional consequences that can be grouped into two primary categories: (a) the effects on lower-income students; and (b) other common repercussions.

Davis (2003) discusses the effects of tuition discounting on lower-income students, saying that the most striking unintended consequences is the generally diminishment of financial access to four-year colleges for lower-income students. Between 1995 and 1996, and from 1999 through 2000, the average dollar amount of institutional grant awards at both public and private colleges and universities rose faster for higher-income students than for their lower-income counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). Specifically, in 1995, the lowest-income students received roughly two percent more than did students from middle- to upper-middle class financial backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). However, by 1999, the study revealed that the lowest-income students’ average aid was 29% lower than the average aid for their more affluent peers. Davis (2003) theorized that if colleges use the limited financial aid resources they possess to attract students whose families can ultimately afford higher tuitions, then there will be less aid available to students who cannot afford those tuitions. As a result, Davis concluded tuition discounting reduces access opportunities for lower-income students.

Between 1995 and 1999, average institutional grant aid at both public and private colleges and universities grew more for middle- and higher-income students than for lower income students (Davis, 2003). As a result, students with higher incomes generally received
larger increases in grant aid than did their lower-income peers. While the use of institutional funds to reduce tuition costs for more affluent families was one primary reason behind this change, the increased shift to merit aid among state and private grant programs as tuition-reduction tool also contributed to the pattern (Davis, 2003). Davis stated that the trend of primarily using merit aid to reduce tuition costs has caused lower-income students to take on the majority of the typical increase in marginal tuition. According to Davis, lower-income students had to take on larger loans, work longer hours –perhaps detracting from their academic performance –and otherwise make sacrifices to meet rising tuition costs.

For the past 30 years, private college officials have grown increasingly concerned about the rising difference – or “tuition gap” – between the cost of attendance they must charge students to defray institutional expenses and the lower tuitions that public schools can charge as a result of receiving subsidies from state funding sources (Davis, 2003). According to a 2015 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, the average total cost of undergraduate tuition, room and board at public four-year colleges and universities was $17,474. This same study revealed that undergraduates at private, four-year institutions paid an average of $35,074 in tuition, room and board expenses. Davis (2003) posited that if private schools can provide incoming students with enough institutional aid to close the “net tuition gap,” these colleges and universities will be more competitive in the marketplace for students. However, between 1995 and 1999, the average net tuition gap for the lowest-income students had widened by 19%, from $6,000 in 1995 to $7,154 in 1999 (Davis, 2003). In addition, Davis revealed that the gap for students with family incomes between $20,000 and $39,999 increased by 32% (by $1,344) over that period. However, Davis (2003) also discovered that the tuition gap for students with family incomes of $40,000 or more either remained the same or somewhat decreased.
Therefore, the average net price obstacle that the lowest-income students faced for attendance at a private college in 1999 was only 13% lower than the average net price obstacle faced by students with family incomes of $100,000 or more (Davis, 2003). As a result, Davis concluded, the widening tuition gap at private colleges makes it far less likely for lower-income students to choose this type of institution regardless of their academic capabilities.

In addressing the other common repercussions of tuition discounting, data collected in a National Center for Education Statistics (2000) study suggested that increases in the net tuition gaps for lower-income dependent students and for independent students resulted in an increased number of these students choosing to attend public rather than private colleges. However, decreasing or maintaining the net tuition gaps for their more affluent peers—middle- and upper-income dependent students—did not prevent enrollment losses. According to Davis (2003), between 1995 and 1999, private schools—in spite of awarding more aid to their incoming students—lost market shares in seven of 11 undergraduate income intervals. As a result, Davis concluded, the data suggests that for private institutions, tuition discounting was not successful in increasing their market shares of students from a variety of income groups, despite those schools spending higher levels of institutional aid to an attempt to attract and enroll such students.

According to Davis (2003), increasing student academic quality is a significant factor in the choices of many colleges and universities to use tuition discounting practices. However, in reviewing the median SAT verbal test scores of incoming classes at 608 four-year private colleges and at 266 four-year public colleges, data from the College Board Annual Survey (2000) revealed that between 1995 and 1999, academic profile objectives were not reached. Despite an environment of increased tuition discounting and the extensive use of merit aid to
reduce the cost of attendance for those who may qualify, fewer than two out of 10 colleges increased their median first-year SAT verbal scores by 11 points or more – a change representing an increase of less than 2%. Similarly, Redd (2000) discovered, in reviewing the academic quality of specific schools, that institutions with the largest increases in tuition discount rates did not raise the median SAT scores of their incoming students.

According to Hillman (2012), colleges can strategically leverage aid to take full advantage of the amount of net tuition revenue generated per student receiving aid by using tuition discounts to tempt students to enroll, bringing their tuition dollars with them. Similarly, Davis (2003) contended that those colleges that persuade more students to enroll through the use of tuition discounts can expect an increase in net tuition revenue from one year to the next, but he noted that this expected gain in net tuition revenue is not always as significant as originally anticipated. Highly aggressive or highly inefficient discounting strategies can, at times reduce rather than enhance revenue streams (Massa & Parker, 2007). In comparing tuition discounts and net tuition revenue from 1990 through 1991, and from 1996 through 1997, Redd (2000) found that institutions with the largest escalations in discount rates increased their spending on grants by an average of $3,375 per full-time student. However, these same schools saw their tuition and fee revenue grow by $3,069 per student. Redd (2000) clarified the point by explaining that if financial aid expenditures – through tuition discounting – grow faster than expected incoming tuition, then net tuition revenue grows increasingly slowly and will eventually decline. Hubbell and Lapovsky (2002) developed similar data when discovering that from 2000 to 2001, net tuition revenue at four-year private colleges increased at a lower rate than did gross tuition revenue, leading the authors to conclude that many private colleges are actually losing revenue despite rising incoming tuition dollars.
According to Davis (2003), one reason that revenue is often lost through tuition discounting is that a large percentage of the money awarded to students as scholarships, tuition discounts or grants is generated by tuition and fee monies collected from other students. And Redd (2002) discovered that 67% of the funds used for institutional aid by four-year private colleges came from tuition and fee revenue, with 21% coming from endowment earnings, and 12% coming from grants, gifts, and other sources). Within the public institution sector, Redd found that 39% of institutional aid was derived from tuition and fee revenue, while 35% came from the institution’s endowment, and 26% came from grants, gifts, and other sources. Using large amounts of tuition and fee revenue for financial aid purposes reduces a college or university’s ability to use net revenue for other purposes, creating tremendous financial inflexibility for the institution (Davis, 2003).

In summary, Martin (2004) contended that tuition discounting can inflict collateral financial damage on institutions if it is not managed effectively. According to Lewis and Winston (1997), institutions frequently price their services for a net price that is lower than the average cost of providing that service, both in the short term and long term. When the prospective student receives a significant amount of aid, the institution is always in deficit with respect to student-generated revenues and total expenditures. To reduce this deficit, Lewis and Winston (1997) explained that colleges and universities frequently use subsidies from third parties, either endowment, public funds, or monies raised from institutional fundraising efforts. Therefore, Martin (2002) contended, any significant increases in enrollment must be accompanied by appeals to these alternative fund sources, and institutions must match their enrollment with their capacity to subsidize the size of enrolled student groups. As a result,
Martin continued, an increase in student body size, thought initially to stabilize enrollment, “will cause financial problems for these institutions in the short run and in the long run” (p. 126).

According to Martin (2004), aggressive tuition discounting can also have a debilitating impact throughout the higher education landscape. Specifically, the author explained, overtly assertive tuition discounting can lead to a “downward spiral of defensive discounting” among peer institutions (p. 188). The aggressive discounting actions of one school will cause defensive discounting from another, thus lessening their collective ability to support academic quality and need-based aid. Martin (2004) concluded by stating that the outcome of such tactics depends on which institution has the greatest financial endurance or most significant resource pool.

*Lowering academic standards and the relation to remedial education.* According to Longden (2012), lowering institutional expectations is frequently applied as a tool for what college officials often envision as a pragmatic strategy to “bear down on retention” (p. 138). By redesigning the curriculum to remove “difficult concepts,” colleges and universities often choose to make the learning process less taxing and place it with reach of the perceived skill set of the student cohort (Longden, 2012, p. 138). Merisotis and Phipps (2000) theorized that due to increased competition for students, higher education institutions continue to accept students who are unprepared for the demands of college level coursework, contending that the “halcyon days when all students who enrolled in college were adequately prepared and all courses offered at higher education institution were ‘college level’” no longer exist (p. 69). Most colleges and universities offer unique courses for students who lack some degree of the reading, writing, and mathematic skills that are crucial for successful college-level work (Roueché & Roueché, 1999). According to Woodham (1998), roughly 40% of traditional undergraduates take at least one developmental or remedial” education course. The existence of remedial coursework
opportunities suggests that many institutions have lowered their entrance standards, and have subsequently reduced the academic rigor of certain courses, so that under-prepared students can not only boost incoming class size, but make progress toward a degree (Bennett, 1994; Traub, 1995).

Abraham (1992) reported that many parents and students view remedial coursework as an unnecessary delay that prolongs the educational process and increases the cost of a college education. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) discovered that many colleges obscure the fact that remedial courses are frequently offered for no college credit. In fact, the authors contended, “students often go several months, a full semester, or even a full year without knowing that their remedial courses are not counting toward a degree” (p. 260).

Merisotis and Phipps (2000) contended that many institutions do not find it in their best interests to acknowledge that they enroll students who require remediation. Astin (1998) suggested that resources and reputation largely define the perception of an institution’s educational and operational quality, positing that by admitting underprepared students, the perception of departmental and institutional quality would be diminished. According to Breneman, Abraham, and Hoxby (1998), colleges and universities have little incentive – for both political and reputational reasons – to appropriately estimate or report the amount they spend on remedial education. The authors contended that the larger the cost reported, the greater amount of attention remediation will receive, which most school officials want to minimize for fear of tarnished public opinion.

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) judged the educational delays caused by remedial coursework as highly detrimental, and perhaps the basis of many students choosing to drop out of college altogether rather than perhaps earning a lesser degree. Adelman (1999), following a
cohort of students who graduated from high school in 1982, found that students who took remedial courses in college had significantly lower graduation rates (just 39% of them graduated) than those who required no remediation (69% of them graduated). In researching a later cohort that graduated from high school in 1992, Adelman (1999) discovered comparable college degree completion statistics.

**Literature Review Summary**

Longden (2006) theorized that the pressure institutions face when responding to the increasing scope of access to higher education, while also attempting to maintain an established level of academic quality, creates a tension that threatens to undermine the system itself. Faced with poor retention rates, Longden indicated there is a risk at the institutional level “that pragmatism will supplant rational decision-making” (p. 175). Specifically, the author expressed a belief that institutions are in danger of responding to drops in enrollment with “knee-jerk reactions rather than seeking to understand the underlying influences and causes” (p. 175). Should retention rates fall, Longden (2006) said that institutions should not immediately modify their approaches to retention with alterations in program evaluation, the designation of specific resources to remedial support, and/or changes in the amount of intentional contact that students have with faculty and staff. The author concluded that swift commonsense solutions may result in improved retention rates, but that sustained retention improvement will not be realized if a fundamental understanding of the student-institutional relationship is lacking.

Sound retention strategy cannot be made in a vacuum or in perfunctory fashion. Tinto (1982) stated that it was unlikely that higher education would be able to greatly reduce student attrition without some significant and creative changes to the educational system itself. The author asserted that changes going beyond the mere “surface restructuring and institutional
differentiation that has marked past educational changes” are required to create the systemic appreciation for dignified decision-making (p. 691). However, Kalsbeek (2013) posited that developing a sound universal approach to reducing student attrition will be of significant challenge, noting that amid the abundance of attention paid to student retention and the apparent quantity of information, “there are persistent cries at the institutional level about the scarcity of usable and actionable knowledge, understanding, or insight” (p. 5). As a result, Kalsbeek (2013) contends that improving graduation rates at the institutional level appears to be among the most difficult of institutional challenges in higher education.

The philosophical values and traditional virtues that define institutions may also be factored into retention-related decision making. According to Braxton et al. (2014), “institutional integrity manifests itself when a college or university remains true to its espoused mission and goals” (p. 88). In turn, based on the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996), if the student positively perceives the institution as fully embodying its promoted brand, that satisfaction may increase buyer loyalty; ultimately reinforcing institutional decision-making as effective. As such, Tinto (1993) theorized that institutional decision-making in regards to retention would be best served by learning to acknowledge how events within the institution itself come to influence student attrition. Tinto (2006a; 2006b) suggested that without the ability to determine how institutional practice impacts both the departure and persistence of its own student body, increased student retention and enhanced institutional effectiveness will remain elusive.

According to Longden (2006), institutional aspirations to achieve high participation and high completion rates have brought with it a series of unexpected consequences institutional officials now must grapple with. And despite the existence of a number of programs that will aid
in retention improvement, as research in this chapter has revealed, educational leaders are still without a clear understanding of the pitfalls and principled consequences of comprehensive retention strategy. According to Braxton et al. (2014), the problem of student attrition defies a single, immediately understood, institutional solution because most of the forces of influence wield indirect rather than a direct influence on student persistence. In addition, Longden (2012) suggested that the research literature on student retention is “weak,” particularly in regards to where it may be advisable to challenge institutional behavior. Regardless, Tinto (2012) stated that far too many retention strategy decisions are made without evidence of whether or not a particular action would yield a better outcome than another, and without evidence of whether a previous action has produced its intended result.

Barefoot (2004) indicated that while controlling student departure with complete accuracy is impossible, the complex and demanding nature of today’s generation of college student requires thorough review of longstanding enrollment and retention practices. He argued that while such operational appraisals will be difficult, the exposing and reconfiguration of deeply held educational values is critical to improving both student learning and persistence.

**Chapter Summary**

In response to the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent recession-fueled environment, colleges and universities across the United States have had to take quick action to stabilize student enrollment (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013). While many retention issues can, in theory, be anticipated and even planned for, there are unforeseen, secondary ramifications when institutional student retention initiatives move from theory to practice. This chapter presented the existing literature detailing common enrollment management practices and their inadvertent ramifications.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This chapter focuses on the methodology used in this study and how it effectively aided in answering the primary research question, as well as the associated subordinate research questions. The chapter also explains the study’s overall construction; specifically, the chosen research design and research tradition. After a description of the study’s participants and their recruitment, this third chapter outlines the ethical considerations taken into account to ensure research integrity. The third chapter also details the independent processes of data collection, storage, and analysis, and concludes with a description of the steps taken to maintain the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

Primary Research Question and Subordinate Questions

In order for educational officials to create retention strategy best practices, institutions must come to fully understand the impact of the strategies they ultimately choose to implement. Therefore, the primary research question driving this study was: How do the effects of enrollment instability and the resultant student retention decisions impact institutional operations? The study also addressed the six subordinate questions outlined below.

1. How did institutional administrators formulate student retention strategies?
2. What were the strategies that institutional administrators used to address student retention?
3. What were the intended goals of such actions, and what results did administrators expect these retention driven practices to have prior to implementation?
4. Is there an optimal rate of annual student attrition? If so, what is it and how was it established?
5. What were the operational implications and decision-making implications of the
retention strategies?

6. Do retention policies influence student welfare and programming? If so, how did they influence student attitudes toward their college or university, and how did they influence the students’ overall educational experience?

The study explored participants’ experiences to shed light on the subject of retention strategy, and on the institutional environment both prior to and after retention strategy implementation. Understanding the chosen retention strategy and its impact will aid in future planning related to ensuring enrollment stability.

Methodology

Research approach. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative researchers are driven by an interest in developing a deeper understanding of a particular issue or concern. Stake (1995) stated that throughout a study, and after its completion, qualitative researchers often ask themselves whether or not their studies illuminated the issue. Student attrition is a significant fear for nearly all institutions of higher learning. But despite the numerous reasons to be concerned about student departure, very little is known about comprehensive institution-based efforts to improve student persistence or about the effectiveness of organized interventions to manage student persistence (Hossler, 2005). As such, designing a study that looks deeply at the issue of the consequences of student retention strategy and provides the field with a real-life, contextual understanding of the problem is crucial for broadly mitigating its affects. Therefore, this case study, focused on one particular institution of higher education and the central issue of the implications associated its retention strategy decisions, produced findings that provide a specific, multi-faceted illustration of the broader problem. According to Adelman, Kemmis and Jenkins (1980), a case study can increase understanding of how specific ideas and theoretical
principles fit together. By focusing research on a particular setting and a particular group of study participants, case studies provide a distinct example of “real people in real situations,” enabling the reader to grasp ideas more clearly than if they were presented as abstract theories (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 181).

To explore the possible secondary implications related to retention driven decision-making and to evaluate the collective, emergent themes of administrator recollection, this study used a qualitative investigative design. According to Snape and Spencer (2003), “Qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social worlds” (p. 3). Therefore, in order to use the lived-experience strengths associated with a qualitative research design, the researcher asked educational officials to reflect on their past professional experiences at the college, as well as to explain institutional decision-making in relation to the creation of a college retention initiative and in relation to its results and consequences).

**Research paradigm.** By interviewing specific school officials, the researcher sought to understand administrative experiences from the vantage point of “those who live it day to day” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). This interpretive approach provided the researcher with an investigative lens through which to consider how those at Metropolitan College begin to understand “the world as it is” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 28). According to Schwandt (2000) and Sciarra (1999), a constructivist position maintains that meaning is often obscured and must be revealed through considerable contemplation, and Ponterotto (2005) posited that this reflection can be motivated by cooperative researcher-participant dialogue. As such, through the use of qualitative interviews, educational officials shared their experiences and reflected on past
choices and professional philosophies. By speaking directly with participants at the site where they experienced the issue, and by using intricate reasoning skills, qualitative researchers are able to establish "patterns, categories, and themes" within the data (Creswell, 2013, p. 45)

**Role of the researcher.** Retention strategy assessment is often based on impartial measurement tools and statistical data such as cohort retention rates, institutional enrollment numbers, percentage of departing transfer students, program completions, and cohort graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding review of the possible resulting campus environments created by chosen retention strategies. It is the ensuing institutional dynamics (post-retention initiative) that are commonly discussed and debated internally through anecdotal evidence and the sharing of personal observations. Therefore, through a series of interviews, the researcher intended to provide select institutional officials with the opportunity to articulate their decision-making process and explain their post-strategy implementation experiences. It is only through this type of communication, Ponterotto (2005) theorized, that “deeper meaning can be uncovered” (pp. 128-129). To generate answers to the proposed research question, the researcher met with members of Metropolitan College’s administration and faculty and recorded their retention strategy experiences at the institution.

**Research Design Overview**

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000b), the process of describing and interpreting the experiences of study participants lies at the heart of qualitative research. This study explored the possible unplanned implications related to student-retention-driven decision making, as perceived by institutional officials at Metropolitan College, the study’s research site. The case study setting was a small (fewer than 4,500 enrolled undergraduate students), four-year liberal
arts college located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The institution offers more than 50 undergraduate majors, as well as four graduate-level programs of study. According to The Princeton Review, the college has an acceptance rate of 74%, with 39% of all incoming students posting a high school GPA 3.75 or above, and close to 100% of incoming undergraduate students receiving some form of financial aid. This study also involved a thorough review of the professional and administrative experiences shared by school officials during the academic years from 2010 through 2014. The research selected this timeframe as one characterized by considerable enrollment instability at the institution. The researcher sought to understand whether and how enrollment uncertainty (and the associated student retention related decisions during that timeframe, impacted on institutional operations.

As this particular institution began to experience an increase in student departures during this period, school officials made certain decisions to stabilize enrollment. This case study was designed to investigate how these retention-based decisions ultimately influenced enrollment figures, as well as how they influenced general campus harmony and operational objectives. By asking school officials to illuminate the implications of such decision-making, the researcher provided participants with the opportunity to explore the ramifications of retention policy for possible broader application.

According to Bryman (2006), qualitative research is frequently depicted as a flexible research strategy that often produces new and surprising insights. As such, a qualitative investigative design best accomplishes the evaluation of central emergent themes of administrator recollection. Rather than starting with a specific theory, Crotty (1998), Lincoln and Guba (2000), and Schwandt (2007) each posited that qualitative studies frequently allow researchers to generate or develop patterns of meaning through their investigative methods.
Schmid (1981) described qualitative research as the study of the empirical world from the vantage point of the study participant. As such, current and former Metropolitan College officials were asked to reflect upon their past professional experiences as well as explain their personal decision-making values, both efforts lending themselves to qualitative research that constructs interpretation from discussed experiences. As Ponterotto (2005) noted, “the researcher and her or his participants jointly create findings from their interactive dialogue” (p. 129). Similarly, Creswell (2013) posited that a researcher’s interpretation of a study participant’s recollections requires the investigator to “make sense of the meaning others have about the world” (p. 25).

**Research tradition.** According to Baxter and Jack (2008), the qualitative case study is an approach to research that “facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources” (p. 545). The authors continue by stating that using multiple sources of information guarantees that the issue being studied is not investigated through one lens, but rather through a multitude of lenses, thereby allowing for the illumination and understanding of multiple elements of the phenomenon. For this study, the researcher used a single-site, instrumental, case study approach to invest significant investigative energy into the myriad possible ramifications that influence original administrative decision-making on enrollment issues, and that arise due to these same institutional choices. The instrumental case study was selected over an intrinsic case study because of the universal role that student retention strategy occupies within the higher education environment. Stake (2000), writing in regards to instrumental case study research, posited that “the case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else” (p. 437). While an intrinsic case study allows the researcher to deeply explore the particular elements of one
specific case or set of experiences, instrumental case study research provides the researcher with the opportunity to investigate a specific issue. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), the investigative goal of an instrumental case study is to build a stronger understanding of a particular issue, rather than to establish a deeper command of the case itself.

This case study approach allowed the researcher to craft an investigation that neatly aligned with the theoretical framework guiding the study itself – the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996). By carefully exploring how one specific campus community was impacted directly and indirectly by retention strategy implementation, this study developed a deeper understanding of how these retention-related implications influence the perception of that institution’s service quality. In addition, by investigating how these retention initiatives may have effected student enrollment and institutional operations, this study provided a stronger understanding of how students respond to perceptions of an organization. This information can positively influence future policy creation.

Case study research is an approach based on theory building that is frequently used in organizational studies and throughout the social sciences. Since case study research is rooted in empirical data, it is likely to produce theory that is “accurate, interesting, and testable” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, pp. 25-26). According to Bromley (1986), the case study method provides researchers with opportunities to make direct observations and collect data in natural settings, rather than having to solely rely on data such as test results or statistics that may be considered “derived” (p. 23). Shavelson and Towne (2002) posited that using the case study method is appropriate when conducting research into either a “descriptive question (what happened?)” or an “explanatory question (how or why did something happen?)” (p. 99). Qualitative methodologists have acknowledged that case study methods provide researchers with
advantages by establishing internally valid and context-sensitive measures of concepts (Bennett & Elman, 2006).

Scholars have used case study research to develop theory on a wide array of topics including group processes (Bohmer, & Pisano, 2011), institutional change (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), and perhaps most importantly, the development of grounded theory in Glaser & Strauss’ (1967) Influential study focused on the interpretation of meaning by social actors. Stake (1995) and Yin (1994) appear to be most frequently cited as pivotal scholars in case study research. According to Jones et al. (2006), whereas phenomenology requires the interpretation of experiences to create understanding, case study research involves a “constructivist” approach to establishing meaning (p. 54). As such, the researcher chose case study methodology to drive this investigation in order to benefit from the “intensive, holistic, and descriptive analysis” that often develops through case study methodology (Merriam, 1998, p. 12).

**Participants and sampling.** The criterion-based sampling concept (Creswell, 2013) behind this research was to interview administrators who set retention-based policy and particular staff and faculty members who, in turn, had to respond to strategy impact following initiative implementation. A final pool of interview participants was selected from a preliminary listing of the following institutional personnel:

1. College President
2. Dean of Academic Services
3. Dean of Student Affairs
4. Dean of Business Affairs
5. Dean of Campus Operations
6. Director of Admissions
7. Director of Financial Aid
8. Director of Counseling Services
9. Director of Academic Advising
10. Director of Campus Safety
11. Director of Residence Life
12. Director of Student Activities and Orientation
13. Director of Athletics
14. Director of General Education
15. Director of Multi-Cultural Affairs
16. Director of Student Conduct
17. Coordinator of the First-Year Seminar
18. Chair of the Student Welfare Committee
19. Chairs of various academic and programmatic departments
20. Various veteran faculty members

From this group of campus leaders, the researcher confirmed the participation of a minimum of 8-12 college officials and staff and faculty members. With the confidential assistance of the study site, if an individual who had served in one of the aforementioned institutional roles during the period of review (2010-2014) was no longer were employed by the college, the researcher attempted to make contact with them to investigate their possible participation in the study.

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) posited that the intent of qualitative research is not to oversimplify what is learned through investigation, but to illuminate particular elements of the findings. Therefore, according to Patton (2002), “sample size depends on what you want to
know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resource” (p. 244). Jones, et al., (2006) stated that the process of collecting data and sampling is guided by the goal of taking advantage of presented opportunities to collect all pertinent data. Referencing Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) theory that the process of sampling involves a constant state of assessment, Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) note that at some point a researcher must conclude that either data-gathering opportunities have been maximized or that previously emerging themes now arise continuously to indicate that sufficient data has been collected. This process is referred to as sampling to redundancy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

**Recruitment and access.** The researcher’s intended study structure and practices strictly followed all Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes as set by Northeastern University (the researcher’s sponsoring institution). In addition, the researcher paid respect to the host site and its research requirements by deferring to its own IRB approval in order to avoid potential conflicts. Upon receiving IRB approval from both institutions (Appendix A), the researcher worked to secure interview subjects. Potential study participants were approached via personal email messages (Appendix B) requesting their involvement, with the contact providing a thorough explanation of the study, the reasons their specific involvement was being sought, and the potential institutional benefits that could result from their participation. After determining whether or not a specific school employee was a viable candidate for inclusion, the researcher then confirmed that candidate’s status of study participation.

**Informed consent.** The researcher distributed informed consent documents (Appendix C) for review and signature by each of those who had agreed to take part in the study. In addition, the researcher provided participants with an overview of the study prior to involvement.
This thorough explanation included discussion about the topic of the research, its importance to the field of education, and the possible benefits to the host site and to participating individuals. In addition, the researcher detailed methods for keeping participant identities strictly confidential. Those who chose to participate in the study were then informed of their ability to remove themselves from the interview process at any time.

**Ethical considerations and protection of human subjects.** Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2000) posited that ethical predicaments that may develop from an interview are challenging to foresee and that the researcher must be cognizant of sensitive topics and possible conflicts of interest. In addition, Orb et al. pointed out that while a research interview is typically structured to protect the participant, the interview process itself requires that the interviewee “share old secrets” and/or “open old wounds” (p. 94). As such, the researcher must be sensitive to how the interview poses new risks to both the researcher and interview subject alike.

The researcher selected for interview the senior officials at the study site who have implemented student retention measures in attempts to stabilize enrollment. Though the chance of participants experiencing physical or legal harm was negligible, the possibility of psychological, social, and economic risk was present, and participants were informed of these risks prior to participating in the study. All study participants took part on a voluntary basis and could have chosen not to participate or withdraw from participation at any time throughout the study’s timeline. In addition, study participants were provided with the opportunity not to answer particular interview questions.

**Confidentiality.** According to Baez (2002), theorists acknowledge the critical nature that confidentiality plays in research, in research focused on personal experience (Bresler, 1995;
Furthermore, Baez posited that through confidentiality, researchers seek to protect of individuals or groups that could be negatively affected in some way if their views are exposed.

In this case study, each participant was assured of their complete confidentiality, and informed that all information with potential identity revealing components (i.e. name, age, gender, position at the institution, years employed by Metropolitan College, etc.) would be either labeled with pseudonyms or not disclosed in the study report. All answers to interview questions, as well as subsequent discussion comments, were coded to ensure that an individual’s identity remained completely private. Each study participant was given the opportunity to review his or her interview answers to verify accuracy, and if discrepancies were found, the participant and researcher reviewed the transcribed answers to confirm accuracy. Because a transcription service used for the interview, a transcriber confidentiality agreement (Appendix D) was put into place.

**Data Collection**

**Semi-structured interviews.** In order to illustrate what may have occurred at Metropolitan College during this period of enrollment uncertainty, the researcher collected data in a variety of ways. Using the interview protocol found in Figure 2 below and in Appendix E, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews school administrators, staff and faculty to explore their decision-making processes and professional experiences. According to Drever (1995), qualitative researchers often use semi-structured interviews due to that technique’s flexibility in small-scale research. In addition, Laforest (2009) posited that since semi-structured interviews provide researchers with access to participants’ perceptions and opinions, the method is effective for gaining insight into issues that may not be immediately perceptible, but could
nevertheless cause concern in certain areas or for certain populations. Following the conclusion of a pilot study to refine the interview questions, the researcher asked interviewees open-ended questions related to their experiences in creating student retention policy and related to the ramifications of those policies once implemented. Study participants were interviewed once in person, and were offered follow-up phone calls to seek clarification of comments, although no participants accepted the offer for the phone call follow-up. The researcher recorded the particulars of each contact with specific study participants (date, time, location, and interview method). Individual interviews were scheduled for approximately one hour at a mutually agreed upon campus location.

Ahead of the scheduled interviews, and in order to gain contextual familiarity with the issue, the researcher reviewed general statistical data including cohort departure and retention figures. The researcher also collected and analyzed Student Affairs Department documents and Retention Committee meeting notes. The combined data sources provided the researcher with an important grasp of campus climate after implementation of the retention strategy.

**Interview protocol.** According to Rabionet (2011), the most crucial elements of an effectively constructed interview protocol relate to answering the following two questions: (a) How does the interviewer introduce themselves to the interview subject? and (b) What are the questions being asked of the participant? According to Rabionet (2011), the first element is crucial to establishing a positive rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, and Orb et al. (2001) theorized that the quality of social interaction between the researcher and participant may “facilitate or inhibit access to information” (p. 94). In addition, Rabionet (2011) posited, the social interaction between participant and researcher also directly influences the creation of a proper interview environment and is critical to stimulating consideration and ingenuous
comments from the interviewee. Specifically, Rabionet stated that the opening interaction between interview participants must be crafted by the researcher in a way that not only establishes a clear line of honest communication between the parties, but also makes the interviewee feel at ease and willing to share their experiences.

Perhaps the most crucial element for successful interviews is the proper development of interview questions and follow-up inquiries (Rabionet, 2011). Though previous literature on the subject matter helped guide the researcher in creating these questions, Rabionet suggested that seeking out consultation from experts in the field also assists in the careful crafting of effective interview questions that fit the subject being explored. Lastly, Rabionet (2011) theorized that beyond “paying close attention to the relationship between the questions asked and the content produced during the interviews,” researchers also must remain cognizant of whether or not the questions posed are perceived by the interview subjects to be courteous and socially sensitive (p. 564).

**Figure 2. Example of Study-Specific Interview Protocol**

---

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

**Position of interviewee:**

(Briefly describe the study while including statements of confidentiality, consent, options to withdraw from the study, and the planned use and scope of the results)

Questions:

1. How do institutional administrators formulate student retention strategies?
2. What are the strategies that aid student retention?
3. What were the intended goals of such actions, and what expectations did you have for the results?

---
4. Is there an optimal rate of annual student attrition? If so, what is it and how was it established?
5. What were the operational and decision-making implications of these strategies?
6. Do retention policies have an impact on or influence student welfare and programming? If so, how did the policies influence student attitudes toward the college or university and toward their overall educational experience?
7. How do retention policies influence your specific area of professional responsibility (i.e., your office or department)?
8. To whom should I speak to gather additional information about student retention strategy development and its impact on campus operations?

(Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure them of confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews and opportunities for member-checking).


Collecting multiple forms of data. To effectively create an in-depth picture of Metropolitan College and how it responded to enrollment instability between 2010 and 2014, the researcher investigated the many aspects of institutional decision making during this period. The researcher followed the recommendation of Yin (2009), who encourage the collection of multiple forms of data when conducting a case study, gathering data from sources including the aforementioned interviews, departmental documents, audiovisual materials, and researcher observation. Collecting data from multiple sources permitted the researcher to explore administrative decision making, operational implications, and student educational experiences on multiple levels. According to Encandela, Gehl, Silvestre, and Schelzel (1999), investigative efforts using multiple methods of inquiry often prove more powerful for eliciting responses than research that applies one approach. Encandela et al. (1999) theorized that findings combined from an array of investigative sources provide a wide-range of descriptive data, as well as added depth, that single investigative approaches may not offer. Information gleaned from a particular
data source can be verified through this multi-source approach, and using multiple data forms can allow implied information from one source to be confirmed through a second source. In this case, for example, a participant’s statement of perception can be confirmed through retention committee notes.

**Data Management**

**Data storage.** The researcher recorded all interviews in audio format using multiple recording devices – an Apple iPhone and a Sony hand-held micro recorder – to ensure that all exchanges were captured authentically and completely. According to Beddall-Hill, Jabbar, and Al Shehri (2011), researchers are beginning to recognize the potential of their own “social mobile devices” as viable research tools due to their transportability and affordability (p. 69). The authors contended that these qualities make devices like the iPhone especially appealing for data storage and the development of research when conducting research in unfamiliar settings, and noted that social mobile devices allow for “the capture of multiple data types, provide access to wider networks” and “can make backup of data easier and faster” (p. 69), thus compiling and preserving research data in a well-organized and timely manner.

All files and documents associated with the study were secured in a locked storage unit at the researcher’s private residence. The recording devices used for the study, as well as the password-protected hard drives, and the external flash drives used to temporarily store documents were also secured safely at the researcher’s home. Once an interview was completed, its contents were transcribed and then reviewed by the participant to confirm accuracy. Once the research project was formally completed and submitted, all hard copies, along with any identity revealing characteristics and information, were destroyed. All previously saved electronic files were permanently deleted. Any remaining documents or files related to the study will be
destroyed 10 after the project’s completion. Throughout the study, only the researcher, the study’s principal investigator, and the members of the researcher’s doctoral thesis review committee had access to the raw data.

**Data analysis.** All research components, including interview tapes, discussion notes, documents, etc., were uploaded by the researcher into ATLAS.ti, a software program designed to organize, manage, and analyze textual, visual, and audio-visual data. According to Alvira-Hammond (2012), ATLAS.ti software is used across many academic disciplines and provides a flexible interface to aid the visual management of data and the transcription of multimedia files. In addition, Alvira-Hammond posited that ATLAS.ti software is more user-friendly than other software programs because it comes with a complement of instructional manuals, webinars, video tutorials and online support. A visual example of this coding software can be found in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3.** A Basic Working Layout Screen of ATLAS.ti Coding Software
According to Weitzman (1999), computer software for qualitative analysis can provide “speed, consistency, rigor, and access to analytic methods not available by hand” (p. 1241), explaining that software not only greatly speeds up analysis and tracks many aspects of the data in connection with one another, but also ensures consistency and completeness of data review.

The researcher arranged common interview discussion points and topics brought forward by the study’s participants into themes for analysis. Given the relatively small sample group of 12 school officials interviewed, the researcher was able to conduct a comprehensive review of each conversation and used a “descriptive coding” process (Saldana, 2009) to illuminate significant or central themes of discussion revealed by the interview subjects. Descriptive coding – one of many first-cycle coding methods such as NVivo, process, initial, narrative, hypothesis, and evaluation coding) – is a basic method that typically uses the nouns of the content being processed to keep general facts clear and manageable. These initial summaries, or “codes” of the data serve as the foundation of “the lessons to be learned” from the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 362).

After establishing an initial set of codes, the researcher used the Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis process to gain a deeper understanding of the content being studied. Thematic analysis is the term used for method of identifying, analyzing, organizing and reporting patterns of content within data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The process calls for the reading and re-reading of the transcripts and associated codes in order to determine potential points of analytical interest. Thematic analysis involves as many as six independent phases of content review that groups like codes into larger themes and revises them by identifying significant patterns in the interview transcripts. The penultimate step of this process involves engaging in a detailed
analysis of the data in each theme in order to further refine categories and their organization, after which comes the final revision that establishes the significance of the data in the context of the existing theory and research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

All transcripts generated from the interview process were formally member checked by the interview participants themselves to assure data accuracy. In addition, an independent third party (a veteran higher education official with no connection to Metropolitan College) reviewed the research process itself to ensure its legitimacy and integrity. The researcher reviewed all documents and non-interview-related information received through the research process, a process that allowed the researcher to analyze meeting documents, organizational summaries, and student-life-related statistics to confirm whether or not any of the operational or student life issues discussed in the interviews manifested themselves in a documented institutional component such as department meetings, staff goals/objectives, or department reviews. This step served to identify interrelating themes in the data. At no time was any of the specific information generated from interviews discussed with individuals who did not provide that specific subject matter. Individual identities and all response-related information was kept strictly confidential.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Creswell (2013), “interpretive research is a chain of interpretations that must be documented for others to judge the trustworthiness of the meanings arrived at in the end” (p. 248). After creating a narrative discussion summarizing the study’s initial findings, the researcher used a formal triangulation process to compare interview data with secondary source data such as internal departmental documents, institutional retention statistics, and committee meeting minutes in order to confirm the authenticity of the preliminary results. The researcher
also used a member check process to ensure data accuracy, sharing first findings with participants for confirmation of clarity and validity. Specifically, the researcher chose to use Maxwell’s (1996) respondent validation process to ensure that all notes taken during the study faithfully represented the comments offered by the individual interview subjects.

**Threats to Integrity of the Research**

A potential threat to the integrity of this study involved the researcher’s own familiarity with retention strategy creation. Though Creswell (2013) theorized that the researcher “interacts with the research” to “co-create the interpretations derived” (p. 248), every effort was made to limit private bias in the analysis of participant responses. Aamodt (1982) theorized that the qualitative approach to research is reflexive, in that the researcher is a part of the research being conducted and not detached from it. As such, Aamodt posited that research situations are dynamic, and that the researcher is a participant in the investigative process, rather than merely an observer. Similarly, Krefting (1991) said that qualitative researchers must be willing to analyze themselves in the context of the research being conducted in order to ensure research integrity, and concluded by stating that upon entering a qualitative investigative environment, researchers must constantly reflect upon on their own characteristics and examine how they may influence data gathering and analysis.

The researcher acknowledged the processing challenges that resulted from his personal experience with retention strategy, making every effort to simply report the study participants’ experiences and avoiding any interpretation of their comments through the lends of his own experience and knowledge. The researcher attempted to protect the quality and legitimacy of the study by allowing participants’ personal reflections to create more of a conversation-based interview than a scripted interview session and by avoiding any formulating of a particular theme.
that might be unfounded in the eyes of the participants. On the other hand, Hanson (1994) posited that a researcher’s subjective knowledge of a subject, setting, or site can be positive, and that, in some cases, the effectiveness of the investigative effort is dependent upon that prior relationship or setting understanding. Similarly, Ashworth (1986) asserted that the thorough understanding of an insider is beneficial for conducting pertinent and insightful qualitative research. Greenwood (1984) supported Ashworth’s theory, claiming that if the researcher does not share contextual understanding of the setting with study participants, he or she is likely to misinterpret the behavior of interview subjects.

According to Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001), integrity becomes significant in the critical reflection and examination of qualitative research. Furthermore, the authors posited that the potential bias of interpretive research acknowledges the researcher as an individual who may construe data distinctively (Johnson, 1999), but integrity must be demonstrated in the process to order to guarantee that the interpretation is effective and grounded within the data. However, Johnson (1999) contended that if investigators are self-critical and pursue integrity at each stage of the investigation, indiscriminating procedures and researcher belief could be prevented. In this study, in order to limit all threats to the integrity of the study and to reaffirm procedural neutrality and reliability, the researcher employed the practice of peer review, submitting the research process to the examination of an autonomous, trusted colleague unrelated to Metropolitan College. In addition, to further minimize the impact of the researcher’s personal history with the study site and the college’s retention initiatives, the researcher formally acknowledged this potential bias and chose to reveal these past relationships and experiences to study participants. Should study participants have questioned the researcher’s ability to
construct an unbiased process, they were provided with the opportunity to choose not to join the study itself.

A second concern in regards to study authenticity involved the extended period of time the research required. Though interview subjects only needed to be available for periodic meetings and conversations with the researcher, the comprehensive research process may be considered lengthy in that it required interview subjects to reflect on experiences that took place months, and even years, previously. The length of time that participants were asked to recall had the capacity to dilute the factual capability of their memories of a particular experiences or personal responses. Though the passage of time may have naturally impacted recall, the researcher made every effort to sharpen the reflection process. For example, researcher remained in consistent contact with the interview subjects and provided them with the data they generated, a process that provided member checking of the data, and also kept participants squarely focused on the immediate information they had recently provided, thereby decreasing the likelihood of memories changing due to a perceived gap in researcher/participant communication.

Limitations

According to Eisenhardt (1989), case study research has strengths for developing theory, but can also create weaknesses. Specifically, Eisenhardt stated that the extensive use of empirical data captured within a case study can result in the construction of theory that is excessively complex. Eisenhardt (1989) warned that when gathering large quantities of data in a case study, researchers may feel compelled to develop theory that captures everything they unearthed, perhaps losing their sense of proportion as they review large quantities of rich data.
Given this study’s effort to interview multiple Metropolitan College administrators and faculty members, the opportunity for collecting voluminous and unwieldy data was present.

A second potential limitation of this study relates to another potential pitfall of case study research in general – the possibility that building theory from case study research may result in “narrow and idiosyncratic theory” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 547). Eisenhardt posited that case study theory creation is a “bottom up approach” such that specific data points produce larger, more general themes within a theory (p. 547). As such, Eisenhardt theorized that theory developed from case study research can misguidedlly describe a personalized phenomenon or that the researcher may be unable to raise the level of theory from the specific to a transferrable generality. This possibility existed in the case of this study, as Metropolitan College is just one of many different types of higher education institution throughout the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, each with its own academic profile, trends in student enrollment, financial status, and operational structure, and that therefore the results from a study of Metropolitan College may not apply to the same issue at other schools.

Despite the claim by Walton (1992) that case study research often produces the strongest theory, an additional limitation of this research, as described by Flyvberg (2006), may be the fact that the case study method can tend toward validating a researcher’s existing ideas. Flyvberg posited that case study research has a propensity for confirming a researcher’s predetermined ideas, so that the study therefore becomes of increased value to the environment being investigated. Though the researcher used triangulation and member-checking processes to assist in the validation of all collected data, the interpretive elements of case study research required that the researcher make a concerted effort set aside preconceived notions and allow the uncovered data to produce themes organically.
Chapter Summary

Bai and Pan (2009) posited that factors influencing student retention have been well studied, and that strategies for reducing the rates of student departure have been implemented throughout the field of higher education. But other research points to the fact that institutional officials need additional information to develop successful retention programs, and points out that evaluation of existing retention strategies plays a critical role (Tinto, 2006a; Wang & Grimes, 2000). Tinto (2006a) comments, “Though it is apparent that evaluation is an essential component of the development of successful retention programs, it is surprising how little attention programs give to even the most elementary forms of assessment” (p. 9), pointing out, along with others, that there are still some resultant factors not yet fully understood (Tinto, 2006b; Titus, 2004). According to York and Tross (1994), institutions must guard against accepting the creation of a project or initiative and the means for its installation without proper acknowledgement of the need to evaluate outcomes pertinent to the stated goals. In today’s higher education climate – a climate that stresses outcomes measurement, and that sees the evaluation of a program’s cost effectiveness as essential – thorough analysis of a program’s effectiveness and institutional contribution will provide educational officials with the opportunity to better appraise and communicate the value of their programs (Congos & Schoeps, 1997).
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how college officials and faculty members at a Mid-Atlantic college perceived the effects of the retention strategy implemented by their institution during a period of enrollment instability from 2010 through 2014. To that end, the researcher used an instrumental case study design centered around semi-structured interviews Metropolitan College’s staff and faculty members of Metropolitan College. The research question investigated through this study was: How do the effects of enrollment instability and the resultant student retention decisions impact institutional operations?

Participant Vignettes

For this study, the researcher interviewed 12 current and former Metropolitan College employees, all of whom worked in an administrative or teaching capacity. To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, the researcher created pseudonyms to use in the place of names or positions. Accordingly, participants were identified by pseudonyms for their name of position, as well as by the relevant department, broad age designation, and ethnicity and gender labels, as follows:

1. Imprudence Controller, Student Affairs, 30s, White male
2. Care Attendant, Campus Operations, 40s, White male
3. Franz Boas, Student Affairs, 40s, African-American male
4. Interest Advocate, Student Affairs, 30s, White female
5. Ringmaster, Administration, 50s, African-American female
6. Florence Nightingale, Faculty, 40s, White female
7. Zoo Keeper, Administration, 50s, White male
8. Cultural Relativism Liaison, Enrollment Services, 40s, Hispanic female
9. Theoretical Service Provider, Administration, 50s, White female
10. Gatekeeper, Enrollment Services, 30s, White female
11. Immanuel Kant, Faculty, 50s, White male
12. Gestalt, Student Affairs, 40s, White male

The researcher used broad department or area labels to encompass broad categories of positions or subject areas, as follows:

- Administration: indicates senior presidential cabinet-level offices;
- Campus Operations: indicates Campus Safety, Human Resources, Facility Services, Special Events, and the Bookstore;
- Enrollment Services: includes Admissions, Financial Aid, and the Registrar;
- Faculty: includes various academic departments; and
- Student Affairs: includes the Office of the Dean of Students, Student Activities, Orientation, Intercultural Student Life and Global Programming, Athletics and Recreation, Spiritual Life, Housing, Dining, Counseling Services, Health Services, Residence Life, Judicial Affairs, Student Accessibility Services, Greek Life, and the CARE Team.

Each participant offered unique insights into Metropolitan College’s retention strategy as a result of their varied positions at the college. The participants’ demographic profile consisted of: one African-American male (8% of the participant pool); one African-American female (8% of the participant pool); one Hispanic female (8% of the participant pool); six white males (50% of the participant pool); and three white females (25% of the participant pool). The majority (42%) of the participants were in their 40s, with 33% of participants being in their 50s (33%), and 25% being in their 30s (25%). Each school employee presented valuable information regarding the impacts of the varying retention strategies on the college, particularly as they related to students and institutional staff and faculty members.

**Preliminary Analysis Findings**

The researcher conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with the aid of an interview guide, yielding 16 hours of data. Findings were then derived from analyses of the individual transcripts by assigning codes to quotes in order to identify emerging themes. Codes were
assigned according to common concepts identified throughout the transcripts, reflecting the seven primary themes that emerged from the initial analysis: (a) retention problem factors; (b) retention goals; (c) retention policy impacts; (d) retention strategies (e) retention strategy formulation; (f) retention strategy implementation; and (g) lessons learned. As shown in Table 1 below, the primary themes were further refined into associated subthemes according to the number of participants who made comments related to that concept.

Table 1. Themes and Associated Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Response rate (n=12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retention goals</td>
<td>Retention rate</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attrition rate</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention problem factors</td>
<td>Underprepared/unqualified</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special admits</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention policy impacts</td>
<td>Student impacts</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff and faculty impacts</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive impacts</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention strategies</td>
<td>Back-on-track program</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summer bridge program</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support services</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Warning system</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention strategy formulation</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Departments</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention strategy implementation</td>
<td>Operationalization</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prioritization</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other universities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Retention goals. The primary theme of retention goals included the two interrelated subthemes of retention rate and attrition rate. While retention rate refers to the percentage of students within a specific cohort who are retained from one year to the next, attrition rate is associated with the percentage of students within a cohort who do not persist from one year to
another and leave school. Accordingly, 58% of participants mentioned that between 2010 and 2014, Metropolitan College had a first-year-to-second-year student retention goal of approximately 80%-85%, with an acceptable attrition rate ranging between 15% and 20%. Given the interrelated nature of retention rate and attrition rate, the overall sentiments of the respondents are best summarized by the Theoretical Service Provider, who commented:

Because they were previously losing 25%, in a relative spectrum, 16% looked pretty darn good. Again, it's unrealistic to think you're going to retain 100% of them. The point of fact is, not every student is ready for college. They find their way to your campus on orientation day for a variety of different reasons. There's some aspects of retention that I think the school can impact. There are some aspects of it that are beyond your control. That's why 16% was okay, because that should represent the majority of things that are beyond your influence.

The comments made by participants regarding retention rate goals were confirmed by documents acquired from Metropolitan College, which plainly stated that the college had an 80% retention rate goal in 2012. Despite this goal, documents further confirmed that in 2012, Metropolitan College experienced an actual first-year-to-second-year student retention rate of 75%, which placed its attrition rate at 25%. In reviewing the comments of all participants, a major take away from all retention goal commentary for the period of 2011-2012 involved how the institution’s retention committee (first formed in 2008, and reconstituted in 2011) had begun investigating exactly why the institutional retention rate had dropped to 75% after years of higher and relatively stable rates of persistence. According to participant labeled as Immanuel Kant, this deeper investigation was the first of its kind. He said: “I don’t remember ever hearing about
retention, never getting much information on what our retention rates were. I don’t recall much discussion about what our retention goals should be until it became a problem.”

One significant finding from the Retention Committee’s deeper examination into its institutional rate of attrition was the realization of how different segments of the student population were being retained at different rates. As noted by the Zoo Keeper, “The number one goal and the clear goal was to try to increase the retention percentage from freshman to sophomore, because that was the biggest group we were losing. Similarly, the Retention Committee discovered how students involved in certain fields of study or students who had yet to formally choose an academic major were also being retained at much lower levels than other segments of the student population.”

**Retention problem factors.** A total of 10 participants (83%) provided insight into the contributing factors associated with Metropolitan College’s retention problems between 2010 and 2014. The participants whose knowledge allowed for a better understanding of the retention problems included the Imprudence Controller, Franz Boas, the Interest Advocate, Florence Nightingale, the Zoo Keeper, the Cultural Relativism Liaison, the Theoretical Service Provider, the Gatekeeper, Immanuel Kant, and Gestalt. The Cultural Relativism Liaison described just how prepared the institution was to tackle a rising retention issue, saying, “During the period of 2010 and 2014, there was no additional support, no additional retention efforts than what we had already.” The three subthemes that emerged in association with the primary theme of retention problems included (a) underprepared/unqualified, (b) special admits, and (c) attrition factors (financial), discussed below.

**Underprepared/unqualified.** According to five participants (or 42%), the admittance of unqualified and underprepared students was a primary factor that contributed to retention
problems. For the purposes of this study, an underprepared or unqualified student refers to a student, who despite gaining proper admission to the institution, may not have had the appropriate academic profile to succeed, and ultimately struggles significantly, be it academically or socially. As the Imprudence Controller explained in the following comment: “I think the other piece of that that I can't ignore though is the high number of underprepared students that were brought into the college at that time did not care about those efforts, because they weren't really set up for success to begin with.” The Zoo Keeper made a similar observation, reflecting, “That was a huge part of it that we realized retention is going to be what retention is, because a lot of our students, they were just not prepared.” In a final example of the comments made regarding the unprepared and unqualified nature of students during that time period, Gestalt remarked: “There were students that should never have been admitted to the college, or if they were admitted to the college, it should have been very clear to the community that we are bringing in some very marginal, don't meet our expectations, students because we needed to fill seats.”

**Special admits.** The special admits subtheme is directly related to the previously mentioned issues of underprepared and unqualified students. This particular subtheme, however, was informed by responses related to students who were specifically considered to be students admitted with less than the standard academic expectations for acceptance. According to the Metropolitan College Retention Blueprint from 2012, special admits were students whose profiles included combined SAT scores below 950 or ACT scores below 20. Additionally, the SAT scores for this population were not included in formal institutional reporting processes to the College Board. The retention blueprint further recorded that in the fall semester of 2011, only 65% of special admits were retained, which meant this population suffered an attrition rate
of 35%. By the fall of 2010, the number of special admits had grown to more than 300, from 98 in the fall of 2005. In addition, by fall 2012, there were large differences among the percentages of applications, admits and enrollees in the special admit category. While one-third of all Metropolitan College applicants fell into the special admit category (they had combined SAT scores below 950), just 13% of all admits were considered special admits. However, by fall 2012, 22% of all enrollees (239 out of the 1,084 enrollees) fell within the special admit category. The retention problem related to special admits was best explained in the following comment made by Immanuel Kant:

Only subsequently did we find out that that was because they had a lot of these special admits, but we didn't know any of that. We weren't given the tools necessary to anticipate that. We weren't given information about where our students might be academically before the start of the new school year so that we could pitch our courses appropriately.

Echoing Immanuel Kant’s frustration with the special admits between 2010 and 2014, the Zoo Keeper remarked that “the most difficult part was to make decisions on those discretionary admits. It wasn't very strategic.”

By 2011, when it was discovered that the special admit population was being retained at a particularly low rate, Franz Boas explained that Metropolitan College was left with the challenging question of how to manage the matriculation of this group. He said:

When the retention numbers were down, I think that led them (senior leadership) to wanting to get away from those students. The college did a poor job of weaning itself off of it (offering admission to Special Admits). They just went cold turkey and had no other
areas to make up the difference. You saw a loss of 200 students in one year, which is ridiculous. It was absurd.

**Financial.** The final subtheme associated with retention problems was derived from comments related to the contributing factors leading to the attrition rate between 2010 and 2014. To that end, the Imprudence Controller, the Care Attendant, the Interest Advocate, Franz Boas, and the Ring Master made assertions that financial concerns (or whether or not a student could afford his/her college attendance) played an important role in the attrition rate. More specifically, the comments made by participants linked the financial component with the overall success of the college. As shown in Table 2 below, some comments made by participants in relation to the role that finances play identified the deleterious effects poor financial planning can have on providing key services to students, which, in turn, results in higher attrition rates.

**Table 2. Financial Factor Quotes Related to Retention Problems**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ringmaster</td>
<td>Financial is a factor because students will be able to come and piece together the money for the first year and then have no idea where they're going to get the rest of it. Or they come in and they borrow money and then they've reached their max, so finances has something to do with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care Attendant</td>
<td>Yeah, I think obviously, number one is going to be financial. What's the financial impact on our attrition rate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest Advocate</td>
<td>I don’t know if that was something we really thought through very well. I think the focus was so much on enrollment numbers; numbers and dollar signs all the time, that I think we missed an important piece. Student satisfaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franz Boas</td>
<td>That for me would be some of the factors, which is really the financial piece and how it's built onto those different areas (i.e., how revenue generated from first year and second year students is typically higher than that of upper classmen and utilized to offset operational costs).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Retention policy impacts.** There were three subthemes that emerged in relation to the primary theme of retention policy impacts: (a) staff and faculty impacts, (b) student impacts, and (c) positive impacts. Specifically, staff and faculty impacts related to how retention strategy effects the staff and faculty experience, while student impacts referred to how implemented
retention practices effect the student experience, and positive impacts related to determinations that a retention policy had a constructive effect on the campus community. Table 3 below presents a summary of the subthemes and the specific participants whose comments resulted in their formulation.

**Table 3. Retention Policy Impacts Subthemes and Contributing Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff and Faculty Impacts</td>
<td>Imprudence Controller, Care Attendant, Franz Boas, Interest Advocate, Ringmaster, Zoo Keeper, Cultural Relativism Liaison, Theoretical Service Provider, Gatekeeper, Immanuel Kant, &amp; Gestalt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Impacts</td>
<td>Imprudence Controller, Franz Boas, Interest Advocate, Ringmaster, Florence Nightingale, Zoo Keeper, Cultural Relativism Liaison, Theoretical Service Provider, &amp; Gestalt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Impacts</td>
<td>Imprudence Controller, Franz Boas, Interest Advocate, Ringmaster, Zoo Keeper, Cultural Relativism Liaison, Theoretical Service Provider, Gatekeeper, &amp; Gestalt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Staff and faculty impacts.** Participants revealed that there was a lack of communication related to the special admits, which made their jobs more difficult. This issue was articulated in a comment made by the Zoo Keeper, who said, “Also, looking at the initiatives and strategies that we were using and to be quite candid with you, I'm not quite sure how you can use this, was that we were not accurately informed of the profile coming in. It put us at a disadvantage.” The Cultural Relativism Liaison relayed similar sentiments, saying, “There was a lack of communication between administrative services or enrollment management, what it's called now, with the academic side of the house. The academic affairs office did not know what students were coming in, and our academic profile was thought to have not changed because there was data that was not included in our profile.”

On a different note, the Imprudence Controller identified retention policy impact on staff and faculty in relation to staffing problems, by stating, “I just remember the implication being, people felt really stressed out and overworked. Morale was a problem because they didn't feel like that they were succeeding in getting out and talking with students.” Franz Boas also
mentioned impacts associated with inadequate staffing, in that he felt like they “were always playing catch-up.” Gestalt, however, reflected on how the recruitment practices impacted professional staff members’ workload, explaining, “We’re having to work with students a little beyond what we probably wanted to. It really pushes right up against the threshold of where they should absolutely not be here. We don’t make those decisions. That’s a cost. Everyone will pay a bit of a price.”

Lastly, the Theoretical Service Provider illuminated how the institution’s significant focus on improving the retention of at-risk groups reduced the amount of time and resources staff and faculty could spend on supporting programs that were historically impactful in a positive sense (e.g. student research and capstone experiences), saying, “The fact that this was all-consuming limited the ways in which we could navigate at the other end of the spectrum, to look at high impact practices…or ways that we could elevate that (those programs) to a point of significance or distinction at the institution; programs that we might have been able to draw (students) to.”

**Student impacts.** Faculty and staff perceptions of the impacts that retention strategies were having on students are presented in Table 4 below.
### Table 4 Participant Quotes Associated with Student Impacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imprudence Controller</td>
<td>I think half, about half of the students felt that they were a valued member of the community that was getting attention that they needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest Advocate</td>
<td>Students were aware that there was a retention issue and that the college was working on that, again at that more engaged level. Your average student who maybe wasn’t involved in something wouldn’t know the difference or could have cared less, until there was something to complain about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care Attendant</td>
<td>I can go back to 2005, 2006 and students would come in our office and the number of people that came in with attitudes and the way they responded to our staff and the accusations that they would make about us not working, not being in their best interest, compared to the now is night and day (i.e. students perceive this department to be far more engaged and available to the student body than in years’ past).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franz Boas</td>
<td>By saying overall, we’re talking about the overall student body as opposed to the targeted retention areas of students. I would say overall, no (i.e. general student retention was not improved). I would say only from the standpoint of the folks that were targeted, especially with the undeclared piece.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Positive impacts.** Despite the problems associated with the difficult time period from 2010 through 2014, interview participants did mention some positive impacts that retention initiatives had on the staff, faculty and students. The majority of participants (58%) specifically mentioned the positive impacts that improvements in student programming had on retaining students beyond their first year. For example, the Interest Advocate commented, “I think that there were some positive pieces that came out of it, some positive programs, programming components that came out of it. I think that was good, because it drove us to just be a little bit smarter in how, at least within student life, how were reaching out to students, engaging students, programming for students.” The positive impacts on student engagement were also confirmed by the Imprudence Controller, who remarked that “We got out and got more involved face-to-face with student's lives and students knew that.” Similarly, Franz Boas remarked as to how the focus on retention efforts reinvigorated many of those working directly with students, saying, “I think the folks who were involved with the Summer Bridge, or retention really, they saw the shift of it
being this feed into this action type of thing, which I think was empowering. They saw an opportunity to really have an impact on people. However, in looking broadly at the positive effect of an increased focus on retention, the Theoretical Service Provider commented on the change felt throughout campus professional culture: “

Once we got everybody together around a table, joined forces if you will, they began to see how their work could synergize. I think that’s one of the most positive outcomes of the way in which Metropolitan built their retention efforts during this timeframe.”

**Retention strategies.** Ten interview participants (83%) spoke about specific retention strategies that were implemented during the period of enrollment instability at Metropolitan College. Information gleaned from further analysis of the interview transcripts revealed the following five subthemes associated with retention strategies: (a) the Back-on-Track program, (b) the Summer Bridge program, (c) support services, (d) warning systems, and (e) outcomes. Each of these subthemes is expanded on in the discussion below.

**Back-on-Track program.** Five staff and faculty members (42% of participants) mentioned the Back-on-Track program, which was initiated to aid students who were struggling academically. This program, which is maintained through the Academic Advising Center, was designed to assist students whose cumulative GPA has fallen below a 2.0, resulting in academic probationary status. Students participating in the Back-on-Track program work directly with a professional adviser to identify and overcome the obstacles and deficiencies that have impeded their academic progress. The Ringmaster explained the philosophy behind the creation of the Back-on-Track program:

One of the things that we did say was, why wait until they really bomb the first semester?

What are the warning signs? If they get a warning notice that they are in jeopardy of
failing two courses, then the Back-on-Track program now kicks in immediately so that they don’t have that.

The Zoo Keeper, Gestalt, the Gatekeeper, and the Interest Advocate all made similar comments related to the Back-on-Track program. Their sentiments are best encapsulated by the comment made by the Zoo Keeper:

They developed the Back-on-Track program for probably 50 to 60 students. I say that with regard to resources, advisors, and counselors. The one semester of '11, '12 the '12, '13 in those two years there, but particularly in the first year that we had the Back-on-Track program going into the second, that the wagon broke. It was designed for 50 or 60 and we had 250 students that were in a range to be on the Back-on-Track program.

The Imprudence Controller also shared comments that expanded upon the concerns related to the introduction and management of the Back-on-Track program, saying:

They had a huge number of people that found themselves in that Back-on-Track program. The lean staff and faculty charged with being involved were overworked. It’s one of those theory to practice breakdowns. In theory, the program was great, the rationale and mission was really good. But in practice, it was extremely taxing because people didn’t have advisers and other folks involved.

*Support services.* The importance of support service strategies was mentioned by five participants: the Care Attendant, the Ringmaster, Florence Nightingale, the Zoo Keeper, and the Cultural Relativism Liaison. Support services refer to the programs, offices and practices that directly support student experiences and/or student well-being, both inside and outside of the classroom. The Zoo Keeper offered an explanation of the expansion of student related services during this period:
We’ve designed new programs, added additional resources, and the students have plugged into them, the assessments that have been done. On our feedback in focus groups to discuss the student experience, the overwhelming response from students is that people here care, the professionals care, the faculty are accessible. The administrators and the helping services are accessible.

To improve the chances of the successful implementation of increased support services, an attempt to ensure alignment between curricular and co-curricular programming was undertaken. The Theoretical Service Provider described this process:

The academic division had a role to play. Then we had Student Affairs. When we began to align that work, it became less like Student Affairs was just the glitter and posters and balloons, and Academic Affairs was really the meat of the experience. We are able to make purposeful connections between what students were learning through those student programs and how they were translating and transferring it back to their academic experience.

Additionally, multiple interview participants highlighted the critical nature of providing students with direct, supportive attention. For instance, the Care Attendant stated:

This year compared to 2005, there's no comparison with how many situations we have to or are called upon to assist students. We have to be the counselors, we have to be the mental health experts, have to be the medical people here, or at least be able to get them to where they need to go.

**Summer Bridge program.** The Summer Bridge program was a consistent topic brought up in relation to strategies aimed at assisting underperforming students. This particular venture at Metropolitan College involved incoming first-year students who are considered to have not yet
reached their academic potential, or are conditional candidates for admission, who attend a five-week summer academic enrichment program on campus. Six study participants (50%) spoke about the Summer Bridge program. According to the Ringmaster, “the Summer Bridge program is designed to take students who are coming in who are less academically prepared to give them a four- to five-week experience.” Although the Summer Bridge program is now thought of as a successful strategy at Metropolitan College, that was not necessarily the case during the years that are the focus of this study (2010 through 2014). Immanuel Kant questioned its effectiveness:

The Bridge program I think was not a success, and it’s targeted to just a small group of students, and it’s a big resource because you’ve got a bunch of administrators spending time on a small group of students, and the retention rate of this group I don’t think is any better than the overall retention rate.

Franz Boas shared similar concerns over the efficacy of this program in relation to overall institutional retention goals, stating that “The Bridge piece, you’re talking about anywhere between 19 and 24 students a year every year. You’re talking about 2% of the population that was coming in…very small percentage. It wasn’t offered to everyone either.”

Ownership for this specific retention initiative was also a challenge for the institution. Though school officials understood how retention improvement required contributions from multiple campus constituents, specific school officials disagreed on exactly where leadership authority for the Summer Bridge program should reside. This produced a leadership model for the program that interview participants said lacked a cohesive and unified message. The Theoretical Service Provider explained, “We kind of happened into a bit of a turf war with the then-Dean of Academic Affairs. They thought the bridge program should live with a general
education committee. We thought it should live somewhere else.” Despite this disagreement and lack of a dedicated owner of the retention initiative, the introduction of the Summer Bridge initiative represented a change in the retention related landscape of the institution, as demonstrated in the Cultural Relativism Liaison’s comment that “During 2010 [through] 2014 there was absolutely nothing for the students.”

**Warning systems.** Five participants (42%) mentioned the implementation of warning systems (such as the Student Referral System) that alert at-risk students about their academic standing. Specifically, this practice involves academic advising staff collaborating with faculty members and student affairs staff to comprehensively monitor the academic and social well-being of the student body. In a classroom example of the system, academic advisors send warning grades at mid-semester to students who are in jeopardy of failing a course. The staff and faculty members whose responses identified this subtheme included the Imprudence Controller, Florence Nightingale, the Zoo Keeper, the Gatekeeper, and Immanuel Kant. The Imprudence Controller explained the warning system strategy as “a strategy for retaining students, because you have to sit down and see who's struggling and really pay attention to those people right away, because you're trying to keep them in school.” The Gatekeeper further said that Metropolitan College has “a pretty good advising office that keeps track of warning grades and things, things that catch students from not doing well.”

However, this alert system also provided staff and faculty with an instrument for discussing students who may be strong candidates for drop-out or transfer. Franz Boas explained this tool:

Through [the new retention committee structure and the increased prioritization of enrollment stability by the president] came a retention alert where faculty, staff were able
to identify a student who discussed leaving or they knew was washing out. They could put some information into this mechanism that would deliver data. It would at least help us have a better understanding. That was information that we weren’t getting on the front end of an enrollment standpoint.

**Outcomes.** Eight participants (67%) spoke about the outcomes of the retention strategies. This subtheme refers to a particular conclusion that can be drawn from the implementation of a particular strategy or group of strategies. A few of the responses from these participants are presented in Table 5 below.

**Table 5. Participant Quotes Related to Retention Strategy Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Franz Boas</td>
<td>Initially, I felt good about it (the retention strategy outcomes), especially the Bridge program. I think about if we were able to take the academic structure from the first year, and I noticed out of the range of the 2010 to 2014, and the social support structure of the second year and merge them, it would have made a perfect model. I felt good about that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoo Keeper</td>
<td>What we didn't know is that there were some that were operating not on the same page. For example, those working on the retention committee were not privy to what, completely what, and it wasn't transparent, what the admissions staff was doing to get students and numbers. As a result, I can say that it became an issue and one that we had to report to Middle States accreditation, because we were not putting out information in a couple categories including our academic profile, that were accurate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immanuel Kant</td>
<td>Well, I think in terms of, say, faculty reports, the goal was to get faculty a little more involved in the sense that is a student does say, “I’m not returning,” the faculty member can at least alert Advising, or Student Affairs, or Student Services, whatever that division was called.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care Attendant</td>
<td>When in the years that we accepted more than we had in the past, one outcome I can tell you is our number of incidents and problems went up (e.g. student disciplinary issues). There’s no question about it. I could go year by year. When we recruited more students from that lower tier of applicants, we had more disciplinary problems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Retention strategy formulation.** The strategies were formulated through a process that was spearheaded by the president of the college. According to staff and faculty members who had insight into the formulation of retention strategies, the process should have involved both specific departments and collaboration among departments. Six participants (50%) mentioned the importance of collaboration, and 10 interviewees (83%) commented about the specific departments involved in the retention strategy formulation process. Four participants (33%) also
identified the importance of looking at the retention strategies that other universities had implemented when formulating new retention approaches. Table 6 below displays a few of the participants’ quotes related to the three subthemes associated with the primary retention strategy formulation theme. While collaboration refers to the ability of professional staff members to actively communicate with and assist one another, while the term “departments” is associated with particular professional working units within the campus operational structure.

Table 6. Retention Strategy Formulation Subthemes and Associated Quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Imprudence Controller</td>
<td>I think administrators do that (creating retention strategies) in a collaborative way, across different administrative offices, where Student Affairs offices will have a common understanding within themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interest Advocate</td>
<td>The first thing that comes to mind when you ask that is looking at retention through a broad lens and not through just academics or just at campus life or just at admissions procedures, but formulating a campus-wide group or at least pockets of people around campus that can start to look at the different parts of retention to figure out what exactly is affecting it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gatekeeper</td>
<td>There was a lot of hesitation from some key individuals, it’s not going to work even before we tried to implement it. There was still some reluctance to follow through on the directive; a little bit of not wanting to implement something that came from a certain division.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departments</td>
<td>Theoretical Service Provider</td>
<td>The first (Retention Committee) group was really 95% staff and administrators. There was one faculty member that was on that previously existing committee. I believe, it is my perception and my feeling that that person was put there simply as a conduit to give updates and presentations at the faculty senate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Relativism Liaison</td>
<td>The academic side of the house is typically responsible for retention efforts. However, they do have to work together with the enrollment management side to make sure that they communicate, and they understand the types of students that are enrolling, and the types of support that the academic side of the house will need to provide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Immanuel Kant  
A number of our courses that used to be popular are under-enrolled. I know that Biology had a huge retention issue in that students come in declared a Bio major and I think upwards of 50% to 60% change their major.

Other Universities

Care Attendant

Well, one thing I found is we immediately started to look at what other institutions have done and what has succeeded elsewhere.

Florence Nightingale

It was interesting to hear what other schools do and what strategies they use that I did feel like we can benefit from.

Franz Boas

In our research, it was split. You have some bridge programs where students pay for it, you have some where the institution pays for it.

---

**Retention strategy implementation.** When it came to implementing the strategies that made it through the development phase, two interrelated subthemes emerged: operationalization and prioritization. For purposes of this study, operationalization refers to how a policy decision or specific strategy is ultimately implemented and reinforced through the actions of the college. At Metropolitan College, prioritization relates to how the institution judges and decides regarding where to invest resources in what order of importance to rank investment priorities.

Interview participants indicated that the retention and enrollment aspects of the student experience were the initial components that needed to be addressed, which began in Admissions and were then operationalized according to individual departments. According to Gestalt, retention strategies “effected how the college made decisions operationally for the Admissions department, because the Admissions department needed to develop the strategy of bringing in students that can graduate, not students that can get admitted.” The Zoo Keeper gave particular insight into the specific mechanisms involved with implementing the retention strategies, saying:

> The retention committee was pretty significant in terms of the players that could impact programs. Their recommendations went to the President's Cabinet, the Academic Council, the Student Affairs Council, to implement with the President's support. In
addition to that, this has become an issue obviously for the Board [of Trustees] because when enrollment and retention is impacted, it affects the finances and the running of the college.

However, while the operationalization of retention practices involved campus-wide programming and initiatives, it also included smaller, more intimate efforts, as Frank Boas explained:

I remember having to change the way I speak to a group [of undeclared students] and trying to get them to a point of empowerment behind [the undeclared student advising initiative] Explore 360. I was trying to get them away from undeclared being a bad thing. It was really getting them to a point where they felt like they had some value within themselves.

To further illuminate how the institution prioritized the student retention effort through practice, the Care Attendant highlighted a shift in Student Affairs related thinking, saying:

“There was an attitude change; there was a greater emphasis on trying to find a route that will work to resolve the issue in the student’s behavior where we can still try to keep them here at the college and engaged rather than suspending them.”

Lessons learned. In reviewing the experiences shared by all study participants, there is one particularly painful recollection from this period that continues to bring significant disappointment and shame to school officials. Staff, faculty and administrators alike continue to refer to this scenario as having shaken their faith in the decision-making and value system of the institution. Though specifically an enrollment management decision, between 2008 and 2012, school officials chose not to report the SAT scores of admitted students to the appropriate governing agencies (the College Board, the National Center for Educational Statistics, the
Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and Standard and Poor’s) if those scores were below 950. The result of this decision was that the reported and publicized SAT score of Metropolitan College students during this period was seen as 1081, rather than the true score of 1052. The school officials involved, claiming that students were admitted using a holistic review of their candidacy, determined that if a candidate could be offered admission due to other talents, and if the SAT score was not considered in the review of his or her application, then that SAT score was moot and not required for submission to the appropriate authoritative bodies. For context purposes, between 2005 and 2013, the number of special admits gaining admission to Metropolitan College grew from 98 students in 2005 to 239 students in 2013, with a high of 305 special admits in 2010. As of 2013, 22% of all Metropolitan College enrollees were considered special admit students; a fact that many study participants felt put great pressure on the retention efforts of the college.

Once the controversial practice was discovered and halted in 2012, the college’s Retention Committee set out to reinstate the missing SAT data and evaluate the predictive value of that data as a retention and performance indicator. Given the large presence of special admits in the overall enrollment of the college, understanding the true academic capabilities of this at-risk group was critical to effective retention efforts. Regardless, a considerable amount of damage had been done to the psyche of many within the institution. Some of those interviewed felt the practice had discredited the college and the individuals within the involved departments, even though those individuals played no role in the controversial practice.

Despite the difficulties encountered during this period of enrollment instability at Metropolitan College (e.g., the loss of students and associated tuition revenue, sagging staff morale, and a decrease in academic quality of student body), valuable lessons were learned that
have aided in the formulation and implementation of current retention strategies. For example, along with a stronger understanding of how to approach the prospect of special admits, the Retention Blueprint report also identified that the retention rates of undeclared students in 2011 were below the target retention goal of 80%. As such, according to Franz Boas, “now they have a full-time undeclared adviser.” Another area where changes have been implemented is the Back-on-Track program, which was explained in detail by the Zoo Keeper: “We developed a strategy to bolster more of the Back-on-Track program, increase the counselors, and particularly [what] came out of this [was] that a large percentage of those that were having difficulty were undeclared.” Furthermore, the Summer Bridge program was enhanced so that it encompassed an increased amount of direction for the involved students. The Ringmaster articulated the changes with the Summer Bridge program in his statement: “First of all, they form a cohort, so they have friends that they interact with early on and they enter into the Advising system early. They are able to take I think three courses that are just fundamental courses so they get used to college work.

**Research Question Response**

This study was undertaken to determine how the effects of enrollment instability and the resulting student retention decisions impacted institutional operations at Metropolitan College. Specifically, the research question driving this study was: “How do the effects of enrollment instability and the resultant student retention decisions impact institutional operations?” In order to adequately answer this primary research inquiry, six additional refined research questions were formulated. This section highlights the key findings for each of these supplementary research questions.
How did institutional administrators formulate student retention strategies? To answer this subordinate question, the researcher focused on participant responses that fell under the corresponding retention strategy formulation theme. Accordingly, the formulation of current retention strategies was predominately informed by perceived mistakes made during the time of enrollment instability between 2010 and 2014 – the lack of leadership transparency when developing and implementing original strategies, disagreement over who was responsible for installation and assessment of certain strategies, and inadequate faculty involvement in the creation of various strategies. Participants specifically mentioned the importance of the guidance of the college president and collaboration among different departments and staff faculty members. Interviewees largely attributed the success of any retention strategy to the college president’s steps to visibly make them comprehensive campus priorities. During the period being studied, interviewees did not feel as though the critical nature of increased student retention was made clear enough by the president. Specifically, Immanuel Kant expressed concern over the lack of faculty involvement in the development of the retention initiative, saying, “I don’t know that the administration ever really shared very much regarding their strategies for composing a student body, for retaining a student body, for talking about kind of school we would want to be.”

Beyond the collaborative and departmental aspects, the formulation of retention strategies was also informed by identifying the successful retention strategies of other universities. This concept was articulated in a statement that Gestalt made: “For instance, the whole bridge program, I think that strategy came because there are other colleges and universities that had summer programs.” Gestalt’s assertion was further confirmed by the Care Attendant, whose personal experiences with retention strategy formulation offered further insight. She said, “One
thing I found is we immediately start to look at what other institutions have done and what has succeeded elsewhere.”

**What are these strategies to aid student retention?** Interview participants and college documents identified four specific retention strategies: the Back-on-Track program, the Summer Bridge program, warning systems, and support services. In order to address strategic and logistic problems related to the poor implementation of these strategies during the college’s period of enrollment instability, the Back-on-Track program was refocused to include a student advisor specifically focused on undeclared students. The warning system, now defined as the Student Referral System, was also adjusted to include more strategic measures that send alerts to specific departments for student-directed interventions. The Summer Bridge program was adjusted to better prepare for college life those admitted students who are deemed initially underprepared in the classroom, with changes including the offering of remedial classes. Overall, interview participants expressed general optimism and satisfaction with the retention formulation strategies currently being implemented.

**What were the intended goals of such actions, and what results were expected prior to implementation?** Staff and faculty members revealed that there was an initial lack of communication regarding the retention strategies and regarding how to go about implementing them with the leadership that was in place between 2010 and 2014. Some participants were originally hopeful about some of the retention strategies, specifically in relation to student programming, whereas other interviewees had doubts about the overall success of the strategies once implemented. The staff and faculty members who expressed apprehension about the retention strategies were primarily informed by issues they encountered regarding the lack of a cohesive message from the president at the time. Instead, participants felt as though the retention
initiative was initially discussed amongst a finite group of school officials instead of being promoted comprehensively by the president to the entire campus community. Furthermore, participants who were aware of the retention strategies prior to their implementation remarked that one aspect that they were not notified of was special admit procedures, which led to significant frustrations once the strategies were carried out. This was specifically disappointing for the faculty members interviewed who believed that they and their teaching colleagues were largely excluded from strategy discussion and installation. Therefore, this research question was somewhat difficult to answer since many of the staff and faculty members did not have full disclosure of the exact strategies prior to their implementation.

**Is there an optimal rate of annual student attrition? If so, what is it and how was it established?** According to the interviews and the 2012 Retention Blueprint, the optimal attrition rate was 20%, but study participants were more comfortable addressing the optimal retention rate, which was 80%. To that end, the retention rate goal was informed by the Retention Blueprint and past experiences with retention problems at Metropolitan College. More specifically, the Retention Blueprint highlighted issues related to the subpar retention rates of special admits and undeclared students, which were below the retention rates of students who had higher SAT scores and declared majors. Staff and faculty members who identified the higher attrition rate of students who were underprepared and undeclared, provided comments that echoed findings from the Retention Blueprint. Nevertheless, participants stated opinions that an acceptable attrition rate would be between 10% and 20%. This statistical objective is similar to the experiences during the same time period of another Mid-Atlantic liberal arts institution of similar size and academic mission (referred to in this study by the pseudonym Atlantic College. Atlantic College had an annual rate of student attrition between a low of 15%
in 2014 and its five-year high of 21% in 2010). Additionally, when considering Metropolitan College’s attrition rate target of 10% to 20%, two aspirant liberal arts institutions within the Mid-Atlantic region experienced consistent attrition rates during the same period of roughly 9% at Monument College (a pseudonym for the purposes of this study) and 3% at Historical College (0a pseudonym for the purposes of this study).

What were the operational and decision-making implications of these strategies?

Despite faculty members’ statements that the increased retention effort made little impact on their day-to-day responsibilities and decision-making. analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the members of the staff and administration believed that the chosen strategies had broad implications on the decision making and operational aspects of the college. The retention strategies specifically impacted how the Admissions department operated, since the strategies were directed at enrollment stability. As articulated by Gestalt, “it affected how the college made decisions operationally for the Admissions department because the Admissions department needed to develop the strategy of bringing in students that can graduate, not just students that can get admitted.” The new initiatives also directly affected how decisions were made within the Admissions office. According to the Gatekeeper, “operationally we had to figure out how to rearrange work load in the Registrar’s office to account for this new initiative.” Moreover, staff members who were not directly involved with retention strategy implementation also mentioned that the strategies appeared to be kept secret during at the time. This sentiment was expressed by the Cultural Relativism Liaison, who said:

I think there was probably a change in campus culture. Retention was typically Enrollment Management. It was like a secret operation. Nobody ever knew what the recruitment strategies were. When this retention initiative came up, it really involved the
entire campus, not just the services for the students from the administrative offices. It included every single person on campus making an effort to retain students.

Similarly, faculty members also expressed concern over the lack of the college implementing a retention initiative that was thoroughly communicated and broadly embraced. Specifically, Florence Nightingale spoke to how little the faculty was actually involved in the rollout of the retention plan, saying, “I felt like there’s all this behind the scenes stuff and no faculty member could get the information they need. Nobody was the gatekeeper. It’s like we’re all going to have to figure it out for ourselves.”

**Do retention policies influence student welfare and programming? If so, how did they influence student attitudes toward the college or university, and how did they influence students’ overall educational experience?** Participants revealed that one of the positive impacts of the retention strategies was improvement in student programming, which enabled the students to be more engaged with the overall campus community. The impacts that the improvements in student programming had on the overall well-being of students was explained by Gestalt: “

We continue to have more and more students participate in the things that we offer from Student Services, Student Affairs. We continue to see more people engage in utilizing offices like in Counseling, we see more students engage in the utilization of our services.”

The Interest Advocate also relayed how student programming had positively impacted students’ connection with the college community:

I can't tell you how many conversations we've had with students who say, ‘Because of Student Senate, that's the only reason I stayed past my freshman year, because I got
engaged,’ or, ‘Because of the rugby team, I found my home here. Before, I just wasn't sure if it was going to work.’”

The positive impact that improvements in student programming had on students’ attitudes was also poignantly identified with a statement made by the Care Attendant:

I can go back to 2005, 2006 and students would come in our office and the number of people that came in with attitudes and the way they respond to our staff and the accusations that they would make about us not working, being in their best interest, compared to now is like night and day.

**Key Findings**

Student persistence rates remained between 81% and 82% throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, generating little administrative concern. But between 2010 and 2014, first-year student retention rates at Metropolitan College fell to a range of 73% - 77% for freshman cohorts. In the fall of 2013, the first-year retention rate was 74%. Recognizing the pattern of increased student attrition, institutional officials devised a series of retention-related strategies throughout this period in an effort to stabilize enrollment. To assist in the planning of all retention initiatives, school officials in 2013 used a retention rate range of 80% - 84% from a group of peer institutions an ultimate benchmark. Additionally, institutional leadership set a high first-year retention rate target of 84% by the fall of 2018. At present, heading into the fall 2017 semester, the college’s first year student retention rate was 78%.

When reflecting on the various themes that emerged from the analysis of the documents acquired from Metropolitan College and from analysis of the interview transcripts, it become evident that many lessons were learned from the problems encountered during the period of enrollment instability between 2010 and 2014. As the institution still suffers a measure of
embarrassment stemming from past controversial enrollment management decisions, information gleaned from the interviews revealed that staff and faculty members were in agreement regarding the negative impact that the lack of direction and the lack of decision-making transparency had on retention rates during that time period. Despite the problems associated with the lack of communication and lack of transparency during the period of enrollment volatility, and despite the difficulty in significantly improving student retention rates, staff and faculty members were largely optimistic about the positive impacts that have resulted from appropriately addressing the problems associated with staffing and resource management issues. More specifically, the additional support services now provided to undeclared students and the increased focus on implementing academically sound solutions for the Summer Bridge program has resulted in a student body that is more equipped to succeed. Moreover, increased student programming opportunities has led to a more engaged student body and campus community. Ultimately, the findings from this study have revealed that the mechanisms through which retention strategies are implemented have far reaching impacts on the college’s overall institutional culture.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from interviews with institutional officials and documents acquired from Metropolitan College. In summary, seven primary themes emerged from analysis of the transcripts: (a) retention problem factors, (b) retention goals, (c) retention policy impacts, (d) retention strategies, (e) retention strategy formulation, (f) retention strategy implementation, and (g) lessons learned. More refined subthemes were then identified in association with the primary themes. Findings revealed that the successful implementation of retention strategies had significant impacts on both the college professional community and on its students. Furthermore, the mechanisms through which retention strategies were formulated
played a key role in the successful implementation of the retention strategies. Chapter 5 presents a thorough analysis of the study findings.
Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions and Implications

Introduction

In this final chapter, the researcher presents findings-related interpretations and a series of recommendations. To begin, the chapter presents an overview of the study, along with a brief review of its purpose, before proceeding to an analysis of the key discoveries in the context of the chosen theoretical framework and appropriate scholarly literature. The researcher then illuminates potential implications of the study and offers recommendations for future practice and research, before outlining the study’s limitations and concluding with a series of reflections and a final summary.

This study was qualitative in nature and employed an instrumental case study approach to investigate the effect of student retention strategies implemented during a four-year period of enrollment uncertainty at a particular four-year college in the Mid-Atlantic region (referred to throughout the study by the pseudonym Metropolitan College). The study reviewed reports of participant experiences to explore how college officials formulated the retention strategies, and to identify the impact that the strategies had on the campus community. In an attempt to understand the daily experiences of those working at the college during the years of enrollment instability, the researcher applied a constructivist or interpretive research approach. The constructivism-interpretivism research paradigm provides the critical foundational elements or “anchor” for qualitative research methods (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129).

The researcher set out to develop a deeper understanding of how student retention strategies formulated during a time of enrollment instability impacted a particular campus community. By exploring how retention strategies are created and by exploring their potential effect on institutional enrollment, officials at this particular institution, as well as others, will be
better prepared to create increasingly effective retention policies and practices in the future. Additionally, through the revelations related to how these strategies may have impacted the campus community in ways beyond enrollment size and make up, the researcher has produced a more comprehensive understanding of retention strategy impact. As such, college officials will be better equipped to create retention strategies in which their broad influence is accounted for and planned. The primary research question explored in this instrumental, single-site case study was: “How do the effects of enrollment instability and the resultant student retention decisions impact institutional operations?”

Twelve Metropolitan College administrators, faculty and staff participated in this research study. Pseudonyms were used to maintain participant confidentiality and to protect the identity of each interview subject. The study focused on subjects who worked at the college during the 2010 to 2014 period of instability, and were involved in either creating or implementing retention strategy at the study site.

Following completion of the 12 semi-structured interviews, the researcher coded, analyzed and interpreted all forms of collected data using a descriptive coding process to identify primary themes. By reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to complete the coding effort, the researcher used what is referred to as a six-step thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed the researcher to determine potential points of analytical interest, and develop key descriptive phrases to code the data. Once the initial codes were created, the researcher grouped like codes into larger themes, and revised the themes to identify relationships and organize the analysis.

According to Carlson (2010), collecting and analyzing narrative data for a qualitative study presents numerous unique challenges. Description-based inquiry is concerned with an
individual’s experiences, personal thoughts, memories, and interpretations, all of which are subject to incessant change (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To ensure the integrity of the study, the researcher used a member-checking process in which participants reviewed their comments to confirm data accuracy. Additionally, the researcher also applied the process of peer review, submitting the research procedure to an independent third party in order to limit any threat to research integrity. Because the pool of interview subjects encompassed a wide variety of roles at the university, their responses incorporated a broad array of relevant, lived experiences. As a result, the insight gained from interpreting the wide spectrum of participant experiences produces a narrative that combined a multifaceted set of responses, reaching into every corner of the retention-related experiences at Metropolitan College between 2010 and 2014. The researcher’s interpretive review of the collected data yielded seven primary themes and related subthemes, as outlined below.

- Theme 1: retention goals, supported by the two subthemes of retention rate and attrition rate;
- Theme 2: retention problem factors, supported by the three subthemes of underprepared/underqualified students, special admits, and attrition factors (financial);
- Theme 3: retention policy impacts, supported by the three subthemes of student impacts, staff and faculty impacts, and positive impacts;
- Theme 4: retention strategies, supported by the five subthemes of the Back-on-Track program, the Summer Bridge program, support services, warning system, and outcomes;
• Theme 5: retention strategy formulation, supported by the two subthemes of collaboration and departments;
• Theme 6: retention strategy implementation, supported by the three subthemes of operationalization, prioritization, and other universities; and
• Theme 7: lessons learned

**Interpretation of Findings, Conclusions and Implications**

The framework for this study was based on the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality by Zeithaml et al. (1996). In an attempt to further understand the consequences of student retention strategies, the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality provided the frame for exploring the educational loyalty related tendencies amongst students (Zhang et al., 2016). Prior to this theory, little empirical research had focused primarily on the relationship between service quality perceptions and customer loyalty (Bloemer, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 1998).

The theory is based on the idea that if service quality relates to retention of customers at the organizational level, then its impact on customers’ behavioral responses should be noticeable (Zeithaml et al., 1996). The ramifications of service-quality perceptions on an individual’s behavioral intentions can be viewed as indications of either retention or defection. According to Zeithaml et al. (1996), variables and linkages predicting service-associated outcomes may well be disproportionately related to those that predict customer intentions of loyalty or disloyalty. Additionally, service quality is one of a number of other elements, including pricing, advertising, efficiency, and image, that simultaneously influence profits (Zeithaml et al., 1996). However, the authors posited, providing resources to service efforts does not guarantee results, for strategy and execution must both be taken into consideration. Yet, assessing the defensive impact of
service quality through customer retention assists organizations in gauging the financial impact of service quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Student recruitment efforts require significant institutional investment in the form of staffing departments, marketing costs, and travel expenses. In contrast, according to the research, retention strategies devised to manage institutional enrollment are estimated to be three to five times more cost-effective than recruitment efforts (Noel et al., 1985; Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1983). Additionally, Hossler and Bean (1990) argued that a single student who persists at one institution for four years of study will generate the same amount of revenue as four new students who drop out or transfer after one year of enrollment. Similarly, theory suggests that increasing customer retention or reducing the rate of customer defection are key to a service provider’s ability to generate profits (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Specifically, research has revealed that lowering customer defection rates is a more profitable strategy than pursuing larger market share or reducing costs (Zeithaml et al., 1996). As an example of this, Fornell and Wernerfelt (1987 and 1988) found that associated resources are more wisely spent retaining customers than attempting to attract new ones. Therefore, according to Bloemer et al. (1998), the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality is of both “theoretical and managerial interest” in defining how service quality and service loyalty are related (p. 1083).

This research study aimed to explore the impact of student retention strategies on campus operations at a particular Mid-Atlantic college. By investigating the overall campus influence of the chosen strategies, the study arms educational officials with a deeper understanding of potential ramifications of their strategy-related decisions. As a result, retention strategy planning and implementation will be increasingly well informed, enabling educators to make constructive, outcomes decisions with confidence. The study identified retention goals, retention problem
factors, retention policy impacts, retention strategies, retention strategy formulation, retention strategy implementation, and lessons learned as key issues to consider when attempting to create and implement retention strategy that is well informed, sound in its make up, and effective in terms of desired outcomes.

**Theme 1: Retention goals.** Each research participant used the interview process as a means to reflect upon his or her professional experiences during the period of enrollment instability from 2010 to 2014. The majority of the interview subjects remarked about the fact that once the institutional retention rate was considered to be problematic, immediate retention-related goals were developed by a small group of administrators and publicized in an inconsistent manner. For some participants, the retention-related goal or objective was simply a target number for percentage of first-year students retained, imposed with little background information as to what may have made up such a goal. For other participants, retention goals developed over time and were numerous, with a desired outcome assigned to a variety of new initiatives and programs. According to Wild and Ebbers (2002), determining retention goals for the institution and determining data for assessment is critical to generating cohesiveness during the initial development and implementation of any retention plan. Similarly, Habley and McClanahan (2004), when asked to identify campus retention practices that had a significant impact on student retention, theorized that the establishment of “realistic short-term and long-term retention, progression, and completion goals” was vital to such an end (p. 7). However, according to interview participants, the initial student retention goals at Metropolitan College were devised by a relatively small group of Retention Committee members in 2008, and then again in 2011, and the committee’s their planned strategies and desired outcomes were not widely known or understood. Habley and McClanahan (2004) stressed the importance of broad-
based representation during the planning phase, with individuals from all levels of campus hierarchy being involved in the effort. Without that, the authors theorized, a planning team is likely to experience substantial opposition no matter how considerate its recommendations may be. The lack of clearly established and well-publicized retention goals, as well as succinctly defined strategies, left many of the interview subjects doubtful as to the effectiveness of the chosen retention initiatives.

**Theme 2: Retention problem factors.** Each interview participant offered a number of reasons as to why they believed Metropolitan College suffered from failing student retention rates. Participants spoke of factors including: the acceptance of a large number of underqualified/unprepared students ("special admits"); the lack of a consistent and long-standing retention focus by the institution; the dearth of retention-related services; a high number of “undeclared” students (students with no chosen major); and a lack of communication amongst leadership and staff and faculty.

A significant element of this study’s chosen theoretical frame involved the ways that a customer’s perception of a brand or organization’s quality of service produces certain behavioral intentions about whether to remain with that brand or organization or to defect). Study participants noted that during the years immediately preceding the drop in retention rates, the college provided few support services for students who may have been struggling. While the Student Affairs and Academic Services divisions offered programs that supported all students, interview participants revealed that students who may have been laboring academically or socially frequently had to navigate challenges without specialized services or offerings. In addition, once the institutional retention rate was deemed a serious problem, multiple participants described the college’s response as “panicked.” All of this led, many participants surmised, to an
increased level of student dissatisfaction with the institution. According to Styron (2010), students who drop out or transfer to another institution have a significantly lower perception of institutional satisfaction than students who return and maintain progress toward a degree. As a result, a number of study participants stated that rising student dissatisfaction levels – or student perceptions that the institution was not prepared to serve their personally unique needs – produced critical student behavioral intentions that led to defect-based behavior.

**Theme 3: Retention policy impacts.** According to Tinto (2006a), colleges and universities, when faced with retention issues, often develop strategies that fail to gather the comprehensive institutional support necessary to make the strategies a visible part of campus culture. Tinto explained that although many implemented retention initiatives may become long lasting, they frequently work at the boundaries of campus life. As such, Tinto (2006b) theorized, these strategies fail to gain a foothold in the institution’s mainstream academic life and are therefore limited in their impact. All interview participants spoke of the varying degrees of influence that the chosen retention strategies had on the institution during the years between 2010 and 2014, but each participant also spoke to the effect of these strategies in relation to either the student or faculty experience and in terms of whether they were considered to be positive outcomes.

The Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996) posits that customers who positively perceive a brand or organization’s service quality will be intuitively inclined to behave in ways that are favorable to the brand or organization – for example, praising the firm, expressing preference for the firm over others, increasing their engagement with the company, or agreeably paying a price premium for continued access to or involvement with the company. A number of positive outcomes were found to have occurred as
a result of the implemented retention strategies at Metropolitan College. Interview participants spoke to the enhancements being made in academic advising, to increased transparency in the directives of retention programming, to changes in the general curriculum, to the expansion of support for undeclared students, and to an increased student-centric focus within the campus community. Additionally, a number of interview participants indicated that the increased emphasis on retention efforts brought with it a rising sense of professional empowerment to staff and faculty, with personnel feeling strongly encouraged to enhance their relationships with the student body. However, participants also spoke of the costs associated with investing increased amounts of energy and resources in retention initiatives, specifically pointing to the rising level of expectations for increased attention to students, the intensified programming and services, the rising work loads of staff members, and the stark changes in campus harmony as a result of disruptive students now being provided with educational rather than punitive judicial sanctions. Each staff member and administrator admitted to feeling significantly challenged by the workload and/or decision-making necessary to support the increased prioritization of retaining students. But just as significantly, administrators, staff and faculty all noted the rising level of academic weakness of the incoming classes as a result of stabilizing enrollment by expanding access to admission. By offering admission to a weaker pool of applicants, and in conjunction with having little in the way of specialized support services for this population, interview participants stated that the academic mission of the institution was undermined and their own professional effectiveness was greatly challenged. Lastly, faculty members, though challenged by having to respond to certain enrollment management policies, particularly special admits, indicated that they did not experience any sort of professional impact on their day-to-day responsibilities or decision-making due to the new focus on retention.
Theme 4: Retention strategies. Though retention as operational practice and policy was seemingly not well established at Metropolitan College prior to the dip in rates of student persistence, each of the interview participants noted a series of specific retention strategies that were used by the institution between 2010 and 2014. The most frequently cited strategies included the school’s Back-on-Track advising program, its Summer Bridge orientation activities, the expansion of support services throughout campus, and the introduction of a multi-tool warning system called the Student Referral System. A majority of the interview participants also commented on the outcomes associated with these particular strategies. Lau (2003) posited that institutional administrators, faculty, and the students themselves, play a critical role in improving student retention, outlining a series of institutional actions, each believed to enhance student retention: the establishment of learning centers, first-year student programs, career centers, and specialized housing. In addition, Lau (2003) theorized that an increased emphasis on practical teaching and learning rather than on theoretical knowledge, boosts student retention, as does the creation of specifically collaborative and cooperative learning.

In reference to this study’s theoretical frame, each of the actions taken by an institution to stabilize enrollment and raise retention rates is undertaken with the goal of improving the academic and social standing of the student body, and also with the intention of enhancing the positive attitudes the students may themselves have in relation to the institution. Behavioral intentions have a direct effect on chosen behavior, and in the private sector, there are financial consequences to these behaviors (Zeithaml et al., 1996). In an educational setting, educational service quality leads to a change in student perceptions of institutional quality, and this alteration in perceived quality further impacts student satisfaction and, ultimately, levels of institutional loyalty (Zhang et al., 2016). Therefore, according to many of the interview participants, the
slight improvement in student retention rates seen at Metropolitan College since the prioritization of a focused retention effort is directly attributed to a rise in student satisfaction levels brought on by the introduction of many of these chosen institutional strategies.

**Theme 5: Retention strategy formulation.** The formulation of retention strategies was discussed by many interview participants; particularly in reference to the concept of collaboration and in relation to the various departments on campus that play a particular role. While interview subjects spoke frequently of the importance of strong communication and active partnership amongst campus offices, the subject of what constituted effective inter-departmental collaboration was not often mentioned. Additionally, many interview participants could offer only conjectures as to what the motivations were behind the college’s quick action to formulate a variety of retention strategies to address financial losses, reputational concerns, and loss of market share. According to Steel, Griffeth, and Hom (2002), successful formulation of retention policy begins with the “acquisition of data from relevant sources describing the current retention situation” (p. 150). Steel et al. (2002) added that managers then absorb collected information, as the information will become the basis for conclusions about possible retention concerns and objectives. Retention goals are created from an increased awareness of the institution’s existing conditions (Steel et al., 2002). Ultimately, Steel et al. argued, “problem-responsive strategies” arise and can be modified to the particular needs of student populations addressed by a policy’s retention goals (p. 150). An example of this at Metropolitan College was the creation of the Summer Bridge program as a specific retention strategy. Once college officials acknowledged that the institution was struggling to retain its special admits, the Summer Bridge program was developed to provide these students with additional academic assistance prior to initial enrollment. This extra attention was offered in an attempt to improve the academic preparation
of this particular segment of student, and specifically to strengthen those students’ ability to persist.

Hovdhaugen et al. (2013) posit that retention strategy formulation is often motivated by concerns related to institutional reputation or finances. Similarly, the Theory of Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality (Zeithaml et al., 1996) very clearly states a customer’s unfavorable behavioral intentions have financial consequences. Hoydhaugen et al. (2013) theorized that a customer’s intentions lead directly to behavioral choices regarding whether to remain with the brand or organization or whether to defect. Defecting to another brand or organization produces lost customers, a reduction in available revenue, and the increased cost to add new customers (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Interview participants, perhaps surprisingly, while expressing general support for the need to collaborate on status assessments, were unclear as to the primary reason behind the need to formulate a retention effort. However, each interview participant recognized the importance of retaining students as a means of improving institutional health.

**Theme 6: Retention strategy implementation.** According to Tinto (1993), in explaining what must occur on a campus in order to create an institutional culture that is supportive of retention improvement efforts, the implementation of retention strategies must be conducted in as firm a manner possible, in order to move beyond “largely a social matter for the staff of student affairs” (p. 71). Tinto further posited that the principles behind chosen strategy must connect to the core of the institution’s educational mission. Additionally, Kinnick and Ricks (1993) identified four institutional subcultures as being critical to the successful implementation of a retention agenda: (a) students who want immediate change, (b) administrators who want improvement with no increase in costs, (c) faculty who want to learn
within their own paradigm, and (d) policymakers who want to know the bottom line and the costs associated with the changes that need to be made (p. 67). While interview participants recalled that many campus officials addressed the importance and urgency of improving retention, they did not effectively and broadly communicate its prioritization and operationalization. Interview subjects expressed that while being originally hopeful about a number of the retention strategies, many also had doubts about the ultimate overall success of the retention initiative. Apprehension was primarily due to the perceived lack of a well-communicated and broadly embraced retention improvement plan. Interview participants frequently spoke of how the institution’s Retention Committee drove the majority of the strategy development, and also oversaw the dissemination to the campus community, with individual departments often left responsible for creating their own programs and services to serve the overarching targeted retention goal. In addition, interview participants stated that various departments across campus were responsible for prioritizing these strategies amongst their own constituents, and for working in ways that normalized such initiatives. Lastly, a number of interview participants noted that they appreciate the professional autonomy of the strategy roll-out, but believed that the lack of a cohesive implementation plan may have hindered strategy efficiency and effectiveness.

**Theme 7: Lessons learned.** In reviewing decades’ worth of retention related research, Tinto (2002) summarized much of what has been learned about effectively increasing student persistence. Tinto posited that in order for institutions to raise student retention rates, they must create certain conditions that promote student success. Specifically, he argued (a) that an institutional commitment to retention is paramount, (b) that academic and social support must be made fully available to students, (c) that students are more likely to succeed in settings that
assess their skills and monitor their progress, (d) that opportunities for academic and social integration must be provided to students, and (e) that the more students learn, they more value they find in learning (p. 3). While school officials spoke of the importance of student retention, they remained unconvinced that it was a broadly accepted and critical priority, and not all constituents felt that they were involved in the effort to stamp out attrition. Furthermore, although Metropolitan College made considerable effort to provide the student body with increased academic and social support services, faculty saw little change in how they were expected to interact and monitor their students. As such, it is questionable as to whether or not Metropolitan College created the proper campus climate to promote student success.

Interview participants from Metropolitan College remain mixed regarding the effectiveness of the retention strategies used to stabilize enrollment between 2010 and 2014. Many study participants recognized that improving rates of student retention is a years-in-the-making type of process. As a result, a number of participants agreed that their judgment of strategy success has changed over time, with a more positive reaction developing as additional years have passed since period of enrollment instability. Other participants viewed the retention effort as the pursuit of a desired quantitative outcome, insisting that reaching a particular statistical goal requires a unified effort across the campus. If a campus community has a number of prioritized initiatives in alignment, participants argued, then students will be increasingly well supported and the desired statistical objective may inherently be within reach. However, study participants similarly concluded that implementing new services simply for the sake of introducing different programs is misguided and likely to fail.
Implications for Practice

Following a review of the study’s findings and of the associated literature and theoretical framework, the researcher identified implications for practice that educational officials may consider helpful when organizing and applying student retention strategies. In an attempt to provide college and university staff and faculty members with an increased understanding of student retention and how the pursuit of strong persistence rates may impact a campus community broadly, these suggestions should be considered when formulating a comprehensive set of retention strategies. Recommendations such as these will ultimately aid educational officials in making decisions and will reduce uncertainty about policy and operational choices. As this study has revealed, impacting student retention rates involves action to address a student’s entire experiential relationship with a chosen institution, from recruitment and, enrollment and first-year support services, through the student’s academic and social navigation toward a degree and ultimate graduation.

The first recommendation for practice involves focused efforts prior to the initial recruitment of a new class of students – specifically the consistent institutional examination of the desired incoming student academic profile. This review should include a multitude of constituencies, including enrollment managers, admissions staff, student affairs personnel, and faculty members, in order to ensure inter-departmental communication and outcome buy-in. There should also be communication among senior institutional officials, financial managers, and enrollment management staff regarding the incoming class size that is required to meet operational budget projections. This will require senior financial staff to establish a proposed campus operational budget for the following fiscal year, with the understanding of the percentage of it that will be covered by tuition revenue. Once an operational budget is proposed, a desired
class size can be developed that aligns with a proposed institutional discount rate. At that point, student recruitment and matriculation policies and programs can be designed to attract the desired student profile at a sustainable cost.

A second operational-based recommendation can be addressed once a new class of admitted students begins to take shape. This specific implication involves the preparation of faculty and upcoming class design in relation to the academic quality of the incoming class. Faculty members will need to be made aware of the academic talent level of the students they are expected to teach each semester. Consistent communication regarding the academic make-up of each class aids individual academic departments in designing classes that will most effectively engage and challenge those students in attendance. This type of discussion and review will illuminate the qualities of unique student populations that may emerge (such as students choosing specific majors, students with a certain high school GPA, of students with certain test scores). This process would identify whether additional remedial or honors classes should be organized and scheduled during a particular semester to support student academic progress.

Responding to the academic quality of a particular incoming class may also require that academic support services be created or increased.

Once the academic component of the institution is prepared to work with the incoming student body, a third recommendation involves reviewing and preparing student life services. This too will require transparency from enrollment managers and senior institutional administrators regarding the academic talents, personal interests, co-curricular pursuits, financial make-up, and formally acknowledged behavioral concerns, of the incoming class of students. Representatives across the academic and social spectrum should all be advised as to the preparation and general “health” of each incoming class, giving those leaders an opportunity to
prepare programming and care-related services that would best support the anticipated needs and interests of the first-year students. This effort could produce specific programs that support increased student engagement and combat a particular community issue. It is important to note that intentional student-related programs and services must be a consistent thread of action throughout each and every school in order to support the student body and to create a community that cares for and nurtures its members.

A fourth recommendation involves the development of philosophical agreement regarding the importance of student retention throughout as broad an institutional constituency as possible. Student retention must be promoted as a primary and long-term campus priority, not only from institutional leadership, but also from those who work directly with students on a daily basis. Without consistent and annual campus-wide discussion and multi-departmental involvement, retention-centric thinking will continue to be viewed as a promoted or reactionary exercise rather than as a foundational part of community operations. Faculty members who may worry about that retention efforts could impinge upon the autonomy of the classroom must be encouraged to recognize their influence on students’ intellectual development and decision making. They must engage with the complete student body in a multi-dimensional approach. Staff members, who may feel put upon as the default retention experts must accept a frontline responsibility and pursue increased programmatic impact and effectiveness. Professional responsibilities must be consistently reviewed and personal approaches must be altered if opportunities are discovered for more impactful interaction and mentoring between staff and members of the student body. As staff members further recognize the importance of connecting with students, they will learn how to manage the task-oriented elements of their jobs with those moments of staff/student interaction. From these deepened relationships will come the
opportunity for Student Affairs staff to offer nuanced programming and services that are increasingly appreciated and attended by the student body and that are increasingly effective in purpose and message. This student-centric focus will increase student satisfaction, ensure that student perceptions of the institution remain positive, stabilize or improve persistence rates.

A fifth and final implication for practice is how institutional leaders must approach student retention as a constant component of their operational responsibilities and philosophical make-up. Student retention efforts should not be a reactionary effort, which often occurs too late to create change and stabilize enrollment. Should a large percentage of a particular student cohort be lost in any given year, that gap and the resultant financial loss carries forward until that cohort is no longer tracked – typically six years out). A cohort’s retention rate follows it from one year to the next, with very little chance for improvement once a student has withdrawn from the institution. Regardless of how the immediate financial losses may be somewhat remedied with the future enrollment of larger classes, institutional retention and graduation rates will continue to be judged based on the progress – or lack thereof – of a specific cohort. Therefore, a significant drop in retention rate from a particular cohort influences overall institution retention and graduation rates, subsequently impacting published institutional rankings, reputational marketing opportunities, and perhaps the academic quality of the cohorts that follow. As a result, educational leaders must continuously be aware of the conditions of the student body, and programming and services must be flexible enough to quickly respond to any perceived weakness within the enrollment resolve of a particular cohort or group of students.

These five operational and philosophical recommendations would greatly increase an institution’s likelihood of not only building and implementing effective retention strategies, but also of making strategy related decisions with enhanced confidence. By practicing collaboration,
transparent leadership, student-centric thinking, and nimble decision-making, programs and services both in and out of the classroom can be devised with improved certainty regarding their positive effect on reducing student attrition. Student retention is often considered to be a “moving target,” with many variables that influence strategy effectiveness. Therefore, this research and associated data may be used as a guide for educational leaders as they explore the unique attrition and retention factors on their respective campuses.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study has illuminated the ways that Metropolitan College responded to enrollment instability in an attempt to stave off rising rates of student attrition. The study not only used the experiences of institutional officials to illuminate the impact of their retention initiatives across campus, but also offers future educational leaders a useful exploration of common enrollment management practices and their unintended consequences. Despite the investigative efforts of this study, there remains room for additional research on specific, less-discussed elements of student retention that could expand the depth of knowledge of the subject. Most retention studies have historically examined retention through the lens of the entire student body or by focusing on first-year student experiences. However, as this study revealed, colleges and universities lose students from a wide array of groupings other than first-year students. Therefore, educational officials would be well served if additional research is conducted that focuses on the experiences and needs of other distinctive student groups, such as students in specific majors, students with particular financial profiles, first-generation college students, students of color, etc.

This study revealed just how challenging a retention environment was created by admitting an increased number of weaker, academically unprepared students between 2010 and 2014. It became progressively difficult to academically support these students, and many
believed that the admissions threatened the integrity of the college’s academic standards, as well as the overall health of the campus community. However, as the number of college-bound students throughout large sectors of the United States continues to decrease, educational officials will be hard pressed to fill classes with academically qualified students and with a financial model that can be sustained. Therefore, college and university administrators would benefit from additional investigation into the effects of expanded admissions policies. Once further data is collected, educational leaders would have the opportunity to better prepare their campuses through possible alterations in financial planning and budgeting or through changes made to the curriculum and approaches to student learning.

As the primary deliverer of teaching and instruction at the college level, the role that faculty members play in the learning experienced by students is a vital one. The actions that faculty members take in their classrooms are directly connected to any efforts that institutions may make to stave off attrition and support the retention of its students. Though literature is available on the subject of the methods that positively affect student learning (Astin, 1993; Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995; Hattie, 1999; Kuh, 2008), there does not appear to be similar quantities of research on how best to prepare faculty members for effective instruction. Therefore, as a means to aid increased levels of student retention and success, future research into the effects of additional investment in faculty development and teaching practices should be explored.

Given higher education’s increased reliance on technology (e.g. online education, “smart classrooms”, computers as learning and teaching tools, etc.) as well as the ease of technology use for today’s students, there is a considerable amount of data that could be collected in an effort to store learning content and track user behaviors. As a result, educators would have the
opportunity to access large amounts of this information and review the entire student experience with greater scrutiny and confidence. These analytical tools should be explored in the future as a means of creating a deeper understanding of the habits and behaviors not only of at-risk groups, but of all students. Though abiding by privacy laws must be an element of any usage of analytical tools, an investment in this type of research of a student body could help educational officials improve student retention and general learning. By using such data, a college or university could personalize a student’s learning experience and intervene if he or she begins to struggle.

While retention remains a widely studied topic, educators would be well served by future research that attempts to construct an action plan for retention initiatives that is approachable, scalable, comprehensively communicative, and measured in its recommendations to colleges and universities. When attempting to reduce student attrition, school leaders frequently either invest in smaller, less impactful elements of the retention puzzle (Barefoot, 2004) or pursue improving retention with broad, new programming and practices (Dickeson, 2010). Educational officials would be aided by a comprehensive retention improvement program that spurs coordinated institution-wide action, rather than independent and isolated departmental or office-driven initiatives.

College and university leadership would greatly benefit from the expansion of study on a number of specific elements within the student retention puzzle. While this current study offers insight on how one particular college was impacted by its own retention strategies, both in terms of enrollment stability and in terms of campus well-being, increased understanding of the experiential nuances that affect student attitudes and campus decision-making is necessary to support institutional health and student success.
Limitations of Study

Despite this study offering an exploration of the ramifications of student retention strategies at one Mid-Atlantic college, the researcher must also consider possible limitations for the final outcome of findings from this specific study. Four conceivable limitations are discussed below.

**Chosen methodology.** According to Gerring (2004), although much of what is known about the observed world is drawn from case studies, this particular research method is often held in low regard by practitioners. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) posited that when case studies are successful in illuminating some of the complexities of a particular societal scenario, there is frequently the problem of representation. The authors stated that it is often challenging to present “accessible and realistic pictures” of that intricacy in written form (p. 9). For example, the authors continued by stating how writing is principally a “linear form of communication with a beginning, middle and end” (p. 9). However, much of what case study research reveals takes on a non-linear shape. When writing about one aspect of an issue, or as related to this study of one specific college official’s experience, other aspects of the experience are inadvertently obscured. There are often many different ways to present the same set of issues, each one with minute variances in its prominence and impact. This fact can make the findings of case study research difficult to summarize in a way that effectively and evenly incorporates all that has been uncovered. While the researcher made every attempt to faithfully represent the data in an even-handed a fashion as possible, a different research methodology, though perhaps producing different findings, may have proven to be more effective at encapsulating the breadth of the experiences at Metropolitan College.
**Researcher bias.** Given that the researcher was once employed at the research site and has had professional relationships with many of the interview participants, a second limitation to this study is a possible lack of researcher objectivity. A researcher’s expertise, knowledge and intuition are critical elements of the case study approach (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). It is the researcher who chooses what to ask of the participants, how to pose particular questions, and what to observe and what to note as significant. Researchers must encourage interview subjects to elaborate on stories that may be of particular research interest, and exclude certain moments of commentary as insignificant. Therefore, case study researchers are consistently coming to conclusions as to what in the data is important, and what can be disregarded. Due to these realities, a significant factor in the quality of research unearthed within a specific case study is the quality of the thinking and insights generated by the researcher conducting the study. Regardless of the degree to which the researcher attempts to thoroughly vet the data and participants, no set of research data can be completely objective. Though all strong researchers attempt to present appropriate evidence to support the study’s findings and correlated conclusions, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) posited that a certain degree of trust must be provided by each reader of the study in order for the study to be accepted as one of quality. As such, in this particular case, the familiarity the researcher had with the study site and its participants must be taken into account when reviewing the study’s relevancy and value.

**Participant sample.** In a report prepared for the National Centre of Research Methods in the UK, Baker, Edwards, and Doidge (2012) posited that there is no magic number of qualitative interviews that a researcher must complete in order to ensure data quality, explaining that where a researcher chooses to stop the research will most likely be influenced by something arbitrary rather than some rational analytical formula. The only reasonable answer to the
question of participant pool size is to conclude one’s research at a point when the interviews and observations in hand coincide with what the researcher wants to say coincide – at the point where the data supports the conclusions, and where the conclusions do not go beyond what the data can support (Baker et al., 2012). However, while there may be no set number of interview participants to ensure the successful generation of relevant data, given how student retention strategies often require input from many different campus offices, role diversity in the participant pool is crucial.

The fact that just one-sixth of the participants (two of the 12 interview subjects) had served Metropolitan College as faculty members during this studied time period of 2010 to 2014, perhaps lessens the generated voice of an influential sector of the campus population – the faculty. While this study was not designed to represent a 360-degree review of the studied environment and perceptions of the time, due to the impossibility of interviewing everyone who may have played a role or been affected by the chosen retention strategies of the day, the small number of faculty members as compared to the larger proportion of staff members is a third limitation to this study. A student’s integration into the academic systems of a college leads to increased levels of commitment to that particular institution, and therefore, the enhanced possibility of completing an educational goal (Kimbark, Peters, & Richardson, 2017).

Pascarella's (1980) student-faculty informal contact model described the critical nature of faculty-student interactions in creating a positive institutional culture that promotes the retention of its students. Given the crucial role that a faculty member may play in a student’s connection to and perception of an institution, this research study may have been better served if the participant pool had been more balanced in terms of staff versus faculty members.
**Singularity of study site.** According to Hartley (1994), case studies are extremely effective for investigating new processes of behaviors or behaviors that are not easily understood. Additionally, Sykes (1990) theorized that unearthing certain types of qualitative information can be impossible without using the case study approach. However, limitations in generalizability and a variety of information-processing biases are two concerns related to single-site case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989). Miles and Huberman (1994) posited that studies involving multiple cases can increase external legitimacy and help protect against the likelihood of observer biases. Additionally, the authors concluded that multi-case sampling often adds to the confidence in a study’s findings. Though this study focused solely on the retention related experiences of school officials at one specific institution, the lack of depth compared to that of multiple-case perspectives may be perceived as a fourth limitation. The study’s reliance on the perspective of 12 college employees on a specific period of time at a single site of study may limit the universality of the key findings and associated conclusions. Metropolitan College is of a certain enrollment size, with a particular academic profile, educational focus, and financial make-up. Therefore, while what was uncovered at Metropolitan College may prove valuable to educators from a wide array of institutions, the outcomes of this study can most accurately apply only to small- to mid-size, private, liberal arts colleges that have a similar brand of students and educational mission. The findings of this study may be considered predictive rather than probable at other campuses.

**Lack of student involvement.** As the researcher explored the recollections of school officials, reflecting specifically on the impact of retention strategies, it became apparent that understanding the perception that students had of their institution at the time being studied would have been well served by interviewing former Metropolitan College students themselves.
Though this study focused on the experiences of those who were responsible for developing, implementing, or responding to retention strategy, gaining the perspective of those students immediately impacted by such strategies would have given the study an enhanced breadth of validity. While the researcher chose to focus on the perceptions of school officials, not having a representative student perspective seems to have been a missed opportunity.

Upon Reflection

The objective of this study was to explore the possible implications of the student retention strategies implemented by officials at Metropolitan College during a period of enrollment instability. The research found that while a number of positively received, retention-related programs and initiatives were undertaken, the study’s participants remain mixed as to the implementation and effectiveness of the strategies. As a fellow educator with considerable interest in supporting college student persistence, the findings of this study provided a smart commentary for those charged with creating and executing student retention strategies to contemplate utilizing in the future. After reflecting on the entire research process, and specifically the interview participants’ revelations and subsequent data analysis process, the researcher has identified the following insights:

1. The effectiveness of retention strategy at Metropolitan College would be enhanced by increased communication among all parties involved in the creation and implementation of strategy elements. In addition, the shared planning and assessment related information should be of a mutually communicative pattern, with insight being provided by and received by all involved, rather than a small group of school officials dictating plans to those on the receiving end, and offering little ability to provide critical feedback as directly experienced with students. Specific
communication from the top of the administration to the faculty and staff members who are saddled with the responsibility of supporting students in and out of the classroom must be consistent and informative.

2. Agreement on the academic quality of the student body must be found in order for broad confidence to be created in the probability of stabilizing enrollment. While there is extensive understanding within Metropolitan College that persistence rates and retention efforts begin with the makeup of the admitted student body, there is an apparent lack of philosophical agreement on who must be admitted to the college in order to maintain some semblance of enrollment size versus what will be required of faculty and staff in order to reduce rates of attrition of admitted students of weaker academic quality. To ensure that all institutional constituents are well prepared to work toward the betterment of all admitted students, increased clarification of the academic profile of the incoming student body is warranted.

3. College officials would be better served by being as transparent as possible with its constituencies regarding all policies and procedures related to student recruitment, enrollment, and eventual academic and social assessment. In Metropolitan College’s case, the decision by certain institutional officials to not submit particular academic information to governing authorities negatively impacted the institution in a number of ways. Not only was the perceived integrity of the college’s admissions process undermined, but interview participants also revealed that many staff and faculty members felt unprepared to support the special admits. This lack of openness limited the ability of those directly connected with students to appropriately plan, organize
and implement curricular and co-curricular activities and initiatives as required by retention strategy or professional responsibility.

4. For retention strategies to be increasingly impactful and thoroughly vetted, the creation and implementation of such strategies would be best served by the involvement of a wider and more role-diverse group of staff and faculty. In the case of Metropolitan College, initial efforts at forming a Retention Committee involved the inclusion of a single faculty member, whose primary role was seemingly to disseminate information. What role does the voice of current students play in the creation of retention strategies? Schools officials would benefit from considering increasingly inclusive practices for committee creation.

5. By making student retention a broadly discussed institutional priority, the college not only was able to slowly implement a number of positively received retention strategies, but the culture of the school began to take on a more student-centric focus. Interview participants revealed that once the importance of student retention was shared across divisions, with programming involving a wide variety of departments, the tenor of the institution began to shift into a community that was much more cognizant of student needs.

6. College officials should recognize that a campus community that is largely focused on the needs, interests and capabilities of its students also requires a staff and faculty that is increasingly present, accessible, and involved in the holistic lives of its students. Interview participants remarked that without cross-departmental communication and collaboration, student retention efforts initially felt like a task charged to a small number of staff members, and employees began to feel
overworked, underappreciated, and lacking in significant input as to the direction of their own jobs.

Chapter Summary

Upon completion, this study revealed the extent to which a series of student retention strategies, implemented by one Mid-Atlantic college during a period of enrollment instability, influenced the overall campus community and operations. Additionally, the study illuminated the daily, lived experiences of a number of the Metropolitan College staff and faculty members who were either charged with developing retention strategies or with carrying them out.

The researcher developed and pursued a research question that was broad enough to spark lengthy discussion on the effect of the chosen retention strategies on annual enrollment figures as well as on student attitudes, internal campus operations, and institutional culture. The study revealed the multifaceted nature of pursuing enrollment stability through strong student retention, with improvement often years in the making and, at times, hindered by what may be seen as inherently conflicting philosophical and programmatic choices. The primary findings supported the research question, which was designed to determine how student retention strategies comprehensively impact a college campus. The study findings broke down into seven key categories: (a) retention problem factors, (b) retention goals, (c) retention policy impacts, (d) retention strategies, (e) retention strategy formulation, (f) retention strategy implementation, and (g) lessons learned, each critical to the effective creation and application of sound and constructive student retention initiatives. These findings support future retention strategy development and application that considers a multitude of critical institutional variables, each one influencing either student behavior and/or campus harmony.
The study also exposed the gaps in existing literature on the comprehensive effect of student retention strategies. While there is ample research available that identifies effective and ineffective retention tools, little existing literature has applied a qualitative or experiential perspective to determining how commonly used retention initiatives may impact a campus community from the qualitative, or experiential, perspective. And while studies address what works in retention from a quantitative point of view, very few of them highlight how retention strategies impact campus operations beyond the improvement of simple enrollment statistics. Similarly, this study included research on many frequently used enrollment management practices and their inadvertent consequences. Improving student persistence – and ultimately graduation rates – is dependent on future research incorporating what is currently known about effective retention strategy with investigation into the broad campus costs associated with reducing student attrition. As the breadth exploration into student retention increases, so too will institutional confidence in implementing retention strategies that are constructive and increasingly attainable. This study takes a visible step toward filling a gap in the research and will serve higher education officials as they search for a means to stabilize college and university enrollments.

Upon completion of this study, it is evident that officials at Metropolitan College, though working diligently to improve student retention rates, did not fully account for what was required to boost student persistence, and did not fully account for the impact of retention-driven policies and practices. As societal demographics in the eastern United States continue to show a dearth of college-bound students, and as the multilayered pressure of retaining those who enroll increases, effective student retention strategy and the understanding of how such strategies effect the overall campus is crucial. Historically, retention efforts have been viewed as an issue solely
for enrollment managers to handle. However, this study has shown that educators from all segments of campus and academic life must contribute to the development and implementation of sound and positively impactful retention strategies.

While education officials are frequently cognizant of desired retention-related outcomes, the pursuit of stabilized enrollments would be buoyed by the acknowledgement of how retention policy and practice-based decisions impact a campus in totality. There is great value for institutional staff and faculty members in recognizing the breadth of impact that a single retention strategy may have. Though Metropolitan College has seen a slight improvement in the retention rates of various segments of its student population, its over-arching persistence goal has not been achieved in spite of have implemented the first retention strategies nearly a decade ago. Regardless, the programmatic improvements and policy and practice related changes that have been made since student retention became a focus, along with the increased recognition of what is required to retain a student, has created a more student-centric environment throughout Metropolitan College. Though such a culture has its challenges, this new approach to managing enrollment has created operational practices and a way of institutional being that ultimately has made Metropolitan College far better suited to support successful student experiences in the future.
References


Baez, B. (2002). Confidentiality in qualitative research: Reflections on secrets, power and agency. *Qualitative Research, 2*(1), 35-58.


Delucchi, M., & Korgen, K. (2002). We’re the customer-we pay the tuition: Student consumerism among undergraduate sociology majors. Teaching Sociology, 30(1), 100-107.


Dickeson, R. (2003). Foreword in J. Davis (Ed.), *Unintended Consequences of Tuition Discounting* (pp. 1-2). Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education.


Paper presented at the ASET HERSDA Conference at University of Southern


Appendix A: Institutional Review Board approval from Northeastern University

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
Date: November 16, 2016  IRB #: CPS16-09-16
Principal Investigator(s): Bryan Patterson
                        Sean Sullivan
Department: Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: The Consequences of Student Retention Strategy: A Case Study at Metropolitan College
Participating Sites: [Redacted - approval in file]
DHSIS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consent: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: NOVEMBER 15, 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
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Email

Recruitment Email

Date:

Dear _________________

My name is Sean Sullivan. I am a graduate student at Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, where I am completing the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. I am seeking participants for my qualitative study involving administrators and faculty members at York College of Pennsylvania. The purpose of my research is to explore whether or not efforts at retaining students during the period of 2010-2014 produced the intended results and whether or not these outcomes had an impact on institutional operations beyond enrollment stabilization. My interest in this topic comes from my own background as a twenty-year Student Affairs professional with experience in student retention efforts at a variety of colleges and universities. Therefore, while this topic is of great professional interest to me, there is also a certain amount of personal intrigue in investigating this educational issue.

You are a potential participant because you worked at York College of Pennsylvania during all or a portion of the years throughout 2010 – 2014, may have played a role in developing institutional retention strategy, and/or were tasked with implementing elements of the constructed retention initiative.

Your participation in this case study will be in the form of a semi-structured interview.

- The interview will last between 60-90 minutes and be conducted in person, on-campus, or at an off-campus location of your choosing.
• This interview will also consist of additional questions regarding your student retention experiences as an educator.

Participation is voluntary, confidential, and there will be no personally identifying information about you in the study. If you agree, a pseudonym will be used. Should you agree to participate, but ultimately choose to remove yourself, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide to volunteer to participate, please contact me at Sullivan.se@husky.neu.edu. If you have any questions about my study, or would like further information, do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you and thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Sean Sullivan
EdD Candidate, Northeastern University
Appendix C: Unsigned Consent Form

Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Bryan Patterson, Principal Investigator; Sean Sullivan, Doctoral Student and Researcher

Title of Project: Title: The Consequences of Student Retention Strategy: A Case Study at Metropolitan College

Request to Participate in Research

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to investigate whether or not the retention strategies utilized by [York College of Pennsylvania] during a five-year period were effective and how they may have influenced institutional operations in ways beyond the original objective of enrollment stability.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place at a time and place that is convenient for you and will last roughly 60-90 minutes.

There are no foreseeable and significant risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.
There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, the information you provide may help us to discover how retention strategies impact a campus community in totality and beyond qualitative retention and attrition rates. As such, increasingly effective retention strategy may be able to be created in the future, accounting for the varying experiences of multiple institutional constituencies.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Your involvement will remain confidential and your input will be anonymous throughout any report or publication based on this research. Pseudonyms will be used if any of your data is represented. We will not identify you or any individual as being a participant in this project.

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

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Sean Sullivan at (650) 346-4836 or sullivan.se@husky.neu.edu. Mr. Sullivan is primarily responsible for the research. You may also contact Dr. Bryan Patterson, the Principal Investigator, at (352) 219-9670 or b.patterson@northeastern.edu.
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: [REDACTED], Email: [REDACTED]. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for your files if you wish. Thank you very much.

_Bryan Patterson and Sean Sullivan_

_I consent to participate in these interviews. I have read and understand the above information, or have had it explained to me._

____________________________________________  __________________
Signature of Participant                        Date

____________________________________________
Name of Participant

____________________________________________
Signature of Researcher
Appendix D: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Precision Consulting Company, LLC
CONSULTANT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

This is a Non-Disclosure Agreement (the “NDA”) between Sean Sullivan (the “Client”) and Precision Consulting Company, LLC (the “Company”) which is entered into between the Client and the Company in consideration of the Client retaining the Company for the performance of services (the “Services”) for the benefit of the Client.

The Client and the Company, each separately, is a Party (a “Party”) to this NDA and collectively are herein referred to as the Parties (the “Parties”).

1. The effective date of this Agreement is the date on which the Parties have entered into an agreement for the Services either orally or in writing as evidenced by payment for the Services by the Client to the Company.

2. The Company acknowledges and agrees that in connection with the Services, the Client may disclose to the Company information, including, but not necessarily limited to:

Methods, processes, formulae, compositions, systems, techniques, inventions, machines, computer programs and research projects, and raw data.

3. The Company agrees to keep confidential all the information described in Clause 2 herein and shall not disclose said information to any person or persons, real or juridical, other than as may be required to enforce a Party’s rights in the resolution of any dispute between the Parties.

4. After completion of the Services, the Company shall continue to keep confidential all the information described in Clause 2 herein. The Company may keep its obligations of confidentiality as set forth in the NDA by returning all Client materials to the Client or by destruction of such materials after a three (3) month period following the completion of the Services.

5. Drafts provided to Client are based on the Client’s work product materials provided to Precision and subsequent discussions. Clients are responsible for review of these drafts and for making any changes required to ensure it meets the requirements of the Client.

6. This NDA will be governed by the laws of the State of Delaware and subject to the jurisdiction of the courts thereof.

Signed this December 21, 2016

Heather Bowlan

Heather Bowlan
Precision Consulting Company, LLC

1000 N. WEST STREET • WILMINGTON, DE 19801 II PHONE: (646) 553-4730 EMAIL: INFO@PRECISIONCONSULTINGCOMPANY.COM
Appendix E: Complete Interview Protocol

Complete Interview Protocol

*Interview Protocol: The Consequences of Student Retention Strategy*

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Sean Sullivan

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

(Briefly describe the study while including statements of confidentiality, consent, and options to withdraw from the study, and the planned use and scope of the results)

Questions:

1. *How do institutional administrators formulate student retention strategies?*
   
   a. *Follow up: Who or what groups are responsible for such strategy decisions?*
   
   b. *Follow up: What influences how strategies are devised?*
   
   c. *Follow up: How are retention strategy objectives prioritized?*

2. *What are these strategies to aid student retention?*
   
   a. *Follow up: Are specific areas of the institution given certain strategies to implement? If so, how do these strategies differ from area to area?*

3. *What were the intended goals of such actions and what outcomes did you expect these retention driven practices to have prior to implementation?*
   
   a. *Follow up: What was your sense of comfort in these strategies being successful?*
4. Is there an optimal rate of annual student attrition? If so, what are the factors that influence this established rate?

5. What were the operational and decision-making implications of these strategies?
   a. Follow up: What changes in the campus community did you experience or witness (if any) as a result of these strategies?
   b. Follow up: How would you categorize the effect of these strategies in relation to their original objectives?

6. Did you perceive an impact of retention policies on overall student welfare? If so, did these factors influence student attitudes toward their college and their perception of their overall educational experience?

7. Did you perceive an impact of retention policies on overall student programming? If so, did these factors influence student attitudes toward their college and their perception of their overall educational experience?

8. How do retention policies influence your specific area of professional responsibility (i.e. office or department)?
   a. Follow up: To what degree does the importance of these retention strategies influence the programmatic and operational decisions you may make as a part of your professional responsibilities?
   b. Follow up: Can you describe how retention objectives may (or may not) have influenced your professional decision-making? Did you experience any particular challenges in this process?

9. As it relates to my study, to whom else would you recommend I speak with that may have additional information about student retention strategy development and its impact on
campus operations?

(Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure them of the confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews and opportunities for member-checking).