A CASE STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF INSTITUTIONAL BEHAVIORS ON
PERSISTENCE AND DEGREE COMPLETION

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Abstract

The increased attention to student learning outcomes, student success and graduation rates continues to intensify as the demands from parents, students and government agencies on colleges and universities for accountability continues to build. Since the 1980’s there has been a plethora of research on the topic of attrition, retention, student success and degree completion, but only more recently has research begun to investigate the role of institutional behaviors on retention and persistence. The purpose of this case study was to understand how undergraduate, liberal arts majors at a medium size, public college in the Northeast perceive the relationship of college institutional behaviors with their ability to persist and complete a degree. This research study utilized the constructs of Terenzini and Reason’s comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence (2005) to better understand the effects of institutional behaviors on college degree completion. Data collected consisted of 4 focus groups of students in their senior year, semi-structured interviews with 5 full-time faculty and 7 administrators, and a wide array of college documents. The results were grounded in the perspectives of and experiences of all the participants and contextualized through college documents. The research revealed that while the problem of student retention and persistence is complex and multidimensional, how a college chooses to act, structures itself and places resources can influence and shape the college culture, programs and policies to improve and support persistence to degree. The findings and knowledge generated from this study are expected to inform retention and persistence practices of higher education institutions.

Keywords: persistence, higher education, degree completion, retention, institutional behaviors, organizational behaviors, social and academic integration, engagement, student success
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Graduation rates and student loan debt for undergraduate college degrees has put into question the role and responsibilities of colleges and universities in facilitating student persistence, controlling costs, and reducing student loan debt by timely degree completion (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Theoretically a bachelor’s degree is completed in 4 years, however, statistics tell a different story. Although graduation rate data are a relatively new phenomenon, as it was not until 1996 that the Department of Education first collected graduation rate data (ACE, 2010); graduation rates have now become an accepted means of assessment by important educational journals and consumers including students and parents. While many colleges have instituted reactive piecemeal retention programs based on the various retention and student dropout theories little has been done to change the essential character of the college bureaucracy and alter the student educational experience (Tinto, 1999). Despite the research on persistence and retention, the needle for baccalaureate degree completion (either by the 4 or 6 year metric) is not trending upward nationally.

The purpose of this case study is to understand how undergraduate, liberal arts majors at a medium size, public college in the Northeast perceive the relationship of college institutional behaviors with their ability to persist and complete a degree. In this study institutional behavior encompasses institutional culture, structure, programs and policies. Knowledge generated is expected to inform retention and persistence practices of higher education institutions.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to student retention and degree completion to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus
and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

**Context and Background**

The U.S. has long prided itself on its higher education system. For over four decades the U.S. has focused on access to higher education with its open door policy and mass higher education system that is its hallmark and is more open to the entire population than almost any other country. Only more recently has U.S. educational policy begun to focus on issues of degree completion. Following the lead of President Obama’s major higher education initiatives, Making College Affordable (Fact Sheet on the President’s Plan, 2013) and the College Scorecard (NCES, 2015), both federal and state governments have called upon, some even mandating, higher education institutions to hold down costs and be accountable for student outcomes of learning, degree completion and employment. There is increased attention in the news today regarding rising costs of a bachelor’s degree, student loan debt and the increased earnings potentials for students with bachelor’s degrees. Students who start college and then dropout without a degree, many with loan debt, do not receive the benefits that students with a degree receive making loan repayment even more difficult. Current six year graduation rates remain around 60% for a full-time, first-time undergraduate student pursuing a four-year degree and fall to less than 50% for completion in four years (NCES, 2015). While researchers have been studying factors that contribute to student dropout or attrition since the early seventies only in the last couple of decades have researchers begun to study additional factors that may directly or indirectly influence retention and eventual persistence to degree (Astin, 1999; Bean, 1981; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Conner, Daugherty & Gilmore, 2013; Fowler & Boylan 2010; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Some of the studies have
begun to include organizational characteristics and behaviors that may affect degree completion (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger, 2000; Berger, 2002; Berger & Milem, 2000; Chen, 2102; Ro, Terenzini & Yin, 2013). It is within this context that this case study will address degree completion at a four-year undergraduate college.

Understanding the factors and issues that lead to student departure or student success is a complex web of factors and no one theory or perspective can fully address the complicated nature of the problem (Kuh et al., 2007). The wide scope of research on retention and persistence can be difficult to decipher, as there is inconsistency in its nomenclature and a decided lack of standardized terms, in addition to the more obvious differences in student attributes and institutional characteristics. Due to the lack of consistency in the variables and factors used to assess the outcomes (Astin, 1999), the results can be difficult to evaluate. Still there are a few major theoretical perspectives (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1981; Tinto, 1975) that are most frequently cited by scholars and researchers working in the discipline of student attrition, persistence and success. Prior to the late 1960’s there had not been any significant studies or formal writing research on retention. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, researchers began to develop models and theories of retention and attrition (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1981; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). By 1999 into the 2000’s, additional theories of student involvement and engagement were published (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 2008). The ongoing research examined through the lens of these theories continues to shed new light on the connections between these theories and the complexity of the issues.

The growing need by businesses for an educated workforce and the drive of families and individuals to achieve the American dream of social mobility, coupled with the growing disparity of earnings between those with college degrees as opposed to those without, led to increased
research in an attempt to better understand the factors which might contribute to degree completion as well as illuminating triggers for attrition. Much of the early research on college retention or attrition utilized one of two frameworks (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). The first construct focused on “developmental” or changes and processes relating to individual human growth (Chickering, 1969; Perry, 1970). The second construct of college impact models incorporated student characteristics and institutional traits (Astin 1999; Tinto, 1975). Not until the 2000’s did researchers such as Berger, Braxton, Brier, and Milem begin to consider and investigate the role and impact of organizational influences and behaviors on student outcomes (Berger, 2000; Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Berger & Milem, 2000). Organizational theory, which incorporates organizational context including behaviors, has only more recently been considered a potential factor (indirectly or directly) to understand and explore student retention and persistence in college (Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Titus, 2004). Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the effects of organizational (institutional) behaviors on bachelor’s degree completion.

Rationale and Significance

Administrators and faculty must recognize how virtually all policies and programs can affect the way students spend their time and effort in their quest for academic pursuits (Astin, 1999). Colleges and universities must also be part of the solution to improve degree completion rates and attainment of a college degree for a much larger populous. Research on student outcomes has largely deemphasized individual students while at the same time research has also ignored the potential of organizational behavior as an influence on student success (Berger, 2000). With the current national, state and local focus on universities and colleges themselves to reevaluate their goals, policies and practices (behaviors) around degree completion, universities
and colleges as bureaucratic institutions need to transition from gatekeepers of knowledge, to facilitators of a meaningful educational experience, thereby creating meaningful change and praxis in our competitive, challenged and mutable society. Institutions must carefully evaluate the behaviors and practices that would benefit their institution and support student success. Institutions need to be cognizant of current research and recognize the need for a multi-pronged approach that can incorporate the influence of institutional behaviors on persistence to degree. Colleges and universities must be willing to evaluate and reconsider the ongoing variety of research studies on retention, persistence, degree completion, and student success, and effectively address organizational behaviors that directly or indirectly improve retention and persistence.

The problem of degree completion and debt is apparent in the increased research in the field on retention and persistence (Astin, 1999; Berger, 2000; Berger & Braxton, 1999; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Kuh, 2007; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Reason, 2009; Titus, 2004) and the resources colleges, state officials, and the federal government are putting toward the problem. Information on the consequences and impact of low graduation rates, high debt and low earnings of those without a college degree has turned the focus to the colleges themselves (Pew, 2014; Porter, 2002). Students sans degree are at a disadvantage in finding employment that will provide them with a meaningful income allowing for living expenses and loan repayment, for a degree they did not receive. Students who complete their degrees but take a protracted amount of time incur more debt. Debt load with a college degree can be difficult but even more challenging is debt without the degree. Interest, debt and loans accrued by a prolonged undergraduate educational experience is no longer atypical, and has, for some, become the new normal, with disastrous fiscal results. The average student debt load upon
graduation from a four-year college with a baccalaureate degree rose to $28,950 in 2014 according to the nonprofit Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education estimates that on average, college graduates earn $1 million more over a lifetime than high school graduates (NCES, 2015). If low graduation rates persist, it has been estimated that by 2020 there will be a deficit of fourteen million workers with at least some college educational experience (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003).

The concerns and demands from parents and students to hold colleges accountable for growing costs, learning assessment, career readiness and graduation rates has led the federal government to step in and require colleges to be more forthcoming and transparent in costs, programs, graduation rates, careers and average earnings of their graduates. The recently developed College Scorecard (NCES, 2015) designed by U.S. Department of Education provides parents and students with information on the annual costs, graduate rate, loan default rates and salary after graduation and the ability to compare colleges in these areas. In higher education today, the pressure is clearly on colleges to find ways to increase student success and graduation.

While careers, salaries and social mobility are many times the driving force to attend college, outcomes of an educated population point to more than just salaries. Investment and support for higher education can have positive effects on the progress, sustainability, health, innovation and values of a society (Schultz, 1981). The role and contribution of higher education to a country’s economy and its culture has been well documented by economists such as Theodore Schultz (1981). Schultz’s study on the importance of education in post war Germany and Japan and the investments in human capital, make it clear that national economies benefit from an educated populace, and yet our nations reluctance to invest in human capital, enriches our banking and loan institutions rather than society itself. (Schultz, 1981). Education and a
college degree is not only important from the viewpoint of students and parents, and for colleges themselves, an education has proven to be a driving economic force for local, state, national and international communities. Advancing knowledge, understanding, tolerance, and civic responsibilities enrich our culture and help solve many societal problems (Gappa, Austin & Trice, 2011). So while many may view students as the primary beneficiary of education, in the end society is also a beneficiary (Gappa, Austin, Trice, 2011). There is clearly a public good and value added to society of an educated populous.

One essential principle to improve economic earnings, social mobility, and innovation, and reduce student debt load is to increase persistence to degree and improve the graduation rate. Research suggests that colleges must make efforts to display institutional behaviors and structures of commitment and support for student success (Kuh, 2001; Tinto, 1999). Colleges need to develop settings that provide academic, social and personal support (Tinto, 1999) and promote a culture of learning and engagement. Colleges and universities must now step up and take a more active and conscientious role in establishing behaviors to improve undergraduate degree completion. To remain vital and part of the solution, institutions need to take student persistence and graduation issues more seriously and “stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life” (Tinto, 1999, p. 5) and establish educational conditions that support and promise persistence (Tinto, 1999). This study will seek to understand the influences of institutional behaviors, which include, organization culture, internal structures, programs and policies, on degree completion for first-time, undergraduate liberal arts majors.
**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

With limited qualitative research on how institutional behaviors of colleges impact individual students, a qualitative approach can help provide perspectives from students on the ways institutions can develop a culture, programs and services to better address their needs and support degree completion. As this research study will be limited to one specific undergraduate college, the findings may not directly translate to other colleges; however, it could provide a framework to approach institutional behaviors and culture for other college administrators and researchers. Based on the research findings of this study, the goal would be to find meaningful praxis and change in the area of institutional behaviors, including cultures, structures, programs and policies that encourage persistence and degree completion.

**Relating the Discussion to Audiences**

By examining institutional behaviors which influence student outcomes through qualitative research, college officials might better understand the degree to which various institutional behaviors support student persistence. Findings may help provide college administrators with key insights and information to effectively build new programs, practices, polices and structures, or modify the current ones in place thereby increasing the likelihood or possibility of making informed decisions to support the goal of student success. These informed decisions might than impact long range strategic planning for resource allocation and programs that support persistence and the development of institutional behaviors that not only communicate the institutions commitment to student persistence and degree completion but also effectively support students with their goal of a college degree.
Research Problem and Research Question

Student departure and the failure of a significant population of students to complete the required course work and degree requirements for a bachelor’s degree is a national problem, some may say crisis, which requires a major reconsideration of the contemporary paradigms of academic environments, initiatives, academic engagement and learning (Arum, 2011; Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1987; Kuh, 2008). How to identify and address the current dropout phenomenon are complex and even frustrating exercises, and one that universities over the past several years have become increasing engaged in solving. This is a national problem and there are many modalities to try and combat this phenomenon, but the efficacy of such cures have proved dubious at best (Arum, 2011). Many of these strategies, while well intentioned, fail to address the stated problem of practice which is the failure of institutions of higher education to develop behaviors that support student persistence. Institutional behaviors of colleges take many forms: internal structures, policies, practices, architecture of the campus, design of academic programs, intercontextual behaviors of campus life, support services, and campus culture. These structures articulate institutional actions and give form to institutional behaviors and characteristics.

The goal of this study is to better understand the complex issue of institutional behaviors that effect undergraduate liberal arts majors’ persistence and degree completion. Therefore, the one overarching, central question is:

How do institutional behaviors influence persistence and degree completion of undergraduate, liberal arts majors?

To further investigate the essence of institutional behaviors the following sub-questions are proposed:
How do students’ perceptions of institutional practices, programs and policies influence their ability to complete their degree?

How do faculty and administrators’ perceptions of institutional practices, programs and policies influence student degree completion?

A qualitative approach is utilized in this study in order to drill down further on the phenomenon and insights from students and to also allow for the possibility of new questions to evolve in the process. Additionally, quantitative studies are abundant in the area of retention and persistence research, many utilizing data collected nationally from the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the National Student Clearinghouse, leaving little additional research that investigates students’ perceptions and experiences of their journey to a degree.

**Definition of Key Terminology**

This section defines the key terms referenced throughout this study. The definitions of terms are from higher education literature.

**Attrition** - Students who drop out of college prior to degree completion.

**Culture** – “Persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education and which provide a frame of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and off campus” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 6).

**First-time student** - Any student who is entering college for the first time.
Dropout – A student who intends to graduate from college but dropouts and never completes a degree.

Institutional Behavior (also referred to as Organizational Behavior) - The actions, decision making and daily patterns of functioning within an organization (Berger & Milem, 2000).

Persistence - “Refers to the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning year through degree completion” (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p.7).

Retention – An institution’s ability to retain and keep students enrolled (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Reason, 2009).

Student Success - Student who is in good academic standing and progressing toward degree.

Withdrawal - “Refers to the departure of a student from a college or university campus” (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p.7).

The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of Terenzini and Reason’s comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study was to understand the effects of institutional behavior on student persistence and degree completion using the constructs of the Terenzini and Reason’s comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence (see fig. 1) (2005). Based on their extensive review of the literature on student attrition and retention, Terenzini and Reason identified an overlooked array of behavioral influences that may shape student outcomes and developed a framework that takes into account the multiple student, faculty, and institutional
influences which research shows may help shape and support student persistence (2005). Their comprehensive model accounts for “The College Experience” which includes an organizational context and a peer environment (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). There are three sets of primary influences within each of the two areas of organizational context and peer environment. Organizational context includes: internal structures, policies and practices; academic/co-curricular programs, policies and practices; and faculty culture (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). The peer environment of the students’ individual experiences includes: classroom experiences, out-of-classroom and curricular (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

The Terenzini & Reason framework attempts to address the conceptual isolation of many of the original theories on higher education retention and attrition (Bean, 1981; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975) by providing a structure which broadens the investigation to multiple forces affecting the complex issues of student persistence (Reason, 2009). The assumption made by Terenzini and Reason (2005) in their research is that institutional effects are more about what institutions do than what they are. This assumption has been supported by their research on internal organizational structures, practices and policies that are more likely to influence student outcomes (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). “Upon enrolling in college, students enter environments that have the power to shape their behavior and influence their success” (Reason, 2009, p. 666).
Foundations of Framework

Researchers began to explore the complex nature and factors that contributed to student departure or dropout in college in the early seventies (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). This early research in the phenomena of student dropout focused mainly on pre-enrollment characteristics, student commitment to the institution and academic and social integration (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). In the 1970’s, Spady (1971) and Tinto (1975) developed models of student dropout based on these types of factors. Tinto’s theory of student departure or interactionalist theory is the seminal theory that may be the most well known as well as the most tested in empirical studies (Pascarella, 1980). Tinto (1975) based his model on Spady’s (1971) empirical model of the undergraduate dropout process which was developed based on Durkheim’s (1951) concept of social integration in his theory of suicide. Spady’s (1971) model regards the decision to leave a particular social system (college in this instance) as a result of complex social factors that
includes many factors such as family, previous academic background, grade performance, friendship support, social integration, satisfaction, and institution commitment. Tinto (1975) elaborates on Spady’s (1971) and Durkheim’s (1951) work for the development of his theory of dropout which also includes various factors that contribute to the dropout decision such as background, commitment, academic system factors, social system factors, and academic and social integration.

Bean (1981) followed with a model of student attrition which expanded on social and academic integration theory by including organizational variables. Bean’s (1981) research on student attrition incorporated some of the elements from Spady’s model of integration with Price’s model of student attrition which adapted the study of employee turnover in work organizations. Bean’s (1981) model of student attrition included seven background variables (e.g., parents’ education, high school grades) which were expected to influence twenty indicators for students’ interaction with the organization. Bean’s (1981) model also incorporated attitudinal variables such as perceptions of institutional quality, value of the education, satisfaction, boredom, self-development to predict intent to leave.

Subsequently, Astin (1999) advanced his student involvement theory. Astin’s student involvement theory became a model for the investigation of student development in college. Astin’s (1999) theory focused on the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience. College administrators and faculty could utilize Astin’s (1999) research to design more effective learning environments. This allowed for the focus to shift from pedagogical approaches to the motivation and behavior of students, thus the institution
could evaluate all institutional practices and policies in terms of their impact on encouraging and increasing student involvement (Astin, 1999).

These early theories have been tested and have shed light on retention issues prime for theory elaboration and development of new theories. Tinto (1975), Bean (1981), and Astin (1999) provide the seminal works and models that serve as theoretical frameworks for numerous research projects on these phenomena. Although the recent research has not supported one model fully, portions of each model have been supported by research.

While researchers have been studying factors that contribute to student dropout or attrition since the late sixties, only more recently have researchers begun to study organizational behavior that may affect degree completion and may provide more actionable guidance for administrators when developing policies, structures and programs with the goal to improve student satisfaction and persistence (Ro, Terenzini, & Yin, 2013). Despite recommendations that organizational behavior theory is an ideal candidate for theory elaboration of existing theories, research in this area is still developing (Berger, 2000). Research on organizational behaviors of colleges and universities and their impact on degree completion are fewer but seem to be increasing (Berger, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Titus, 2004).

However, as graduation rates have continued to remain stagnant in the United States, it is largely acknowledged that due to the complexity of the phenomenon of persistence, no one theory has been able to account for and explain the factors that influence degree completion, positively or negatively (Tinto 1987; Kuh et al., 2007). So while certain theories may be favored for research studies, researchers working in the field today seem to acknowledge that the ongoing investigation on this phenomenon is critical. Therefore, it is paramount for researchers to
consider all relevant concepts and theories in an effort to better understand and address the very complex phenomenon of degree completion. Organizational behavior theory seems to be a prime candidate for considering individual student’s perceptions.

As researchers continued to address the challenging phenomena of attrition and retention, they continued to expand and elaborate on many of the original theories of student dropout and departure by incorporating additional factors and perspectives. This included the addition of organizational influences and eventually organizational behaviors (Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Braxton and Brier (1989) also developed a model which added three organizational attributes, institutional communication, fairness in policy and participation in decision making, to Tinto’s historic model of retention (1975), but it also focused more externally. Berger’s conceptual framework suggested five core dimensions of organizational behaviors: bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic (2000). While Berger and Milem’s conceptual model on the role of student involvement is one of the first to consider organizational influences on students outcomes, their model still focuses externally on structural-demographic characteristics and organizational environments (2000). Terenzini and Reason (2005) are two of the first researchers to consider the internal organizational factors and behaviors that may affect student outcomes of retention and persistence and is important distinction relevant to this study.

Critics of this Theory

Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) comprehensive framework encourages researchers to look more broadly at multiple influences affecting student outcomes thereby avoiding the conceptual isolation of much of the research on retention (Reason, 2009). However, there are few studies
that have utilized Terenzini and Reason’s comprehensive framework. Compared to the extensive research studies that employ the well-known models of Tinto (1975), Bean (1971), Pascarella (1984), and Astin (1999), the Terenzini and Reason (2005) model has largely been untested. As organizational theory is a more recent addition to the pleura of student retention and persistence research, the impact and effects organization behaviors on undergraduate degree completion remains imprecise.

**Rationale**

Institutional behaviors can take many forms: architecture of the campus, design of academic programs, practices, policies and intercontextual behaviors of campus. These structures articulate institutional actions and give form to institutional behaviors. The multifaceted nature of persistence and degree completion make it difficult to identify one set of factors that seems to address all students and institutions. While the utility of research and practice generally favors multi-institutional studies to parse out the effects of various factors on persistence, institutions must consider local organizational context and their students to effectively address intervention and student persistence at their institution (Reason, 2009). Tinto also reminds scholars that using models of student departure and leaving to understand student persistence cannot directly help administrators determine what to do to assist students to degree completion (2005). “Leaving is not a mirror image of staying” (Tinto, 2005, p. 320). Any institution truly committed to creating an environment to improve degree completion must have a strong understanding of its environment and behaviors so that strategies can be developed to change behaviors to support the goal of increasing graduation rates (Reason, 2009).
Terenzini and Reason take into account the popular models from Astin (1985), Tinto (1993), Pascarella (1984) and Holland’s (1997), although none of these models provide an in-depth consideration of internal organizational behaviors. The Terenzini and Reason model (2005) may be the only model that looks internally to the college experience and the organizational context and peer environment that colleges control and can modify, change and improve to help student succeed. Due to the internal organizational focus of Terenzini and Reason model (2005), it serves as an ideal framework for the examination of institutional behaviors. It is also significant that the Terenzini and Reason model (2005) is a theory of persistence which will be referenced as the framework for this study on degree completion as opposed to utilizing a framework of student attrition or departure. This study will utilize the organizational context as suggested by Terenzini and Reason to evaluate students’ perceptions and experiences of the effects of the internal structures, policies, practices and programs on the outcome of persistence to completion (2005).

Applying Theory to this Study

The inclusion of institutional behaviors or organizational context should not be overlooked as a potential influence and predictor of student satisfaction and persistence. Colleges and universities must be active participants in redefining their role and purpose for the 21st century and stop lingering in the past. Colleges need to develop settings that provide academic, social and personal support (Tinto, 1999) and promote a culture of learning and engagement. Other researchers have called for a cultural shift within higher education to institutionalize student success as part of the norms of the institution and focus on success rather than failure (Kuh et al, 2005; Tinto, 2007).
The comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence developed by Terenzini and Reason (2005) aligns well with this research study on student persistence and degree completion by providing a framework to study the organizational behaviors that may support student success and degree completion. Using the framework identified, the research could provide insights from students to identify and support effective college strategies in the areas of policy, services and organizational structures. It is important to note that the Terenzini and Reason model placed institutional contexts prior to student peer environment to support their concept that organizational context can influence student environment and individual student behavior (Reason, 2009). Their conceptual framework proposes the notion that institutional policies and practices are powerful levers for increasing engagement and persistence (Reason, 2009). The Terenzini and Reason model would then seem to be an appropriately meaningful framework for a single institution study which could inform practice for the institution on institutional behaviors that support improved degree completion.

Conclusion

Understanding the foundations of research and theory on student outcomes of attrition, dropout, retention and persistence, as well as the subsequent research and elaboration of early theories, provides a better and more complete picture of the complexity of students’ persistence behaviors within the context of higher education. Recognizing the importance of institutional behaviors and their influence on persistence and degree completion can provide another perspective to the ongoing struggle to improve graduation rates. and Reason’s comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence offers a solid framework for the research in this study (2005).
Following this introduction, Chapter Two will provide a comprehensive review of the current literature on student retention and persistence. Chapter Three outlines the research design and role of a case study methodology to cultivate an in-depth understanding of liberal arts majors’ perceptions of institutional behaviors on their path toward degree completion. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study and Chapter Five will discuss the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework of Terenzini and Reason’s comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence (2005). Chapter Five also includes recommendations and implications for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Understanding the factors and issues that lead to student departure or student success seems a hall of mirrors, blame is everywhere and the problem itself is a complex one. No one theory or perspective can fully address the complicated nature of the problem (Kuh et al., 2007). The research on the impact of college on students is vast and wide ranging and expanding at an accelerated pace (Pascarella, 2006). The broad scope of research on retention and persistence can be difficult to decipher, as there is inconsistency in its nomenclature and a decided lack of standardized terms, in addition to the more obvious differences in student attributes and institutional characteristics. Due to the lack of consistency in the variables and factors used to assess the outcomes (Astin, 1999), the results can be difficult to evaluate. There are, however, a handful of sound theoretical perspectives that most frequently serve as frameworks by scholars and researchers working in the discipline of student attrition, persistence and success (Kuh et al., 2007). The ongoing research examined through the lens of these theories continues to shed new light on the connections between these theories and the complexity of the issues and highlights the need for more integrated and planned programs and curriculum (Kuh et al., 2007). More recently, scholars (Astin, 1999; Berger, 2000; Berger & Braxton, 1999; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Kuh et al., 2007; Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Titus, 2004) have suggested considering internal organizational behaviors as potential factors that may influence persistence and degree completion instead of continuing to look outwardly at student or institutional characteristics.

This literature review outlines the seminal and current literature on persistence, retention and success. The research will be categorized by themes or phenomena of (1) involvement, integration, engagement, (2) support services, (3) financial, and (4) organizational theory. The
findings and implications will be summarized by the various themes on improving student success and degree completion.

**Academic and Social Involvement, Integration, Engagement**

The multiple dimensions of student success phenomena coupled with the wide array of research methodologies, data collection and institutional differences make it challenging, and at times difficult, to make sense of the literature. Both Astin’s Student Involvement Theory (1999) and Tinto’s Model of Retention (1975) are cited in numerous articles and research conducted that may support or not support the original theories. Both authors have continued to revisit and amend their original theories as well as add to the current literature. While many colleges have instituted retention programs, little has been done to change the essential character of the college bureaucracy and alter the student educational experience (Tinto, 2002). How do institutions make sense of the layers of research on various phenomena? What can be done to support timely degree completion? One way to make sense of the layers is through the investigation of research and theories on academic and student involvement, integration and engagement. Engagement and integration encompass a wide array of educationally purposeful activities and programs that colleges offer to help students integrate both socially and academically with peers, faculty and staff, and ultimately decide to stay at the college and move from a transitional stage to a committed and intentful stage.

**Involvement, Integration and Engagement Models**

The first theoretical model of the student dropout process was in 1970 (Spady). This model was based upon Durkheim’s writings on suicide (1951). Durkheim regarded suicide as essentially a problem between the individual and society (1951), and that shared group values and friendship were expected to reduce suicide (Bean, 1982). Spady’s (1971) research posed the
question of extent of intent to graduate by the student and was the foundation of the concept of institutional commitment. Tinto (1975) developed a sociological model of student retention that indicated student persistence was related to the degree to which students were integrated into a college’s social and academic communities. His model was congruent with the previous work of both Durkheim (1951) and Spady (1971) and highlighted the importance of goal commitment in the process of social and academic integration (Bean, 1982). Successful integration led to further commitment to the institutional mission and the realization of academic goals (Tinto, 1975).

There is a plethora of studies and articles that support, negate or further develop Tinto’s theory that successful integration leads to persistence (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2013; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000; Cabrera, Castafieda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992; Duque, 2014; Liu & Liu, 2000). Much is written on the requisite academic and social engagement and integration required to increase institutional commitment and the likelihood of student persistence to degree. The imprecise definition of the term integration and the different meanings that are applied to different research articles make it difficult to find a common approach. At first glance, social integration seems to read as integration into college life, which could be and has been defined as satisfaction (Liu & Liu, 2000). But how is social integration different than involvement, engagement or satisfaction, and why do certain researchers use these terms interchangeably? Involvement alone may not be enough, because students may not be engaged. The clear understanding of the term social integration is important when evaluating its effectiveness. When it is defined as an absence of estrangement and alienation, it seems to be positively associated with persistence, however student integration defined as frequencies of interactions with friends and social activities many not influence persistence (Liu & Liu, 2000). Conversely, research by Liu & Liu (2000) does indicate students who feel alienated will withdraw.
In the development of his involvement theory Astin (1984) states that involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy to the whole student experience or a specific student experience. Astin (1999) also believed that involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features and can be an important theoretical link between practice and outcomes. Colleges have used involvement theory to develop programming and enhance activities and opportunities for students to become involved. Some studies, such as research by Webber, Krylow & Zhang (2013), indicate that while academic involvement is a predictor of persistence, social involvement is not always a predictor and sometimes can lead to student departure.

Engagement on the other hand is about two elements, what the student does and what the institution does (Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009). High levels of engagement have been linked to increased student satisfaction. Engagement then is a binary process, students need to participate in learning activities and exert their time and effort into academic and social activities at the same time the institution must create this structure wherein self and cohort directed activities can play out. The institution than must allocate resources and services that will support and encourage participation and engagement (Kuh, 2001). Factors of academic engagement may include amount of time studying, use of study groups, meeting with faculty, completing homework or purposeful activities related to academic endeavors (Svanum & Bigatti, 2009). Svanum and Bigatti’s (2006) research demonstrated a substantial relationship between academic course engagement and grades.

Pascarella (1980) developed a conceptual model of student-faculty informal contact which included student preenrollment characteristics and student non-class contact with faculty and other college personnel. Research using this model showed significant positive associations between informal interactions and satisfaction and persistence in the first year (Pascarella, 1980).
The quality of the out of classroom contact influenced factors the most. While Pascarella (1980) does not specifically use terminology of engagement, his model is clearly influenced by previous research on the influence of quality out of class relationships and purposeful institutional policies (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1985). Informal student-faculty contact and interaction have been tied to important agents of socialization within the college setting which positively influence satisfaction, academic achievement and persistence from the first to second year (Pascarella, 1980).

Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2008) apply a business customer relationship marketing framework to the challenges of college retention which provides a different but viable model on retaining student. Their study includes a formula for determining the economic benefits for retaining students as paralleled with business customer retention. According to their study purposeful involvement increases student satisfaction and positively impacts student retention (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2008).

High-Impact Educational Practices

Based on the theories of involvement, engagement and integration, research has identified several teaching and learning practices that have been assessed and tested, and have been shown to be beneficial to students. Kuh (2008) believes high-impact practices are effective because they promote academic and personal development, require substantial time commitment and allow students to apply their knowledge beyond the classroom. These high-impact practices have been broken down to ten categories that educational research suggests can support and improve retention rates and student engagement (Kuh, 2008). The ten practices include: first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive
courses, collaborative projects, research, diversity/global learning, service learning, internships and capstone projects.

First-year experiences, common experiences and learning communities provide a thought-out system to assist students in the transitional period from high school to the college and contribute to student engagement by creating a common experience, building community, and helping students develop identities in a new community (Svanum & Bigatti, 2009; Cambridge-Williams, Winsler, Kitsantas & Bernard, 2013). Internships are high impact activities that not only provide a student with a liaison or reference for a job after graduation but can help the transition from classroom to career upon graduation and lifelong learning (Kilgo, Ezell Sheets & Pascarella, 2015; Kuh, 1991). Successful internships build confidence and connection to academics through the potential of job opportunities, which further augments engagement and persistence (Kuh, 2008). Capstone courses or projects result in a culminating experience that require students to reflect, integrate and apply what they’ve learned (Kuh, 2008). Research on the impact of the capstone project on students suggests that many students describe the capstone experience as one that significantly contributed to their learning and sense of accomplishment (McGill, 2012).

The initial adjustment period for first-year students presents numerous challenges. These challenges are not just limited to academics but also to personal and social challenges that are presented as students move into a new culture, community and must adjust and build new relationships and support systems (Kuh et al., 2006). Everett’s (2015) research on fostering first-year engagement underscored how alone first-year students can feel and the importance of realizing their peers have similar experiences, feelings and challenges. First-year orientation programs and first-year experience programs may be the first two programs that colleges develop
to begin the process of involvement, engagement and bond the abecedarian student to the institution. Well developed and integrated freshman studies courses and first-year experience co-curricular programming have been shown to improve self-efficacy, help seeking, and peer-learning behaviors for students in these courses as compared to students not enrolled in these types of courses (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013). Freshman seminar or orientation may be useful in getting students to use campus resources that help them become more responsible and self-regulated learners (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013). First-year programs that help students development the skills needed to navigate college and build confidence, self-efficacy and help-seeking behavior have been linked to increased engagement, motivation, retention and graduation (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013). Belonging is another area of research that has increased over the recent years by educational researchers studying phenomena that can inform persistence (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; O’Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012, 2015). The sense of belonging of first-year students can have a positive effect on their persistence decisions (Strayhorn, 2012).

Learning communities may involve living in a community together, but the fundamental concept is that students learn, collaborate and share a first-year experience. Research (Tinto, 1999) generally indicates that learning communities’ programs have positive effects on retention and graduation. Shared experiences and collaboration between students and faculty in residential areas or communities may include study groups, formal and informal discussions, group outings and assignments and have been linked to improved confidence and community building for freshmen students (Tinto, 2002). These shared experiences can help move students from the transitional stage to the committed stage. “Every academic year spent in the college decreases
the likelihood of leaving or transferring out because students accrue credits, build relationships, and invest time and money” (Lukosius, Pennington & Olorunniwo, 2013, p. 216)

**Technology**

The potentialities of emerging technologies to improve student integration, academic and social engagement and success need be examined thoroughly with circumspection. Institutions of higher education today make major investments of resources to aid in educational technologies to support student communication, learning, and social connections. Current research in the area of technology can be broken down to three major categories: students’ use of technology, features of technologies and adoption by students, and the impact of technology on student learning (Strayhorn, 2012). Researchers have begun to use theoretical frameworks of student integration, engagement and persistence to study the impact of various technologies in these areas (Palmer, Boniek, Turner & Lovell, 2014; Chen, Lambert & Guidry, 2010; Strayhorn, 2012). Laird and Kuh’s (2005) work suggests a positive link between student-faculty interaction and other measures of student engagement through the use of information technology.

Even the most cursory reading of current articles on emerging technologies and their impact on student retention and degree completion make it clear that there is a lacuna in meaningful research on the role of emerging technologies and their impact on academia (Laird & Kuh, 2005; Palmer et al., 2014). While most of the research to date has been done on the use of academic technology to improve learning outcomes, less has been done on how students use and interact within the various institutional and non-institutional technologies, and how these technologies influence and impact the college community thereby effecting students’ sense of belonging. The use of technology for everyday interactions and communications is important for millennial students (Palmer et al., 2014). Colleges, universities and faculty should actively work
to understand the ways that students use technology in their daily life to develop current and meaningful knowledge in their roles of facilitating social connections and belonging on campus (Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Clearly there still needs to be more research to clarify whether or not the use of technology adds an additional layer of information to the current literature on student engagement or if the ways that students engage information technology are additional indicators of student engagement (Laird & Kuh, 2005).

Further complicating this quandary is the existential reality that the traditional identity tasks of young adults (the development which was previously the domain of the institution and familial relations) have found a new technologically based persona (Reisser, 1995). The contemporaneous development and improvements of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, are replacing the more traditional trajectories of identity development (Palmer et al., 2014). Add to this the simultaneous distrust in institutional bureaucracy, and the hegemony of technology in our society, it is no wonder students, faculty and administrators are nonplussed. All available information is just a key stroke away and all available misinformation is just a key stroke away; perhaps determining the merits is the real measure of education. The fact is our contemporaneous faculty and staff are faced with a bifurcated student populace that needs leadership, reassuring and meaningful engagement, and education, and a way out of the forest of signs and simulacra toward true knowledge, compassion, and understanding.

Conclusion

Most literature supports the importance of academic and social engagement, integration and belonging as positive factors of retention and persistence. The theory of involvement emphasizes active participation of the student in the learning process (Astin, 1999) but it must be complemented by the institutions involvement in the process as well. High impact activities can
help develop a connection to the college as well as advances in technology that may facilitate new ways to engage students in the learning process and to improve integration, belonging and commitment to the institution. The institution’s ability to build a system of multiple pathways to support engagement, integration and belonging that in turn help students bond with the community and college during the first two semesters of a student’s college experience and beyond can foster the student’s connection to the college and result in student persistence.

**Support Services**

In support of student success and persistence, colleges have increased services for academic support including precollege programs, advising, mentoring, and career services. In their research on students’ perceptions of support systems, Lukosius, Pennington and Olorunniow (2013) found that students’ perceptions of the institutions support services in addressing their academic needs influenced how students may behave in the future.

One of the important indicators of student success is the ability to deal with purposeful utilization of stress and stressors (Brooman & Darwent, 2012). First year students often feel overwhelmed when tasked with completing challenging academic assignments whose structures they are both unfamiliar with and might possibly be ill prepared for. Learning to cope with stress, recognizing its antecedents and causations, and directing it in a meaningful way is an integral aspect of the educational process and will help to inform the student scholar both academically and existentially (Brooman & Darwent, 2012). While academic challenges can lead to stress, outside existential factors such as: fiducial responsibilities, personal and emotional pressures, deracination, child care issues, etc., might also contribute to student departures. According to Bandura anxiety and stress can be controlled through the development of student centered efficacy or self-efficacy (1997). Nonacademic factors such as self-efficacy,
institutional commitment, social support, loneliness and stress can be addressed through first-year transition programs (Lotowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). These programs provide continuous student engagement, enhanced advisor support and allow students to develop relationship with faculty, advisors and staff (Fowler & Boylan, 2010).

**Precollege Programs**

As colleges become more diverse and attract and recruit more minorities, first generation and underserved populations, precollege programs have become one way to begin to prepare students with the tools and support needed to transition and excel academically. These programs may include summer research assistantships, major specific programs and summer transition programs. Simmons (1994) research on three summer precollege programs found that students reported positive effects of participating in the programs and felt the programs helped them to perform better academically, develop confidence, and learn how to be successful on a college campus. Research (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Simmons, 1994) suggests that precollege programs can help students to integrate and adjust to college life, and learn how to navigate college support networks and improve retention in the first year. Much of a student’s first-year experience involves knowledge banking aimed at the attainment of skills which would increase the student’s ability to execute behaviors necessary to channel stress into meaningful praxis. The attainment and banking of these skills and the awareness of one’s own triggers for stress is both an important aid to education as well as a life skill that will serve students beyond the academy walls. Precollege programs can help students develop a sense of control over one’s behaviors, motivations and academic outcomes thereby empowering a sense of control and integration with one’s environment.
Advising and Mentoring

Advising can play an important role in student success and retention goals but colleges need to evaluate and assess advising to ensure campus goals are being met and new practices and opportunities are considered in order to improve advising and support student graduation. Many colleges employ a faculty advising model, a central professional advising model, or a combination of both. To provide a wider range of academic services, including tutoring and skill development, many colleges have enhanced centralized advising centers with professional staff who may juggle responsibilities between freshman experience or seminar programs. These types of models increase connectedness, engagement and satisfaction for both the professional advisors and the students, and show clear evidence of the college’s investment and support in student success and persistence. The programmatic interventions that many of the centralized advising centers undertake support indicators of engagement and success (Chiteng, 2014). Prescriptive academic advising serves as a more functional, clerical model and does not promote the independent problem-solving strategies need to support underprepared students or first generation students. (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). Developmental advising is a “process-oriented” relationship between the student and advisor whereas intrusive academic advising is a model that promotes active intervention and concern about the affairs of the student (Fowler & Boylan, 2010). Still another model of advising is suggested by Strayhorn (2015). In his research on belonging, Strayhorn (2015) suggests that to aid in developing student belonging and building a connection to the campus, the role of an advisor should be one of a “cultural navigator.” Cultural navigator/advisors can assist students during the critical transition to the unfamiliar, foreign environment of a college campus and can help provide support and reduce students’ feelings of isolation and loneliness for new students (Strayhorn, 2015). Colleges should weigh
the impact of the various advising/advisor models to ensure the best results on student success. Whether centralized or decentralized, advising is one way to engage students and provide assistance for degree completion.

Although various studies have supported a positive influence on the higher education experience from some form of mentoring (Breen et al., 2001; Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Flumerfeldt et al., 2007), the research into mentoring has proved problematic, as there is no clear systematic definition of the role and support that a mentor may provide (Jacobi, 1991). Research on mentoring has not generally focused on student outcomes but rather on the examination of the mentoring process itself as well as the perceptions of the participants (Campbell & Campbell, 2007). With such a wide discrepancy between informal, peer and formal mentoring it has been hard to compare results of research in this area and the impact on student persistence, however, a successful mentor program, whether informal or formal, does have the potential to improve student engagement and integration into the academic and social environment of the college (Jacobi, 1991). Other positive effects of mentoring have included improved confidence, more willingness to use support services such as tutoring and an improved awareness of the role and availability of support services (Snowden & Hardy, 2013). While there are limited studies on the impact of mentoring on student outcomes, findings do support positive influences of mentoring on many aspects of the higher education experience which have been shown to support student success such as engagement, participation in campus life and self-efficacy (Campbell & Campbell, 2012; Snowden & Hardy, 2013).

**Career and Professional Development**

It is important to understand the different roles and functions of career development as opposed to professional development and their effect on retention and degree completion.
Career development focuses on assisting students with the process of selecting a major and not merely a job placement center for assistance upon graduation. Career Development Centers help to foster a connection between academics and a career post-graduation (Blau & Snell, 2013) and studies have linked career development activities with increased engagement and persistence (Conner, Daugherty & Gilmore, 2013). This can be particularly important in the liberal arts where students may not automatically see the connection and potential of a specific major to a job. Tying career skills with a major early in a student’s academic career may lead to greater comfort and connection with the academic work and the potential career opportunities and success (Luke, Diambra & Gibbons, 2014). This then translates to engagement and stronger commitment to the college and degree completion. Professional development on the other hand augments career development and emphasizes activities that prepare students for jobs upon graduations (Blau & Snell, 2013). These activities include resume critique, alumni speakers and networking workshops, and soft-skill development such as teamwork (Shivpuri & Kim, 2004).

Another important function Career/Professional Development Centers provide is access to part time jobs and internships. While too much time spent working may not mix well with being an engaged full-time student, there is ongoing evidence that on-campus part time jobs and internship programs build engagement and community (Luke, Diambra & Gibbons, 2014). On-campus job opportunities can develop confidence, a sense of place and integration for students. These type of opportunities help integrate the student into the community where he or she can then develop and foster positive, supportive relationships within the college. On campus employment keeps students on campus and increases the likelihood that they will meet other students, staff and faculty who can encourage and assist the student in various ways and facilitates retention (Astin, 1999).
Conclusion

Higher education institutions can have a significant impact on improving graduation rates if they choose to focus their efforts appropriately. Colleges and universities play an important role in strategically allocating resources and designing programs in an effort to create a student-centric environment that fosters and encourages persistence and degree completion. Support services of advising, mentoring, tutoring and career and professional development can assist students in building engagement in two major areas of academics and cocurricular activities. All of these examples are of purposeful activities that can lead to greater outcomes and persistence. Astin’s theory of student involvement emphasizes the active involvement of students in the learning process (Astin, 1999). Institutional commitment to programs such as mentoring, advising, tutoring and academic support, and career related academic activities, when well developed, can provide entering students with a clear sense of institutional support and caring and a sense of community support which fosters academic engagement and integration.

Financial

With the escalating costs of a college degree along with state and federal financial aid programs that have not kept up with the cost of inflation, access to college and the ability to persist to degree is being challenged by financial means of students and parents. Public education policy arguably made great strides in the 1960s and 1970s to provide federal financial aid funding to a much larger population who could then afford to attend college, but the key metric was generally on access to higher education and not on controlling costs and ensuring students persisted to degree completion. The ability to address social stratification and access for marginalized and disadvantaged groups through state, federal and institutional aid programs remains a major challenge for the bureaucracy of higher education. For many families,
uncertainty over how to pay for college may be a major obstacle in completing a degree. As the cost of tuition, fees as well as the cost of living on campus increase and financial aid grants decrease, lack of finances to pay for college may be a contributing factor to dropout or stop out of college (McCormack, Schnee, & VanOra, 2014). While it is generally agreed upon that the current federal financial aid policy and systems are seriously flawed (Brock, 2010; Heller, 2006) there is little research on the effects of how the various federal and state programs support persistence and degree completion (Brock, 2010). The increasing concern of college costs, completion rates and debt justifies the growing interest in the effectiveness of student aid on degree completion.

Students who must juggle full-time work and college may struggle academically and also find it difficult to integrate and commit to school (McCormack et al., 2014). Students in this type of situation may be more likely take an extended amount of time to complete the degree or perhaps not even receive a degree (McCormack et al., 2014). Access to academic support services during nontraditional times, inability to take required courses when offered, difficulty working on group projects and difficulty building a support network of peers are all factors related to working full-time while attending school (McCormack, et al., 2014). Colleges should look to develop policies that support students from low socioeconomic status to enroll and persist (Titus, 2006). To understand the impact of financial factors on persistence, the array of programs must be investigated and considered.

**Federal Financial Aid**

There is little research on the impact of federal financial aid and degree completion. A more comprehensive and strategic approach to the range of federal aid programs seems necessary to support access and eventual degree completion. The limited research on the effects
of federal grants and loans has had mixed results (Yu, 2014). Some research has found that loans are not as effective as grants in helping students stay in college and complete their degrees (Yu, 2014). But due to lack of research and little insight into how the various programs work together or separately to assist students, the impact of federal aid programs on degree completion remains unclear. Additionally, the assortment of financial aid programs offered by federal, state and institutions lack any strategic design to understand if the programs have benefitted the intended audience and further opportunity for a wider population.

**State Aid Programs**

States have the primary responsibility for funding colleges and universities and setting policies and agendas. Research on retention and graduation has focused mainly on students, (Astin, 1999; Bean, 1981; Tinto, 1975) with a smaller amount of research on the role of the institution on retention and graduation (Berger & Braxton, 1998), and even less research on the role of the state in the area of persistence and graduation (Titus, 2009). States are the principal agents in the implementation of state support for institutions and students in higher education degree attainment and therefore state higher education policy, including financial aid, may have a significant effect on degree completion (Titus, 2006). But state appropriations have been on the decrease for years, as tuition and fees have been increasing (College Board, 2015). State appropriations were 14% lower in 2014 dollars than the 2004-05 amounts (College Board, 2015). State financial funding and policy has the potential to impact the economic advantage of its human capital by increasing the flow of college graduates (Titus, 2006). State investment in higher education means that the states should eventually receive the advantages of having an educated populous which can have positive effects on state and local economies, entrepreneurial
enterprises, and lead to a healthier and more civic minded and engaged citizenship (Gappa, Austin, Trice, 2011; Schultz, 1981).

Research by Titus (2006) has shown that rates of college completion are influenced more by state financial aid policy, specifically need-based financial aid, than by federal financial aid. Titus’ research (2006) indicates that states who improve efficiencies by also increasing need-based student financial aid will positively influence degree completion. State policy makers must be careful to balance the demands of increasing selectivity and degree completion by increasing merit aid over need-based aid as such efforts may lead to more social stratification (Titus, 2006).

**Institutional Aid Programs**

Institutional grant aid is funds provided directly to students from institutions of higher education. Institutional grant aid is the largest source of student grant aid (Doyle, 2010). The earliest scholarships in the colonial era and early 19th century were mainly merit-based, by the 20th century this practice was carried over to elite private colleges and universities (Hauptman, 1990). As financial need became more of an issue for many students, private institutions began shifting to a grant system based on financial need. As public tuition began to rise at a faster rate than family incomes in the 1980’s, public colleges and universities began to award scholarships from their own institutional funds (Heller & Laird, 1999) as well. Since institutional grant programs are closely tied to their enrollment strategies and provide clear indications of the values and characteristics that the institution is looking for in its students, the utilization of institutional dollars to increase the likelihood that a student will enroll or continue at the institution is crucial for colleges and universities (Doyle, 2010).
Conclusion

To enroll more students, achieve more equity and support higher degree completion, finance policy needs to adapt and change to support changing priorities and goals. More research needs to be done on the role of state financial support and incentives for degree completion (Titus, 2006). Progress in recent decades encouraging enrollment has not been matched by degree completion (Baum, 2007). Financial aid programs must be designed not to just enroll students in institutions of higher education but also to encourage actual completion of degree (Baum, 2007). Baum, Kurose & McPherson, (2013) propose that the aid debate needs to be reframed and moved beyond the need/merit debate and instead focus on leveraging the existing aid programs and funds to increase the odds for students to enroll and graduate. Stopping out from college and graduating may need to be modeled as “competing” events and some factors, like financial aid, may not appear to increase graduation but may actually promote degree completion by reducing student stop out (DesJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2002).

Organizational Theory

With growing concern that the steps colleges have instituted to improve retention are not taking hold, the area of organizational theory is receiving renewed attention (Chen, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Price’s (1977) research on worker turnover in organizations became the model for the early studies of student departure research utilizing organizational theory. In his model, Price (1977) included six variables of worker turnover: pay, having close friends, participating in decision making, the repetitiveness of work, knowledge of the work role, and being treated fairly. Although employees and students are different, Bean (1982) felt the two groups could potentially have certain similarities and used Price’s model (1977) as a framework for a model of student attrition. Bean (1981) was one of the first scholars to study organizational effects on
individual student persistence (Berger, 2000). Bean (1982) applied Price’s (1977) organizational study of worker turnover to his theory of attrition comparing turnover in work organizations to the student attrition process (Berger, 2000). Bean’s (1981) research is even more noteworthy in that it is one of the first studies to consider individual student’s perceptions. In Bean’s research (1981, 1982), student perceptions of organizational factors, such as routinization, participation, communication and rewards, were found to influence student satisfaction and positively impact persistence (Berger, 2000). Subsequent researchers such as Braxton and Brier (1989) built their studies on Bean’s work. Despite Bean’s early research and theories (1981, 1982), and Braxton and Brier’s (1989) work, research on the impact of college on students generally ignores the influence of organizational behavior (Berger, 2000).

Organizational theory can provide a foundation to further examine the role and relationship of institutional characteristics and behaviors and student attrition (Chen, 2012). Colleges need to develop settings that provide academic, social and personal support and this support must be connected to the entire student experience. Efforts must be made to change the institutional character and display visible structures and support for student success (Berger & Braxton, 1998). “An atmosphere conducive to successful integration is formed when the institutions have constructed programs, policies, and activities that provide a balance between the social and academic experience” (Turner & Thompson, 2014, p. 103). Without balance, attrition will likely follow. Institutions must be active participants in engagement. Some research recommends organizational characteristics as a potential conceptual source for further elaboration of Tinto’s theory (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Research has shown the interconnectedness of factors that may lead to attrition, yet universities themselves manage
personal, social and academic divisions separately and would be better served to organize a comprehensive, holistic approach to the needs of first-year students (Everett, 2015).

**Organizational Behavior and Characteristics**

To promote retention and graduation, colleges and universities must shift the focus to their own behaviors and establish conditions within their control that promote the intended outcome of degree completion (Tinto, 2012). While many attributes of admitted students are out of the control of the institution, this is not the case for conditions within the college in which the student is placed (Tinto, 2012). Institutions must be mindful to ensure practices and policies are in alignment with the goal of persistence and work to remove barriers that prevent student success (Tinto, 2012). Looking inwardly at conditions that institutions can control is often overlooked. Too often colleges look to place blame on students themselves rather than consider how their own institutional actions may be partially at fault (Tinto, 2005). Organizational leadership and behaviors may have strong effects on student persistence. Tinto (1987) believes that the character of the institutional commitment is directly related to the organizations ability to integrate, make contact with and retain students. “When the theory of retention becomes a theory of alienation”, institutions must assume responsibility, at least partially for students withdrawing” (Liu & Liu, 2000, p. 18). Alienation is a structural problem and not an individual student problem and therefore must be addressed by the college itself through meaningful programs and targeted behavioral changes to improve retention (Liu & Liu, 2000).

Research studies on the impact of the image of higher education institutions supports the argument that image may positively affect a student’s institutional commitment (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2013). Sung and Yang’s (2008) research on university image and the supported attitude of freshmen uncovered a significant relationship between students’ evaluative
perceptions of the university and their supportive attitudes toward the institution. Their research on image and prestige of an institution and the relationship of students’ attitude and commitment toward the institution provides college officials another avenue to consider for development of programs and effective communication to enhance the characteristics of their institution that build a strong connection of a commitment with students (Sung & Yang, 2008).

Institutional policies and practices on allocation of financial resources to support student services may have important implications on student behavior (Chen, 2012). Chen’s (2012) research is consistent with previous research findings that found financial investment in student services is an important and even critical environmental factor (Astin, 1993; Webber & Ehrenberg, 2010). Research on the effect of the allocation of institutional expenditures on persistence found that increased student service expenditures influenced first-year persistence rates (Webber & Ehrenberg, 2010). Reallocation from expenditures that do not positively affect persistence (Webber & Ehrenberg, 2010) should be an important discussion by college administrators in the effort to demonstrate institutional behaviors that are committed to degree completion. Institutional behaviors and expenditures may in fact play an important role in student success and traditional views that student services may be frivolous and do not really contribute in any meaningful way should be seriously reconsidered (Chen, 2012; Webber & Ehrenberg, 2010).

In elaboration of Tinto’s departure theory, Berger and Braxton (1998) studied three organizational attributes: institutional commitment, fairness in policy, and participation in decision-making. All three attributes have been tied to a positive source of social integration (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Berger and Braxton’s (1998) study supports the theory that how effectively campuses communicate and how fairly they enforce policy has a positive effect on
first-year retention. This communication is not limited to student affairs and student service offices but also in the classroom. Students are more likely to persist if they feel social rules and academic policies are communicated well in addition to having some say and influence on the social rules. (Berger & Braxton, 1998).

The influence of institutional context on student persistence has received little attention by scholars. Titus (2004) used the size and selectivity of the institution in his research on institutional context, and although limited, indicated that these two attributes may have some correlation. Structural-demographic characteristics on persistence are examined and tested in the research by Berger and Milem (2000). These characteristics would include: size, selectivity, public or private, institution type and location. The Berger and Milem (2000) model also includes student functional experiences, which may have an effect on student outcomes. Their concepts of functional experiences include non-academic interaction with departmental staff, college policies, regulations and campus decision-making processes. Although this model has not really been tested it provides another framework to assess engagement and persistence. However, this model does seem to relate to Berger and Braxton’s (1998) research on the role of organizational attributes on student persistence. One potential source of influence on social integration may be the ways in which students experience the organizational attributes of an institution (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Berger and Braxton’s (1998) research indicates that in addition to student perception of organizational fairness, student participation in policies and decision making may have a direct effect on retention at some institutions.

Students’ own perceptions have received little attention in research on dropout, retention or persistence. There has been limited research and measures of student perceptions and behavior regarding organizational behavior (Berger, 2000). Berger (2000) used five dimensions
of organizational behavior: bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic and systemic to study two student outcomes of humanistic values and community service involvement. In his study, Berger’s (2000) results indicate that different dimensions of organizational behavior affect outcomes in various ways for different students. Research by Blau (1973) also found that highly bureaucratic institutions were less likely to have high retention rates due to the following two factors: these institutions were less likely to attract high achieving students; and highly bureaucratic college and universities were more impersonal which had a negative effect on persistence. Administrative behavior and style is another area that research has shown can affect student persistence (Astin & Scherreri, 1980; Berger & Milem, 2000). Humanistic or collegial administrative styles have been linked to positive effects of student persistence (Berger & Milem, 2000).

Based on Berger and Milem’s (2000) conceptual model for researching organizational impact on student outcomes, Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) model of influences on student learning and persistence identifies three primary domains of organization context of (1) internal structures, policies, and practices; (2) academic and co-curricular programs, policies, and practices; and (3) faculty culture. Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) research suggests that internal organizational and operational factors are more likely to significantly affect student experiences and encourage higher education researchers to look more broadly at multiple factors that affect student outcomes (Reason, 2009). More recent research by Ro, Terenzini and Yin (2013) have supported Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) work by suggesting that internal organizational and operational behaviors, (things in which higher education institutions have control over) can impact student outcomes.
Conclusion

Institutional behaviors and commitment to engagement, integration, student success and degree completion cannot be overlooked. The ongoing research on retention and persistence highlights the need for more research in this area (Chen, 2012). Administrators and faculty must recognize how virtually all policies and programs can affect the way students spend their time and effort in their quest for academic pursuits (Astin, 1999). Astin (1999) goes on to state that administrative discussions must go beyond purely academic issues to include and understand the effects of nonacademic issues such as campus buildings and space, dormitories, cultural and athletic activities, food services, financial and even parking. Institutions must evaluate all aspects of the college policies and structure, physical and cultural, to ensure each is in support of building student engagement, motivation and success. Astin and Scherreri’s (1980) research suggests that aspects of the campus’ organizational environment and behaviors can have a positive or negative effect on student success. The degree to which students feel that the college is concerned about them can affect satisfaction and persistence (Astin & Scherreri, 1980). Berger and Milem’s (2000) research also supports that more research is needed from the student perspective on organizational behavior, including the questions of the dynamic interactive nature between organizational behavior of colleges and universities and student outcomes. Terenzini and Reason (2005) suggest that scholars should look more broadly at multiple factors of organization context that influence student outcomes. The inclusion of organizational characteristics attributes and context should not be disregarded as a potential influence and predictor of student satisfaction and persistence. “It is the higher education institution, which must seek to create a welcoming environment, where care, warmth and acceptance are promoted, in order to achieve improved retention” (O’Keeffe, 2013, p. 612).
Summary

There is an abundance of research on various means and strategies institutions might employ to develop structures and trajectories aimed at ensuring retention, student engagement and persistence in undergraduate college programs. These studies consider institutional initiatives and strategies (both considered and implemented) aimed at encouraging and realizing successful student success and retention campaigns. Also considered in this literature review are the various approaches, tactics and structures that institutions may develop to improve student academic and social involvement, as well as engagement and integration. Academic engagement and integration is paramount (intellectual work). Social engagement and integration is also significant (peer learning, shared experiences) since socialization and integration can help support student success and degree completion. Yet still, organizational behaviors may serve as the foundation for the structures, culture, programs and policies that reinforce the institutions commitment to academic and social engagement and integration and ultimately student success.

Research points to the necessity of multidimensional approaches and small policy-levers to address the complex problem of student departure and degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Braxton & Mundy, 2002). Educational institutions need to be self-reflexive and should be willing to examine and investigate institutional aims and ambitions. While most researchers agree that well thought out programs of first-year experience, learning communities, advising, mentoring, support services, professional and career development, and service learning opportunities aid in student satisfaction, it is the meaningful implementation and integration of these programs which should be of concern to the institution. Special attention should be paid to the college characteristics and the type of students admitted to said college, as these actualities need to be addressed and factored into equations of change. Commuters, first generation
freshman, adult learners, millennial freshman, each of these cohorts may require a different paradigm to generate and create interest and satisfaction. Research on millennials has been particularly challenging and colleges need to develop clear guidelines and programs to address the need for instant feedback, praise, and constant guidance and offset parental intervention (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Different values and expectations between students, faculty and parents can lead to student dissatisfaction.

Colleges need to develop and articulate a clear and meaningful philosophy. Policies designed to address the expectations of millennials prior to enrollment in college should support the transformation of insecure, yet overly confident students (whose helicopter parents often speak for their ward) to students able to demonstrate personal agency, and stronger autonomy, be it personal or academic (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Institutions must carefully evaluate the practices that would benefit their institution and students. Focusing too widely (lack of specificity) or too narrowly, and implementing poorly supported programs and ill-conceived engagement practices will not yield the desired results. Institutions need to be cognizant of current research and be willing to evaluate and reconsider the ongoing variety of research studies on retention, persistence, degree completion, and student success. Institutions must also take time to engage and learn from the research. It seems that almost no two research studies or articles are the same. Differences between colleges, types of students, unclear nomenclature, and a decided lack of a coherent definitions of terms variegates outcomes and may in some ways explicate the lack of an authoritative manifesto offering shape and direction to these inchoate initiatives.

It is clear from the research studied in this literature review that for colleges to achieve and improve student success and persistence, the importance of organizational behavior should
not be disregarded. Universities and colleges as bureaucratic institutions need to transition from
gate keepers of knowledge, to facilitators of a meaningful educational experience, thereby
creating meaningful change and praxis in our competitive, challenged and mutable society.
Colleges and universities must invest and champion the behaviors that support engagement,
integration and persistence so that students and parents can clearly identify with the college’s
commitment to success, but colleges and universities must act soon; the debt and disillusionment
is growing.
Chapter Three: Research Design

This study explores the effects of organizational behavior on the ability of undergraduate, liberal arts majors to persist and complete a bachelor’s degree. In this study institutional behavior encompasses institutional culture, structure, programs and policies. Knowledge generated is expected to inform retention and persistence practices of higher education institutions. The following chapter provides an explanation of the research approach, the research question and detailed information on the process of the study, the participants including a discussion of ethical considerations, trustworthiness, the researcher’s positionality, and the limitations of the study.

Research Question

The goal of this study is to better understand the complex issue of organizational behaviors that effect undergraduate liberal arts majors’ persistence and degree completion. Therefore, the one overarching, central question is:

How do institutional behaviors influence persistence and degree completion of undergraduate, liberal arts majors?

To further investigate the essence of institutional behaviors the following sub questions are proposed:

How do students’ perceptions of institutional practices, programs and policies influence their ability to complete their degree?

How do faculty and administrators’ perceptions of institutional practices, programs and policies influence student degree completion?
Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was utilized in this study. “Qualitative research uses narratives to optimize the opportunity of the reader to gain experiential understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p.40). At its core, qualitative studies emphasize interpretation (Stake, 1995). To sharpen the understanding of phenomena, qualitative researchers perceive events with their own direct interpretation and stories (Stake, 1995). All research has an element of interpretation but unlike quantitative research which works to limit personal interpretation, qualitative research relies on the researchers own observations and subjective judgments when analyzing and synthesizing data. Qualitative inquiry strays from the cause and effect explanations of quantitative research and works toward a more personal and holistic interpretation of a phenomena (Stake, 1995). Insight into human behavior can provide rich insight into the meaning and purpose of behaviors that cannot be captured in quantitative studies that are stripped of context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative studies may uncover what students actually think and do as opposed to quantitative methods which rely on what students say they do (Kuh, 1990).

Constructivism-interpretivism paradigm is grounded in qualitative research. This would appear to be more a posteriori in that objective reality does not enter the equation. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is “constructed within a social-historical context, researcher and participants construct their findings through interaction and interpretation” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). The interrelated assumptions for this paradigm aim to understand that knowledge can be subjective and contextualized based on the researcher/subject relationship and the researchers understanding of the events and situations within the wider social environment. Epistemologically speaking the constructivist-interpretivist view the subject/researcher interaction as central in their research and consider the transactional subjectivist reality of
qualitative, empirical interactions not as problematic but as necessary (Ponterotto, 2005). It would appear that constructivism-interpretivism is more idiographic in its research and testing methodologies and might seek to recognize the emic distinctions of the research subject being studied. Additionally it must be noted that within the interpretivist paradigm, the student, scholar, researcher’s axiology must be addressed honestly, this is in contrast to the epistemology of dualism practiced by positivist researchers. A researcher’s axiology is her or his belief system and bias, according to Ponterotto (2005), “the researchers values and lived experience (Erlebnis) cannot be divorced from the research process” (p. 131).

**Methodology**

This research study employed a qualitative methods approach utilizing a case study design. The qualitative case study approach can offer a rich data set that provides for a more robust analysis of the context of college systems and the effects on persistence and degree completion. Since the research focuses on how institutional behaviors, structures, programs, culture, or college systems influence student persistence and degree completion, the case study approach aligns well. Case study methodology provides a structure to deepen understanding of practices and human behaviors (Miles, 2015). Case study research allows for diverse methods of data generation such as: interview, observation, documents, surveys and images that allow for an in depth description and holistic understanding of complex practices (Miles, 2015). Case study research focuses on an issue with a case selected to provide insight into the issue (Creswell, Hanson, Clark & Morales, 2007). “The focus of case study research then is not predominantly on the individual as in narrative research but on the issue with the individual case selected to understand the issue (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 245). As this study investigates effects of organizational behaviors on degree completion a case study approach can uncover the
contextual conditions of the phenomenon. As scholars have widely agreed that student retention and degree completion is a complex, multidimensional problem (Kuh et al., 2007; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 1987), a case study investigation is a suitable approach for investigation of the research questions in this study.

**Philosophical Underpinnings and Overview**

The origin of case study research has a long history of being particularly attractive to social scientists but is popular among many disciplines as well including psychology, medicine, law and political science (Creswell et al., 2007). The origins of social science case study have been traced back to anthropology and sociology research as early as 1920 (Creswell et al., 2007). A central philosophy of case study research is that of a naturalistic inquiry to engage with and learn the world in order to generate new insights and understanding into the complexities of a constructed or bounded case (Miles, 2015). Case study research focuses on a case (issue) that has been selected to provide insight into the issue (Creswell et al., 2007). The method allows for multiple data sources making for a rich data set for analysis.

The seminal authors of the case study method are Yin, Merriam and Stake (Yazan, 2015). While all three scholars contend that the case study approach allows for a holistic understanding of a phenomenon within real-life contexts from the perspective of those involved (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick & Robertson, 2013), each scholar proposes variations in the case study approach. Yin’s work presents a more structured approach; with some critics suggesting his research is situated more within a postpositivist paradigm as opposed to Stake’s constructivist paradigm (Boblin et al, 2013). Merriam’s viewpoint also stems from a constructivist stance (Yazan, 2015). Yin’s work aims at presenting the design and methods of case study and advocates for its legitimacy in research while Merriam’s text serves to illuminate the usage of
case study methodology and how it differs from other qualitative research approaches (Yazan, 2015).

Even with its long history, the case study approach is still viewed by some scholars as a lesser, flawed method that is considered less valid or lacks theoretical rigor compared to other methodologies (Miles, 2015). The case study approach is also criticized for the lack of generalization to wider populations, potential bias by the researcher’s preconceived notions, and lack of development of theory in favor of concrete, practical or tacit knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Miles, 2015). Despite its history and popularity in certain disciplines, case study methodology is still evolving and building its reputation as a valid, rigorous and powerful research approach. Yet still, case study methodology is one of the most common qualitative research methodologies in educational research; however, there is not full consensus by scholars on its designs, implementation and protocols, leaving an opening for it to be criticized as a legitimate research method (Yazan, 2015; Yin, 2003).

Data collection and data analysis occur concurrently in case study research as it would be in other forms of qualitative research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). While several scholars (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) have outlined their own strategies and techniques for data analysis, there are commonalities between the techniques as each tries to process and make meaning of the data by examining, consolidating, reducing and testing what people have said and what the researcher sees and makes meaning of. As there is no standard format or design for case study research, the overall intent of the case study will shape the presentation of findings (Creswell, 2013). Although there is no one correct format, it is crucial for the researcher to describe phenomenon as well as its context.
Since a case study reports on a complex phenomenon with many sources of data it can be difficult to report findings concisely (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest the goal of presenting the findings is to describe the study in a comprehensive way that allows the reader to feel as though they are an active participate. The presentation will provide a broad interpretation of the case study and what was learned (Creswell et al., 2007). Through the data analysis, the researcher interprets the case and presents the lessons learned. The case study analysis would end with applied generalization on how the research may be applied or utilized by practitioners in the field of the research.

Viewed as a comprehensive research strategy or a choice of what is to be studied, case study method allows for the generation and analysis of multiple data sources from multiple methods (Miles, 2015). The analytic approach in case study research presents a detailed description of the case in its natural setting. This study on the effects of institutional behaviors on degree completion of undergraduate, liberal arts majors aligns well with the case study method due to the incorporation of various methods of data collection and the ability to present an in-depth description of a single case.

**Participants**

This study included students, faculty and administrators as participants. Student participants were selected from liberal arts majors in their first or second semester of their senior year. Student participants were largely first-time students to the institution but a few were transfer students. This study consisted of four focus groups with approximately three to seven students in each group for a total of twenty-one liberal arts majors who were in the first or second semester of their senior year. A purposive sampling was used to recruit the students.
Although the primary focus of the research was student perceptions of institutional behaviors, faculty and administrators also provided valuable insight into their role of shaping institutional behaviors and culture. I utilized in-person, semi-structured interviews with five liberal arts faculty and seven administrators to hear their perspectives on the role and value of organizational behaviors and culture. Purposive sampling was also utilized to recruit the faculty and administrator participants.

**Sample characteristics.** In order to achieve a relatively homogenous sample group of students, participants were selected from seniors who were graduating with a bachelor’s degree with a major in liberal arts. At this research site liberal arts majors are designated as a major within humanities, natural science or social science. Students were of traditional undergraduate age, approximately 18 – 25, entered the college as a first-time student or as a transfer student. An attempt was made to recruit a cohort of residential students, commuter students and students who were a part of an Educational Opportunity Program at the college. An effort was made to achieve a mixed gender sample, however the majority of student participants were female. Faculty participants were recruited from full-time tenured faculty who teach and advise students in one of the majors within the liberal arts of humanities, natural science or social science. Administrators were recruited from directors and deans who have oversight for offices that provide programs and services at the institution.

**Research site.** The research site selected for this study was a medium size, public comprehensive institution in the Northeast region of the United States. The site was selected for this study since the researcher has a familiarity with the setting, its structures, type of students, faculty, and administration. Gaining access for research at a site where the researcher is currently employed or previously employed has its advantages and disadvantages (Marshall &
Rossman, 2015). In this setting the researcher must be particularly sensitive to particular biases and the inability to separate oneself from the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). On the other hand, conducting research in one’s own setting can provide ease of access to the site and participants, may be easier to build trust and rapport with participants when the researcher already has a respected standing in the community and may provide more intense interactions that can greatly increase the quality of the qualitative data collected (Marshall & Rossman, 2015).

Recruitment. Recruitment of participants began once the research proposal received approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as permission from the research site to recruit participants. Initial contact with potential participants was via email. The email reviewed the purpose of the research, outlined general expectations of the participants, emphasized the benefits and risk of the study, as well as reminded them that their participation was voluntary (Appendices A, B & C). Once participants agreed to participate in the study, I obtained their signature on an informed consent form before commencing any research (Appendices F & G).

Data Collection

Case study methodology supports multiple data sources, and as such, a variety of data methods was incorporated to collect data for this study. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in accordance with both the Northeastern University IRB and the research site’s IRB, data was collected from the following sources.
Focus Groups

The twenty-one student participants were broken out into four focus groups of three – seven students each. Two focus groups were residential students, one group consisted of commuters and residential students and the third group was students who are part of the state and college supported Educational Opportunity Program. Each focus group session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Focus groups were conducted in a private location of a conference room or classroom at the research site. The focus group design facilitates a structure for group members to have a group discussion and respond, agree, disagree or contextualize their experience or perspective (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Since a focus group allows for the interview to unfold as a collective conversation young college seniors selected for this study may feel more comfortable sharing and talking about their perceptions and experiences. The focus group followed a protocol designed by the researcher and included open-ended questions prepared in advance which allowed for open-ended answers. All four focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Notes were taken by the researcher during each session as well.

Interviews

A primary tool of qualitative research including case study is in-depth interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty and administrators recruited for this study. A semi-structured interview is one in which the researcher has a specific topic to research and prepares a limited number of questions in advance as compared to the unstructured interview where a researcher has a general research topic in mind but the specific questions are formulated during the interview process and according to the interviewees responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were completed with each faculty and administrator participant. Each interview lasted between 45 and
60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in the faculty or administrator’s office. The researcher designed an interview protocol with open-ended questions which was followed during each interview. The interview also included participant demographic questions such as educational background, years at the college, total years working or teaching at a college or university. The purpose and intended plans for the research were reviewed at each interview.

**College Documents**

Documents included in case study research can serve as sources of contextual information for events that cannot be directly observed or used by researchers to confirm or question information from other sources (Stake, 1995). The documents collected for this study included college marketing materials, college web site, meeting minutes, admission materials, course catalog, mission statement, internal documents, and college planning documents (Appendix M). An effort was made to obtain documents referenced by participants in actual interviews and focus groups to shed more light on the investigation.

**Data Storage and Management**

Electronic and physical documents were stored securely. Electronic files and documents were stored on a password-protected computer. Physical documents were stored in a locked file cabinet at the researcher’s home. After each interview, the audio recording was transcribed and then deleted and destroyed.

**Procedures**

Per Stake’s (1995) recommendations of case study research, data analysis for this study emphasized direct interpretation and categorical aggregation. This approach is appropriate for *instrumental case study* which as defined by Stake (1995) “will have a research question, a
puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case” (p. 3). Unlike Yin (2003) who places great emphasis on a tight and structured design for case study, Stake (1995) argues for a flexible design (Yazan, 2015). Stake (1995) believes that there is not one moment when data analysis begins. Early impressions may later be refined or discounted but the earliest of observations are part of the data pool (Stake, 1995). Stake’s flexible approach will be followed in the design of this research study which will allow for an iterative and simultaneous process of data analysis and collection.

**Data Analysis**

The rigorous and multiple data collection approach of case study research helps to develop an in-depth understanding into the case (Creswell et al., 2007). Data collection and data analysis occur concurrently in case study research as it would be in other forms of qualitative research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The data analysis in this study followed Stake’s (1995) method of direct interpretation and categorical aggregation. “Researchers reach new meanings about cases through direct interpretation of the individual instance and through aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class” (Stake, 1995, p. 74). Analysis and synthesis in direct interpretation requires pulling apart data from an instance and putting it back together with more meaning while analyzing an aggregation of instances can allow for issue-relevant meanings will emerge. While both direct interpretation and categorical aggregation may be incorporated into case study research, one or the other may be relied on more heavily than the other depending on type of case study.

Once interviews and focus groups were transcribed and notes from document analysis completed, the researcher became intimately familiar with the data from each interview and focus group. Then the process of coding the data began to ensure access for analysis and for the
write-up of findings. “Coding forces the researcher to make judgments about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The organization and coding was facilitated by the use of a qualitative computer program. A qualitative computer program does not analyze the data but rather helps to facilitate the analysis by storing and organizing data to allow for assigning labels and codes and enabling the researcher to search through text to identify categories (Creswell, 2013).

Coding began as data was collected, not after fieldwork was completed and preliminary notes in the form of analytic memos were kept in a journal. The reciprocal and dynamic relationship between coding and analytic memos allowed for critical analysis of the research and the development a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). First cycle coding and second cycle coding methods were incorporated in this study (Saldana, 2016). First cycle coding was used to initially organize and summarize the data. In Vivo Coding was utilized in the first cycle coding process. In Vivo Coding uses actual language or short phrases from the participants themselves (Saldana, 2016). In Vivo Coding also allowed the terms and concepts used in the study to be drawn from the participants themselves, allowing the researcher to more likely capture the inherent meanings and subtext of the participants experience and perceptions (Saldana, 2016). In the second cycle coding process, pattern coding was utilized. Pattern coding serves as a way to group and develop meaning from the initial segments of data collected in the first cycle (Saldana, 2016). After coding, analyzing and developing an in-depth understanding of the data, the findings were presented through an in-depth narrative discussion that helped to construct and support the findings.
**Ethical Considerations**

All participants were treated in accordance with ethical research principles and the guidelines of the Northeastern University IRB as well as the principles and guidelines of the IRB at the research site. Researchers should do all in their power to guard against disclosure of study participants information and identity. Although the risks may be low in this research study, the researcher must also guard against inadvertently harming research subjects. Participants were supplied informed consent information, and notified of their rights and ability to withdraw from the study at any time. To protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were used and any identifiable information recorded or observed was excluded from transcriptions. All data collected and electronic files were securely stored on a password-protected computer. Audio recordings were permanently destroyed or deleted after transcription.

**Trustworthiness**

This study examined the influence of institutional behaviors on student degree completion through the subjective experience of the participants. Trustworthiness of subjective data through qualitative inquiry is sometimes questioned by positivist quantitative researchers. However, qualitative researchers can incorporate practices to demonstrate and respond to issues of validity and reliability in their work and thereby establish trustworthiness of the work (Shenton, 2004). To this end, Guba (1981) has suggested four criteria that qualitative researchers may employ to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative studies. This study followed Guba’s recommended criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability to ensure trustworthiness of the research.
Credibility. The rhetoric of research reporting data can lead either consciously or unconsciously to the potentiality of framing information in such a way as to prove one’s case or support one’s stated theory (Kimmel, 1988). The researcher must be vigilant and aware of this as a potentiality in their own work and the work of others. Ensuring credibility is one of the most important elements in promoting confidence in the research and establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To promote trustworthiness, this study incorporated triangulation, member checking, and peer review.

Triangulation involves the use of different methods of data collection and “in concert compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits” (Shenton, 2004, p. 65). Several methods were employed for the data collection in this research study including interviews, focus groups, observations and documents allowing for triangulation of data to reinforce trustworthiness. The use of multiple forms of data collection and evidence are a major strength of case study research and help support trustworthiness of the work (Yin, 2003).

Member Checking and peer review are other methods that were used to ensure trustworthiness. Due to the importance of participant interviews in this study, the researcher utilized member checking. Member checking incorporates a check and balance system with the participants to make certain interviews have been transcribed accurately and ensure the transcript matches the participant’s intent (Shenton, 2004). After an interview was transcribed, the participants were given an opportunity to review the transcript and make corrections and clarifications to the transcript. Shenton (2004) also suggests a second level of member checking involve verification of the researcher’s emerging theories. The use of observations and documents can help to scrutinize and verify particular details shared during interviews (Shenton, 2004). Peer review was utilized during the process to verify validity as well. An advisor
familiar with qualitative research and case study methodology was asked to comment on findings along the way to provide guidance of emerging theories and ensure credibility of the research.

The researcher’s own experiences and potential biases in this study were also taken into account. A more detailed account of the researcher’s background, experiences and potential biases are outlined later in this chapter.

**Transferability.** Transferability of the work can be aided by the collection and development of thick descriptions of the data collected to allow for a strong understanding of contexts that will make it possible for applicability to other researchers (Guba, 1981). “If transferability depends on a match of characteristics, it is incumbent on investigators to provide the information necessary to test the degree of fittingness” (Guba, 1981, p. 86). A thick and thorough description of the effects of institutional behaviors on degree completion will be provided in this study to enable readers to compare the phenomenon described with instances they have seen emerge in their institutions (Shenton, 2004).

**Dependability.** In order to ensure the stability and consistency of data collected in this study, the researcher established an audit trail. The audit trail included actual interview notes along with a complete accounting of the processes whereby data were collected, analyzed and interpreted (Guba, 1981). An in-depth account of the research practices of this research study allows readers to assess that proper research practices were followed as well as enabling future researchers to repeat the work and gain similar results or even new insights (Shenton, 2004).

**Confirmability.** In addition to triangulation which uses multiple methods to collect data which can then be used to test for validation of theories and claims, the researcher practiced reflexivity by keeping a journal of introspections on an ongoing basis (Spradley, 1979). These
documented reflections were then tested during debriefings with peers (Guba, 1981) and helped to mediate researcher bias.

**Potential Researcher Bias**

My positionality in relation to the stated problem of practice is complicated by my position of privilege at the university; I have been working at institutions of higher education for most of my adult life. My position in higher education has afforded me access to the tools and technologies of modernity utilized by the educationally privileged and I have witnessed both the glacial and unremitting transmutation of academic practices. Further complicating my positionality is the fact that I actually attended and completed my undergraduate degree at the very college where I now work and will perform my research.

My own perspectives on this problem of practice are problematized by my twenty years working in academic administration and my recent foray into the world of student services, student success and student affairs. Exploring my position as “outsider within” the field as well as my multiple identities will be crucial (Wilkson & Eacotot, 2013). I arrived at this college in the Northeast deracinated from my Midwestern culture and ethos. In 2014 I was put in charge of student success at the college where I work. My current position is a recent addition to the academic bureaucracy and is clear indicia of the universities failure to address student disengagement and alienation in any meaningful way. Therefore my job is currently reactive, so I am tasked with applying individualized solutions to failing, disengaged students in an attempt to bolster university graduation rates, which as those of us in the academy know, have become important data for state funding and university assessment. By the time failing students reach my office, the student has often found and or attributed one of the above mentioned causations for his or her failure and internalized the oppressor’s definition of which they are (Parsons,
It would be easy and reactive to except the failing student’s assessment of her or his problems, but a failing student traumatized, disengaged, and in shock, who is desperate and asking for help rarely criticizes the system or institution which has failed them. Such a destruction and disconnect from cultural communities facilitates the redefinition of the oppressed by the oppressor and increase the likelihood the oppressed will accept the oppressor’s definition of who they are (Hilliard 2001; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe 2001).

Paulo Freire encourages the development of one’s critical consciousness which is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems, attempting to avoid distortion and preconceived notions when analyzing problems and the rejection of passivity in favor of dialogical forms of life (2000). Understanding our own positionality in relation to each other will shape what we learn and know about the world (Takacs, 2002). Breaking the cycle of local power structures at work that stifle new views and interpretations so that instead the power structure supports the opportunities to respect different ways of learning, identities and experiences and encourages exploration and cherishes differences can develop a fuller sense of self as part of the community (Takacs, 2002). After years of experience in an institute of higher education and of planning and discussing programs to improve student experience and degree completion, I had to be acutely conscious and aware of falling into the trap of complacency and reliance on yesterday’s ideas. I had to be open and sensitive to new ideas, perceptions and sensibilities of others. I could easily fall out of touch with my own biases if not intensely aware of the potential of being self-satisfied in my work and role, particularly due to the longevity of my relationship with college administration and students.

The search for meaningful knowledge and empowerment, to continue to see outside the bounds of our own perspective and experiences, to challenge the status quo, we must first
acknowledge that one’s own knowledge claims are not universal truths which should inform our daily professional lives. By examining potential outcomes through the inclusion of multiple perspectives and ethical modalities of both inquiry and discourse, we as scholar practitioners might create meaningful praxis. As Gallagher notes the interpretation of meaning is a complex series of bridges between the text, our experiences and circumstances (1992). “To work toward a just world – a world where all have equal access to opportunity – means, as a start, opening our heart and mind to the perspective of others. We must be able to hear each other and to respect and learn from what we hear” (Takacs, 2002, p. 169). By continually acknowledging and revisiting my biases and my own perspectives, I tried to open my heart and mind to others, and respect and learn from them.

Limitations

With limited qualitative research on these phenomena, a case study approach can help provide honest perspectives from students, faculty and administrators on the ways institutions can cultivate behaviors, a culture, programs and services to better address the needs of the college community in support of degree completion. As my research was limited to one specific undergraduate college, the findings may not necessarily translate to other colleges, however, it could provide a framework to approach institutional behaviors and culture for other college administrators and researchers. Based on the research findings of my study, I hope to develop meaningful praxis and change in the area of organizational behaviors, characteristics and services that support persistence and degree completion.
Summary

This study explores how undergraduate, liberal arts majors perceive the relationship of college institutional behavior with their ability to persist and complete a degree. The study investigated the phenomenon of student persistence and degree completion in the real-world setting of a four-year undergraduate college. Given that the relationship between student persistence, degree completion, college behaviors and culture is complex, and at the same time may be ambiguous or uncertain, and a case study approach is appropriate. The case study approach facilitates exploration of a phenomenon through a variety of lenses and data sources providing opportunities for the complex issue to be revealed and better understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The qualitative case study approach can offer a rich data set that provides for a more robust analysis of the context of college systems and the effects on persistence and degree completion. As noted by Stake “case study may be at its best use for adding to existing experience and humanistic understanding” (1978, p. 7).
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

This chapter focuses on the study’s findings and the analysis of the data collected. Multiple stakeholders were interviewed for this study to gain insight into the various perspectives from the entire campus community. A variety of college documents were also included in the study to add context and to confirm or help balance participant observations. As an active member of the administration at the research site, as well as a decision maker who participates in formal and informal meetings and discussions on student outcomes, policies and services that may affect student outcomes, the researcher was able to collect insider data and documents through access as a participant observer in everyday setting of the college. The researcher’s real lived experiences cannot be removed from the process (Pontottro, 2005). This process resulted in the identification of patterns and themes through the analysis of focus group data, interview data and a variety of documents such as organizational charts, reaccreditation materials, college website, grant applications, strategic plan, admissions material, meeting materials and minutes, and program information.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the complex issue of institutional behaviors that effect undergraduate, liberal arts majors’ persistence and degree completion. The research sought to answer the following question:

How do institutional behaviors influence persistence and degree completion of undergraduate, liberal arts majors?

The following sub questions also guided the research:

- How do students’ perceptions of institutional practices, programs and policies influence their ability to complete their degree?
How do faculty and administrators’ perceptions of institutional practices, programs and policies influence student degree completion?

Students, faculty and administrators’ voices were included in this study. The research began with four focus groups of three to seven undergraduate students who would be graduating between May 2017 and December 2017. Next, five interviews were conducted with full-time faculty from various disciplines within the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. An attempt was made to interview faculty from the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences in late spring before they left for summer break. All but one interview was completed prior to faculty leaving campus for the summer and the final one was conducted at the start of the fall semester. Third, seven administrators from a broad range of offices were interviewed. Interview questions for all the groups are included in Appendices J, K and L. Lastly, before, after and in conjunction with the interview process, documents were identified and analyzed (Appendix M). The focus group and interview data collected for this case study produced over 12 hours of interview data. This data in conjunction with additional data from documents collected for this study produced a substantial amount of data which is useful in studying complex, multidimensional problems such as college degree completion (Stake, 1995).

Interviews and focus group recordings were transcribed and then provided to the participants to review, clarify and correct any inaccuracies. The researcher created a detailed audit trail of the research process, interview transcriptions, memos, and notes from document analysis. The analysis and review of interviews and documents occurred at the initial stages and on an ongoing basis throughout the process. A coding process utilizing MAXQDA, a qualitative computer program that supports organization and coding of the data, was employed. Documents were arranged and organized by documents type. In the initial first cycle coding, In
Vivo Coding was utilized to code the data based on actual language or short phrases from the participants (Salanda, 2016). During the second cycle coding, patterns were identified as a way to group and develop meaning from the initial coding. After the second cycle coding process, themes identified were then organized under predetermined themes based on the organizational context of the college experience portion of Terenzini and Reason’s comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence (2005). This structure allowed for three primary themes with corresponding sub-themes. The three primary themes are: Internal Structures, Policies and Practices; Academic and Co-curricular Programs, Policies and Practices; and Faculty Culture. Sub-themes in each of these areas were then developed through the analysis process.

This chapter is broken up into a discussion of the three primary themes of Internal Structures, Policies and Practices; Academic and Co-curricular Programs, Policies and Practices; and Faculty Culture, and associated sub-themes, followed by a summary that ties the findings back to the original research question this study was designed to answer.

**Internal Structures, Policies and Practices**

Terenzini and Reason’s research on organizational context proposes that internal structures, policies and practices can affect the student experience and student persistence in subtle but profound ways (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Through focus group research and interviews, students, staff and faculty discussed specific college programs, services and policies that impacted their college experience in some way, positively or negatively. Public and internal documents regarding internal structures, policies and practices were also examined in relationship to their role in supporting persistence. Many internal structures, services and programs were mentioned and described by participants as impacting a student’s transition to
college. The most prevalent sub-themes in this category were divided into: transition to college, internal structures, support structures and physical structures.

**Transition to College**

Students, faculty and staff shared their perceptions on the structures, services and programs available to them to support transition to college and student success. Students reported mixed feelings about the effects of programs and services on their transition to college.

**Orientation.** The college offers a one-day required orientation program in mid-July for all first-year students. The college repeats the orientation daily over four days and assigns groups of 150-200 first year students to one of the orientation sessions. Each session runs from about 10am to 4pm. As stated on the college’s orientation web page the goal of orientation is to:

Welcome and support new students and their families as they transition to the college community by building meaningful connections between the students, faculty, and staff. Through introducing students to our academic programs, support services, and co-curricular opportunities, we set the stage for students to continue to grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally. (college website, 2017)

In addition to the one day required orientation for all the approximately 700 incoming first-year students the college also offers an extended orientation/transition program for three subgroups ranging in size of 50 – 70 students. Students in these three subgroups have been identified as at-risk due to factors determined by the college such as first generation, low income and/or under prepared academically, and may benefit from additional support services to assist with their transition to college and to improve persistence to degree completion. First, is the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which offers a five-day residential orientation for
approximately 40 – 50 students who are accepted into the EOP program. This program receives state funding to provide additional support for students “who have not yet reached their full academic potential” (college website) with the goal of helping them complete their college degree. A second program is available for students accepted into the Merit Access Program (MAP), this group of students is offered a three-day residential orientation program. Both of these programs have existed for many years. The third program, Summer Success Fellows, was only started in the summer of 2016 and is also a three-day residential orientation program designed for 60 – 80 first-generation and/or low-income students. One focus group included only EOP. MAP and Success Fellows students were not represented in any of the focus groups.

In the focus group discussions, students reported diverse feelings on the impact of orientation on their transition to college. In general, students’ perception of the value of orientation on their educational outcomes and transition to college varied greatly between students who only participated in the one-day orientation program as compared to students in the EOP five-day residential program. Some students felt that orientation was too social and could have assisted them better with their transition to college if it covered more essential information on the academic experience and expectations. Some students felt that more practical information such as the complexities of the meal plans should have been included. In thinking back about her orientation one student stated: “I wanted academic preparation from my orientation, but it was all social… I don’t know. I would have appreciated looking at a mock-up syllabus or learning some time management skills. It was just silly stuff that wasn’t actually useful.” One student stated: “I can’t remember a single person who was in my orientation group.” While another student felt that after taking a gap year, “orientation felt like a summer camp.” Another student said that she thought orientation was patronizing and actually left campus for the day.
However, the student did acknowledge that her lack of participation in the orientation program “may have affected her success in the first year.” Two students who had some high school experiences, such as taking college courses in their senior year of high school or participation in a summer program that prepared them to apply for college, including test prep, felt it helped make their academic transition to college easier. Others stated they felt “they were on their own” once they entered the college even though they attended orientation.

However, the responses from the EOP focus group revealed a different perspective. EOP receives state funding to support students who may not have reached their academic potential. According to the college web page, students must meet income guidelines to be considered economically disadvantaged and are required to complete an interview with an EOP counselor for acceptance (2017). A requirement of being accepted into the EOP program is for students not only to attend the required one-day college wide orientation, they are also required to stay on for a five-day residential orientation program designed specifically EOP students. Students who attended the five-day program felt that it made them more comfortable starting classes in the fall since they knew where to find certain buildings and services offered. EOP orientation also included classes taught by faculty to help students prepare for the academic rigors and expectations of college. The summer program also introduced the new students to upper class EOP peer mentors as well as their assigned EOP counselor who they were required to meet with individually a couple of times during the orientation program. These types of programmatic elements are not part of the one-day college-wide orientation. Although the one-day orientation does have upper class peers serving as Orientation Leaders, the amount of time spent with a peer is substantially less than during the EOP orientation. Students in the EOP focus group also reported that if they ran into a problem in college and they didn’t know the appropriate office or
person to go for help, they always knew they could go to the EOP office for information and assistance. When discussing their feelings about the EOP orientation program, students in the EOP focus group made comments such as:

• I think, for me, because I’m in EOP, it was easy. So, during EOP week or during our orientation we got a lot of extra help that the regular students didn’t get. So the transition was easy.

• The week that we had, that we spent with EOP, was focused on workshops, focused on getting around campus, focused on the gist of what college is. The rules that are there in college. When you’re in high school, there’s obviously rules you have to…you have to attend to but, in college, there’s a whole range of other rules that apply to all students. So I got a feel of what college was really like.

Faculty interviewed for this study did not report any involvement with the one-day college wide orientation. Unlike the EOP orientation program where a few faculty are recruited and paid by the EOP director to teach courses, it appears that liberal arts faculty are largely segregated from and uninvolved with the one-day, non EOP, first-year student orientation. This may be due to a number of factors including: faculty availability during the summer period, faculty are not under contract over the summer period, length of the one-day program does not allow sufficient time for faculty interactions, and there may not be a budget to pay faculty to teach at the college-wide first-year student orientation.

The college administration does seem to have an understanding that a longer residential orientation program may be beneficial to some students, particularly at-risk students who may not be admissible to the EOP program. To address this void, in the summer of 2016 the college funded a Summer Success Fellows program that follows a similar format to the EOP orientation.
The program is targeted toward first generation and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Students in this program stay in a residence hall for 3 nights and faculty are recruited and compensated to teach courses designed to expose the students to expectations of a college class. Students in this program are also supported with upper class peer mentors as well as a staff mentor who is assigned to each student. Staff mentors work in various student support offices throughout campus such as the advising center, career services, tutoring services, admissions, registrar and within academic departments, and volunteer their time to serve as mentors. Since this program only began 2 years ago, the students in the 2016 cohort will not be graduating until 2020. However assessment of the program and student feedback of the program from the initial 2 years seems to indicate that the program assisted the students in their transition to college and made them more comfortable and confident during the first weeks of their first semester. First year retention rate of 90% for the 2016 cohort is above the college wide retention rate of 83%

Unlike faculty, administrators reported more involvement in the one-day, college wide first-year orientation program. Most reported that they made presentations about their offices and the programs and services provided. At least two staff expressed that they felt they were previously left out of orientation but with recent changes in the orientation leadership, they felt they were more welcomed at orientation and were provided an opportunity to interact with students and parents about support services available. One director interviewed stated “I have never been given access to the students in orientation until this year which is not good.” She reported that she had to be very persistence to raise awareness of the importance of having time to meet in person with students during orientation in order to support students better from the start of their time at the college.
Over the last few years the college also instituted a couple of internal practices to bridge the period between the end of orientation and the beginning of classes. These include the creation of an online course, *Class of 20XX Essentials*, for freshman to complete after orientation ends but prior to the start of the semester, and a Phase T.W.O. orientation program. The *Class of 20XX Essentials* is designed to communicate important information about the community the students will be entering, its values, community expectations, required new student processes as well as an introduction to academic expectations. A sample syllabus, including suggestions on how to break it down, organize and utilize it most effectively to plan for the semester, is included in the module. Readings and questions to consider for the required first-year film (or book) in preparation for the screening and discussion that will occur when students return to the campus for the start of the semester is also incorporated into the online essentials.

To augment the one-day college-wide orientation, the college instituted a Phase T.W.O program, which takes place once students move on campus a few days prior to the start of classes. As expressed on the college web page, “Phase T.W.O. Orientation is a mandatory program that continues the conversations from the July one day Orientation.” Phase T.W.O. Orientation promotes learning through faculty, staff, and peer led seminars, workshops and educational and social programming” (college website, 2017). Since this program starts just before the fall semester begins and faculty have returned to campus from summer break, the college takes the opportunity to introduce students to faculty through the required film screening and discussion during this liminal period before the actual first day of classes. Phase T.W.O. ends with a first-year convocation run by the Provost and celebrates of the role of the faculty and students, and kicks off the start of academic classes.
Helping Students Navigate College. The ability for students to navigate internal college structures and processes seemed to be perceived by all participant groups as somewhat critical to students persisting to graduation. Students are entering a new community with its own unique rules, regulations, and expectations that are much different from high school. Learning to navigate the college structures and processes that students are now responsible can influence their college experience and outcomes.

Students reported some frustration in the college’s assistance in helping them navigate college policies and procedures. Several students expressed that they felt it was difficult to get assistance on campus. As one student explained:

You have to ask a lot of people to get what you need on this campus…there’s so many programs and so many resources that I found out now that I’m leaving, that I could have used, my freshman and my sophomore year, that nobody told me about…And I found it difficult, on this campus, to get help. You can ask someone and they’ll send you to someone else. They’ll send you to someone else and you…you’re not going to get the clear answer that you need. And, a lot of the resources or questions that I had, I answered myself through having to search.

Another student felt that the support she received through the EOP program could benefit other students.

I feel like if they had an EOP for everyone, it would make things a lot easier because the way they conduct themselves, like helping students and their one-on-ones with students, if the advisors for regular admission kids had the same thing, I think it would make it a lot easier for them, as well, to adjust coming from high school into college.
Signage on campus was mentioned by another student when discussing the topic of navigating the college stating, “Well, the school just recently put up signs as to where each building is and stuff. I think that should’ve been done way long go.” One student shared her experience getting credit for an internship:

I didn’t really find any difficulties I had. I think the biggest thing would be getting credit for an internship last year because I had to end it early, but I still worked enough hours to receive credit for it. That was a whole process. I went to student services. I find the website is pretty easy to navigate. I could kind of find who I need to talk to. If took a little awhile, but eventually all kind of got sorted out.

The theme of “directing” students to the right place was a common thread throughout almost every faculty and administrator interview. When asked to speak about their experiences helping students navigate college processes to persist to degree one administrator described how helping students find the assistance they need also expresses an underlying attitude of caring. “It’s also just exhibiting to the students that you really care that they succeed and that they persist. Finding an answer for a kid is great. That's the end goal. But I think the first step is for them to go, "Okay. I'm scared, but someone is going to do this with me." That's part of it, as well.” One administrator spoke of the importance for students to successfully navigate college processes in relationship to persistence. “I think we really need to think of ways of helping students navigate from day one.” This same administrator expressed her philosophy and her role in helping students, “Students shouldn’t have to be redirected more than once or twice to get to where they need. So part of my job is not necessarily to be the person who directs them but to make sure the structures are in place here so that students get directed to the right person.”
Yet staying on top of college changes, procedures and policies can be challenging for faculty and administrators but important in ensuring students get the correct offices and complete the proper processes. Several administrators and faculty felt participation on committees and building relationships with other offices, staff and faculty helped to provide them with a good foundation to help students navigate the college structures and to be successful. One administrator described it this way:

I’ve been here a long time and you would think that everything would just be second nature but it’s not. Everything changes, and so you constantly have to learn new things and stay on top of new policies. What I do believe has become better for me is that I…in the amount of time I’ve been here and the different committees that I serve on, I have better relationships with other people on campus. So, I can pick up a phone and be able to talk to the dean of that area or the head of that program to help them.

**Internal Structures**

This section explores the perceptions of internal structures and how they shape and define student perceptions and success. An institution’s internal structuring can shape students’ experiences and positively influence student outcomes. Internal structures can include the organization of offices, staffing, reporting lines, mission, values, committee structure, governance structure and resources. Questions on internal structuring may answer such issues as:

- How do internal college structures support collaboration between areas and across divisions?
• What mechanism is in place to ensure input campus wide into matters of importance for the college such as its mission, values, academic programs, and programs to support student persistence?

Based on the analysis of the data on internal structures, the areas of collaboration and governance were the most prominent when discussing internal structures that support student persistence.

**Collaboration.** Participation by the entire campus community in matters of interests to the college as well as issues and policies that have campus-wide implications may influence student persistence more than college’s understand or realize. Terenzini and Reason suggest that the internal structures of an institution that allow for coordination both, horizontally across divisions, and vertically from the top through the chain of command to those responsible for achieving the mission of the institution, can have a powerful impact on student outcomes (2005). An internal structure that allows for collaboration among and across faculty, academic staff, student affairs staff, and students may also shape student experience and outcomes.

The administrators interviewed all spoke about the importance of working across areas and collaborating. Overall most of the administrators had much more positive views of the opportunities to collaborate, even if they felt the college did not always facilitate the process well. The difference in perceptions of opportunities to collaborate across areas between faculty and staff may be partially attributed to the necessity of the job. Faculty at the college tend to function more as free agents whereas the administrators who participated in this study must foster relationships with other areas in order to serve students. Directors of offices interviewed stressed the importance of collaboration with other offices to support student success through programming of events; knowing who to refer students to address issues, and helping students navigate the support services. One participant did suggest that limited resources fostered
working with others, stating, “if you pull together you can probably make more happen.” Most directors seemed to perceive that it was part of their role to collaborate but some reported more obstacles than others. One director stated:

I think a lot of the collaboration I’ve done, I’ve done myself, because I wouldn’t be able to do my job if I didn’t. I would love to do more with other offices. I’m sure if I reached out I could, but I just don’t. I’ve had a goal of focusing internally on my office, because it was non-existent before I got here.

While another expressed:

But I think the college itself sets a good foundation for collaboration. There’s a big push for service to the community, and the way that you do that is to reach out to other people. I think the atmosphere in the college is very much conducive to that. People want to connect with other people. They will ask you to come and do a thing, and if you go help them with one program and then you reach out, then they are willing to help you with another program.

There’s always a sense that we should be working together, especially when there are limited resources. You know, that if you pull together, you can probably make more happen. So, it’s not so much a mandate for collaboration, but it’s sort of unspoken, “This is how things function.” And it’s been effective.

But the depth and breadth of collaboration seems in question as it appears that much of the collaboration mentioned by the staff administrators is within units of a division such as student affairs or academic affairs, as opposed to cross divisions. One participant noted this
when she expressed some frustration with collaboration opportunities with academic affairs. “We’ve done things that we think are important or made offerings. But we have to ask for permission to use the time of whatever entity that we want to collaborate with, and they usually have a full agenda. So, I think this school is unique in how the academic side does not understand or value the student affairs side of the educational mission.” From her stated perception this really stifles collaboration.

One academic administrator participants felt more positive about avenues available and assistance for faculty collaboration within academic affairs than some of the faculty expressed. This could have to do with his position as an administrator who is more aware of conversations throughout the campus and his experience bringing faculty together. “I think there's a lot of ease in terms of collaboration from all areas. From advising to the registrar's office across certainly, within the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, it's very easy to reach out to people. Again, I find it to be a place that says yes pretty readily. There aren't a lot of institutional barriers to crossing boundaries.” One administrator expressed optimism for the future due to recent changes in the administrative structure that may facilitate collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs moving forward with the creation of a new division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. Collaboration that she perceived missing in more recent years. However, she did express concern that optimism she feels for the future may be based more on the people that were placed in certain roles and not necessarily the structure.

In general, faculty reported minimal opportunity to collaborate with other faculty outside their discipline. However some did report temporary collaborative ventures such as an event or presentation with another faculty outside of their academic units. Although most faculty reported that they were interested in collaborating with faculty outside their discipline obstacles
such as not enough time outside their teaching and research, as well as connecting with other faculty that may share a mutual collaborative project. Most faculty reported this was difficult and they had to figure out collaborations and meet other faculty that might be interested by happenstance. The random nature of an opportunity to collaborate on a lecture and a performance in the college’s art museum was described by a faculty member this way:

I knew the person through someone else, it was a filmmaker who then had a dancer there. What was good about that was I went to the provost’s colloquium and the provost and the dean said there was money and support for tying the work that goes on within the courses to the kind of work of the various conservatories or performing arts spaces of the college. So, once I heard that I came up with something pretty half-baked initially but there was an initial support for that and ultimately the money came through and that was really good, had I not gone to that colloquium and had the powers of be not suggested that there was money and the people of the various part of the college would not, had they not said they were very willing to work with that I would not have done it.

Another faculty expressed what he perceived as the challenges in collaborating. “I have tried to collaborate with others on campus, with other faculty members. Not terribly successfully, because we’re coming from different places and, we are all a little bit selfish with our time.”

While faculty reported minimal collaboration with other faculty, they reported even less opportunity or understanding on collaboration with offices outside of the academic units such as student life programming. Most felt no real college structure, office or assigned staff member was available to help facilitate collaborations with areas outside of the academic departments. It may be that some faculty view collaboration on events with residential life in particular as social programming and feel it is out of their comfort level or expertise. One faculty articulated his
comfort level with way: “The whole social thing with students is tough because their interests are very different.”

Although the college currently seems to lack a clear structure to support faculty collaboration within academic affairs as well as between other units, it does appear to be of importance to the college as evidenced through current initiatives and new structures. The creation of a residential curriculum by a working group of faculty and student affairs professionals is one example. “Community as Collaboration” is also stressed on the college web page in the President’s Welcome statement. Another place that the importance of collaboration is visible is in the construction of a new building called the Center for Media, Film, and Theatre (CMFT) which is designed to support collaboration. The college website contains a construction update: “Opening in spring 2018, the CMFT will offer space to create and collaborate, inside and out.” With more visible structures in place to support collaboration amongst faculty and with others outside of academic affairs in the future, the commitment to collaboration may be realized.

Collaboration Through Committees: In 2016 the Orientation Committee membership was redesigned to allow for more input from areas across campus. Committee co-chairs were appointed from the Office of Admissions and the Office of Community Engagement. Prior to this change the Office of Community Engagement ran orientation. Faculty are not generally included as members of the committee, most likely due to scheduling issues, but planning of the program is shared throughout the year with leaders in the academic areas and there are avenues for input from chairs, directors and deans in academic affairs and support collaboration from the entire campus.
Other committees, such as the enrollment management committee, a strategic enrollment planning work group, a student success team, a student services committee, and a technology user group exist outside the college governance system, are designed to provide a forum for discussion on policies, processes and practices that are outside of the purview of governance. These committees are designed to bring together key staff members from offices and divisions across the campus to make informed decisions, build common values in order to support improved retention and student success. All of these committees include members from the enrollment management, student affairs and academic affairs areas. However, most committees do not have faculty members but rather administrators from academic areas and students also have little representation on these functional committees.

**Governance.** In 2012, the college began discussions regarding structural changes in the college governance structure. A committee was charged by the college president to examine and make recommendations for a structure that supported the principle of shared governance. Discussions focused on the split governance structure of a College Senate and a Faculty at-Large that had existed for many years. The College Senate was representative of the college community, including student senators but had not real authority in making important campus-wide decision. Faculty at-Large on the other hand consisted of faculty only and had been provided the power to veto Senate decisions. Faculty at-Large had standing committees that consisted almost exclusively of faculty from various departments. The Educational Policy Committee (EPC) did include representation from the college registrar and director of admissions in addition to faculty members from each area of the college, but this was the exception. This committee has oversight for general education courses, academic policies and
approval of new programs or curricular changes to programs. There was no student representation on the Faculty at-Large committee or its standing committees.

Two separate governance structures created unequal power, leaving Faculty at-Large with the potential power to override items passed by the College Senate. The two structures left some members of the campus community out of important discussions and decisions regarding the college and reinforced lack of unity, diversity and inclusion in the community and left a sense that some populations had exclusive power. In 2015 the college voted to implement a new shared governance model, the College Senate, that was inclusive to faculty, staff, students and administration.

The new College Senate is composed of 46 voting members, plus 10 nonvoting ex officio members with representatives of the academic staff, the professional staff, students and administration. The Articles of the College Senate state the first two functions and responsibilities as:

1. The College Senate and its standing committees function as the representative decision-making bodies or the college. Members of the Senate and all Senate standing committees shall act in the interest of the college as a whole.

2. The College Senate shall have primary responsibility for issues and policies that have campus-wide implications, as well as system-wide.

In the new governance structure Faculty at-Large became a standing committee of the College Senate. In addition to the Faculty at-Large committee, five other standing committees report to the Senate including a Staff Affairs Committee that had not previously existed.

The change in governance structure helped foster more ownership by the entire campus of issues, policies and practices that have a campus-wide implication and it provided more
transparency in the structures governing the college and allowed for students to be involved and have a voice in the processes that govern the college. However, not all faculty interviewed felt that the new governance structure was working. One faculty expressed her opinion on the new governance structure: “I don't think the governance structure is a success. I mean, I think it could... But I think there's also been very punitive responses to faculty sharing their opinion by administration.”

Students also have their own student governance association (SGA) and subcommittees that have oversight for student clubs and support other student run events. This is a separate student run organization, although there is a college staff member who serves as an advisor for the SGA. More of the role of SGA and students’ perceptions will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

**Support Structures**

This section is divided into student support services and communication channels that the college uses to provide information to students on college programs, important deadlines and events. Admissions events as well as orientation and first-year seminar serve as structures to introduce students and parents to the academic programs and support services the college offers. Support services include advising center, counseling center, disability resources, learning center including tutoring, career services and wellness center. Focus groups shared their experiences using various support services. Faculty and administrators reflected on how they utilized support services to address student issues and help students succeed. Then all participants talked about the ways in which the college communicates important information to reinforce student success.
Support Services. With increased commitment and focus on retention and graduation rates by the college administration, the college invested in some internal structural changes to support students and faculty more effectively while maximizing the continued reductions of funding that the college receives from the state. In 2014, the college reorganized office reporting lines to more closely align academic support services and career services with enrollment management and registrar to foster better coordination and a shared vision to helping students complete their degrees. These changes led to the branding of services available to students to support their success as the Student Success Network. A Success Network brochure and webpage were created. The network provided information about support services available to our students, regardless of structural reporting lines, in order to provide students with comprehensive information on the support available and how to contact the offices.

Students reported using one or more avenues to seek out support when facing challenges or obstacles. This ranged from asking their academic advisor to asking their EOP counselor, to their freshman seminar advisor, to going directly to one of the support services office themselves. Some students went directly to their faculty members when they needed assistance. Most students seemed to go to the staff member, advisor or faculty member they were most comfortable talking with and with whom they had built a trusting relationship. While a few students mentioned asking their peers for advice, one student acknowledged that she mainly asked friends for advice with social issues.

Students mentioned utilizing various support services most notably tutoring through the learning center, counseling center and the general college advising center. “The tutoring at the learning center that they have, I actually used it my freshman year and it's a great resource to have.” Adding to this student’s comment, another student mentioned, “I was actually talking to
someone about the online writing lab yesterday and they didn’t even know what it was and that it existed. I’m like, you have three final papers to write. You should be using it… But it definitely should be more advertised.” One student talked about the effects of declaring her major late which required her to take an overload of credits to stay on track to graduate in four years. She discussed her thoughts on how she was able to overload on credits and still be successful:

I had to overload this…my senior year, last semester, I took 22. This semester I’m taking 20 credits. Since I have to take all of these classes jam packed, one after another, making sure that I was passing all my classes. I was struggling in computer science and I went to the director from EOP, he got a tutor for me. I would meet with my tutor every single week, and if it wasn’t for the EOP director and my tutor that year, I probably would not have passed that class.

Several students mentioned using the counseling center and felt that it was an important resource for them and other students for their well-being and success at the college. One student shared her feelings and experience with the counseling center: “incredible that we have free counseling here. And I know that sometimes people struggle to get appointments because there's such a high demand but I think that the counseling center was one reason why I was able to thrive and feel safe for so many reasons.” Another student echoed similar feelings, “I do go to the counseling center, and that’s helped for the most part…Sometimes it’s hard to get an appointment. Especially towards finals and midterms… I feel like it could be larger.” One student said one of the reasons she chose this college was because it had a counseling center and she knew she would need it as a resource to be successful in school. Perceptions that there are not enough counselors were mentioned by other students in several focus groups, as well as the concern over the lack of diversity of the counselors.
Faculty and staff discussed their knowledge of the support services through the relationships they build with certain offices. While new faculty, excluding adjunct faculty, receive a brief faculty orientation through academic affairs, faculty interviewed expressed minimal training and onboarding for advising and other support services to assist students and faculty alike, although most faculty acknowledged that information was provided in the faculty handbook. Still it seems that much of the knowledge about student support resources available on campus is transferred more informally through one faculty member to another. Teaching a first-year seminar seemed helpful to faculty and staff since part of the curriculum is educating students on services, bringing key staff from support service areas into class to present and thus also educating and building relationships between faculty and staff in the support service areas. Building trust and relationships with staff in support service offices seemed to be extremely helpful to faculty. In particular, faculty mentioned specific staff members in all of the support service areas. As one faculty expressed:

This year, though, dealing with a diagnosed issue, I really had to avail myself of campus resources to help me get through that, and the staff at the accommodations office was really terrific with that. I’m going to put in plug for “A”, who’s brand-new, but she really helped me talk through an important issue just this morning in ways that would make me comfortable in addressing the student, and more important, I think, make the student comfortable in sitting down and talking to me.

This faculty went on to state: “So, I think, at times I’m a little resistant to approach various campus arms for help. I have to admit, some of them are kind of on the scale of unresponsive, but one needs to keep trying.” This faculty’s comment highlights the importance of building
relationships and trust between faculty and staff and director’s across areas to support each other as well as students.

**Communication Systems.** The official college email is used for announcing events, lectures, important dates and deadlines, and is used by college offices to correspond and communicate to students regarding official college policies and procedures. The college primary means of communicating information to students is through email, social media and the college website. Faculty and staff also receive important announcements and information through their college email account, however there are also departmental, school and college meetings were information might be shared. All participants expressed frustration regarding the amount of campus wide emails announcements sent out by the college. Students, faculty and administrators complained that many of the emails were not relevant or of interest to them. Nevertheless, most students felt it was important to read their email daily or otherwise some important information will be missed. Regarding their official college email some students expressed views such as:

- Always check your email. Like incessantly. I'm always, always on my email.
- One of my friends does not check her email constantly like that. Email is the most important.

Students did report using email to communicate with an advisor, faculty member or other college officials. When talking about contacting faculty about questions related to a class one student expressed, “The fact that I had that level of comfortability to be I'm having an issue with this or can we meet or talk about this or just email them, that was helpful.” Faculty and staff reported using email to contact students regarding assignments, class attendance or other class related issues. Faculty also used email to report a concern about a student or ask for assistance from support service offices such as counseling or the learning center. One faculty felt that
sending a quick email to check in with a student who may have missed class made a difference and showed the student that he cared about the student’s well-being and success.

Some students reported using social media. One student talked about a friend who didn’t use her college email that much but was always on social media, so perhaps the college, “should be using their social media platforms more often and letting people know that it exists. They have a Facebook page.” Another student felt that the use of social media by the college was not uniform, students would have to follow different accounts since there is not one that can be followed, and there is a lack of clarity of who is posting. “I want to follow one that can give me everything I need and that I can rely on.” Faculty and administrators did not mention using social media.

In spring of 2017 the college launched a new website. During the design phase of the website, the college community at large was invited to presentations and meetings with the web design company to provide input into the needs of the various users as well as to educate the designers about the college culture and values that would need to be reflected in the new website design. The website allows for crowd sourcing so that sharing of information about programs, offices, events and college services can be done easily by the anyone in the community. This was a departure from the previous website which did not allow for sharing of information throughout web pages on the website by the campus community. This is one way in which the college is working to address the continued concerns of students, faculty and staff that the college sends too many emails by posting relevant, up to date information on the college web page.
Physical Structures

The original college buildings and structures were built in the early 1970’s. While a few buildings have been built in recent years, much of the campus space, academic buildings and residence areas have undergone renovations or will undergo renovations in the near future. In the past ten years the college underwent a significant redesign and construction including: an addition of a Student Services building in 2006; remodeling of the mall area that connects most of the buildings on campus to address underlying structural issues, to make the outdoor area more attractive, and allow for outdoor seating and communal areas; residential areas and humanities building renovation; the creation of a Multicultural Center; and a new Center for Theater, Film and Media.

Even with all the construction and renovation projects, overall, students from each focus group were fairly vocal regarding the architecture of the campus, the conditions of some academic buildings and classrooms, and particularly the state of the residence halls. As one student put it: “It’s such a beautiful campus because of all the land there is, but the buildings are really just sad.” Students expressed comments such as:

- The classrooms are ugly. The paint is boring and gross. It’s not a stimulating environment at all.
- They look like prison cells.
- I’m in natural science all the time. That building is probably the ugliest building on campus.

However, another student voiced a slightly different view. “I feel like buildings don’t have to be beautiful…You just have to be able to sit in the building and be okay. I feel like this
building [humanities] is always very cold, very, very cold. In social sciences it’s always very, very hot. Natural sciences, well, lately, there’s been a lot of construction, and so we can’t focus really.” This sentiment seemed to resonant with other student and faculty participants. One faculty member also mentioned that the construction in the building he generally teaches in has been disruptive to the learning environment.

The lack of accessibility for students with physical disabilities was a concern expressed by several students. Even though no students in the focus groups had physical disabilities, they were aware of other students who require elevators or ramps to access certain locations. Students in the focus groups seemed to be very sensitive to the lack of accessibility for students with disabilities to bathrooms, some housing areas without elevators, and access to many of the buildings on campus. One director expressed concern about desks in some of the lecture halls which could not accommodate students in wheelchairs. As she explained that she may have to request a table be brought in to accommodate students in these spaces, she expressed her concern stating: “It doesn’t feel like you’re part of a class.”

Faculty provided mixed reviews on the classroom and academic spaces as well. Several faculty raised concerns about the instability of technology in the classrooms at times. One faculty shared a recent example:

Sometimes the classroom technology still doesn’t work which is a bit…it’s a bit frustrating, I think the students just look at me and think, this is incompetence. The classrooms are widely used and you can’t guarantee that when you stick your laptop into the bit of technology in the room you never know if it’s going to work or not. Today was a perfect example, my laptop and whatever the connection was I could see it on my
laptop, no sound came out no picture came out. That’s a big anti-climax at the end of the course on German history.

Another faculty shared some of her frustrations with managing the technology in the classroom, “And I think that pieces of technology may be missing in a lot of these classrooms.” She goes on to explain that she often has to ask an IT staff member for assistance, “He is always there and always able to help, which is great, but ultimately I really like to do things myself, and sometimes things just aren’t so evident…And it really interferes with my teachings. Over-reliance on technology can also have its issues.” One administrator expressed more positive views based on feedback he had received from faculty who taught in classrooms in a building that was recently reopened after a several years of being shut down for renovation. “Professors will always report to me, "Oh, I have a great class this semester." That first semester we were back, the first year, just an astonishing number of, "I have a great class," and it was the space. That's what it was. The classrooms facilitate learning. They're really conducive to education. They're well-designed.”

One common issue mentioned by both faculty and students was the lack of windows in many of the classrooms. Some faculty reported that the lack of windows effected their teaching while some students reported that the lack of windows effected their ability to focus or concentrate for long periods of time. This led one faculty to state, “I hate not having windows, and I dislike uncomfortable chairs. And I teach a film course right now for four hours. And I just feel that puts the students at a real disadvantage. We offer these block courses, yet we don’t give a comfortable environment in which those courses can unfold.” Students seemed to agree with the faculty member’s feelings. When the conversation turned to windows in the classrooms in
one of the focus groups one student said, “Yeah, and it feels like a cage. The way the classroom is set up and everything, it just makes you… It’s just boring. You find yourself falling asleep instead of listening to the lecture because of how the classroom looks.”

In discussing how the physical buildings on the campus may impact interaction between faculty or staff and students, at least two administrators acknowledged strong concerns about the potential of the physical layout of buildings to create an isolating effect. One stating, “I think that our layout is incredibly divisive and isolating. The students in certain programs are in certain buildings. “Yes, they travel across the plaza to get to their home in the residence halls sometimes, but they don’t necessarily do anything else with anybody else.” Another administrator echoed the concern stating: “Well, it was a strategic error, although I understand why, to have a building for each school and discipline. I don't know how other places do it. Maybe everyplace does it, but it just works against you. The music students don't leave the music building.” However this administrator did go on to give a positive example of a physical structural change the college made. “But I think the change in the library is the single most important change that we've had…the change where we turned the entrance that way...where we made the entrance more inviting…I think it's a showcase. I think it's beautiful.” Another faculty member agreed, “The library is great, particularly after the redesign.”

**Conclusion**

In this section the theme of internal structures, policies and practices was investigated through the perceptions of students, faculty, staff as well as college documents. The college has various structures in place and exhibits various practices in an effort to engage students and faculty in programs that are geared toward outcomes of learning, development, change and persistence.
Programs and practices to support students’ transition to college are more pronounced and visible institutional behaviors exhibited by the college. The value the college places on programs and practices to support students’ integration and engagement can be seen through the importance it places on the orientation program and other programs that support transition and success in college. However, faculty is largely left out of the orientation process, which may explain some students’ perceptions of orientation and their view of the support it may or may not play in their transition to college. The difference in perceptions between students who participated in only the one-day orientation program compared to students who participated in a longer three to five-day residential orientation were considerable and the college should take note of the faculty/academic components of the longer more substantial orientation.

The college seems to be aware of some of the student perceptions. The college administration has redesigned orientation since the students interviewed participated. And perhaps, more importantly, it has added a Phase T.W.O program a few days prior to the start of the semester to introduce the connection with faculty and academics that may be lacking in the summer orientation. In coordinating and assessing the educational effectiveness of student transition programs the college does not have a specific person or office responsible for the coordination and monitoring or whose role focuses specifically on the first-year experience and the impact on persistence.

While collaboration across the campus community is clearly valued as evidenced through language used on the college web page as well as more recent changes in college-wide governance, and internal reporting structures, from the faculty perspective the college has not instituted structures or funding sources to help facilitate meaningful collaborations between faculty and with faculty outside their own school or division or with student affairs.
Collaboration amongst professionals outside of academic affairs, particularly in the student affairs area, is viewed more positively than the ability for collaboration between faculty in different areas. The roles and responsibility of non-faculty administrators may inherently require more collaborative efforts, however, once again, even in the non-academic offices, collaborations largely occur with offices within one division and not across divisions.

Support services and physical structures were viewed as important resources for all participants. Support services of advising, tutoring and counseling were discussed the most by participants. The state of buildings, classrooms and on-campus housing facilities also proved to be lively discussions in focus groups, particular in regards to the state of residence life facilities. Renovations of older buildings and residence halls to address faculty and student concerns continue to be underway and there are plans to break ground on a new residence hall in fall of 2018. Other internal structural changes that have been instituted in the past 2 – 3 years to support student success and degree completion will take some time to understand and assess the effects of supporting students through graduation.

**Academic and Co-curricular Programs, Policies and Practices**

The second theme of academic and student affairs programs, policies and practices includes the curriculum that is offered to students in the classroom, formal first-year programs, which may consist of a core set of classes and experiences for first-year students, and efforts to integrate students’ academic and non academic lives through collaboration across all institutional offices (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). The college’s commitment to the planning and coordination and delivery of academic and student affairs programing may influence student experience in subtle but profound ways (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Students, staff and faculty participants
shared their experiences in this area and the following sub-themes revealed will be discussed:

first-year program, advising practices, academics, and co-curricular programs.

**First-year Program**

The college has a loosely structured first-year program for first-year liberal arts students. The program consists mainly of a few required courses, and a common book or film and subsequent discussions as well as some limited student affairs programing during the first couple of weeks of the fall semester focusing on the social aspects, practical information and expectations of the college community and living on campus. Another component of the first-year program is required online education modules. The two online programs focus on alcohol prevention as well as awareness and prevention of sexual stalking, harassment and assault.

Each year the college picks a common film or book that addresses some type of social issue such as racial inequities, diversity or social justice. As part of the first-year program, freshmen are required to attend a screening of the movie, followed by a faculty discussion of the film and break out group discussions facilitated by a faculty or staff member. The common film or book and discussion, serves as indicia for the values of the college and hopefully provides new students with a glimpse into the faculty and student discourse that they will be exposed to over their time at college.

The academic curriculum for the first-year program for liberal arts majors at the college consists of a few classes that are required in the first-year. These include first-year seminar, college writing and a science course designed specifically for first-year students. Of these classes, only the science course is taught by full-time faculty. College writing is staffed with adjunct faculty and first-year seminar is largely taught by staff members who work in support
service areas or residential life, although there are generally 3 – 5 sections out of the approximately 20 sections offered each semester taught by full-time faculty. However, all but one of the faculty interviewed for this study had taught first-year seminar at some point or said they would be teaching it in the near future. Students did not mention an awareness of a “first-year program,” but rather just the knowledge of the required first-year seminar and college writing. The science course designed for first-year students and required, was not mentioned by any participants in the study.

Focus group discussions did include students’ reflections on their experiences in college writing and first-year seminar (sometimes referred to as freshman seminar). It appears that most students found college writing very helpful to their success in college with one student reporting, “college writing which was extremely helpful as an incoming freshmen.” But perceptions of the usefulness of the first-year seminar were not as positive as college writing. A review of a sample first-year syllabus indicates a goal of providing students with information on resources and behaviors that can support their success. The first-year seminar instructor serves as the student’s academic advisor for their first semester and each seminar class also has an upper class peer mentor. Several students spoke about approaching their first year seminar instructor/advisor when they had questions or academic difficulties. “My advisor actually was my freshman seminar instructor as well so it made it really easy to get to know her and contact her.” Several students mentioned positive interactions with their peer advisor with one student explaining, “One of my peer advisors was most helpful with at least figuring out my schedule for the next semester and what I should do. She actually encouraged me to declare a second major as well.” However, not all students found first-year seminar helpful. One student stated: “freshman
seminar is also a joke. You learn how to be a student, but I didn’t really learn anything….we were taught how to write really eloquent emails.”

Faculty and staff administrators generally had a positive view of the impact of first-year seminar. Faculty and staff administrators also mentioned how teaching first-year seminar helped introduce them to programs and services available to assist students that they had not been aware of. When discussing how he learned about programs and services available to students, one staff administrator talked about his experience teaching first-year seminar saying:

it was my second year, and I started teaching freshman seminar. Freshman seminar is basically here's how to live on campus, and here's how to be at college. We introduced them to the services. For years, I would get introduced to the services and really got to learn it. I would say anyone who's a junior faculty should be teaching freshman seminar so that they get exposed to these things. It was in a sense, I was leading freshman orientation, but I was always getting professor orientation, and it was really helpful. I would urge anyone to do that.

Another administrator who taught first-year seminar shared:

And then, as a first-year seminar instructor, I’m working with them all semester. So, it’s sort of helping them figure out what resources are available at the college that will help them, where different offices are located, talking about things like sexual assault and sexual harassment. There has been a big diversity component to first-year seminar.

Based on the transcripts from the focus groups and interviews, there does not seem to be an awareness of a first-year program for liberal arts majors by most of the participants. Although the college website has a page on the first-year undergraduate experience, its focus is on support
services and student affairs programs and offers little in regards to academics, and it fails to communicate information on a purposeful program for first-year students (2017).

Advising Practices

Prior to 2004, the college functioned solely under a faculty advisor model and no one area was responsible for training advisors and a clear philosophy for advising students did not seem to be established. In 2003, with five-year graduation rates at only 43%, the college submitted a Title III grant to support the creation of a general advising center. Although the grant was not funded, it serves as an important planning document and articulates the college’s commitment to improving student success. In the memorandum from the Vice President of External Affairs and Development to the grant planning committee, the Vice President thanks the committee for their work on the grant stating: “The analysis of the problems of low retention and graduation rates and proposed solutions of providing an interventionist approach to student advising will lift up the entire institution.”

So even though the grant was not funded, based on the analysis and recommendation of the grant committee, the college proceeded to create an advising center with its own resources, an initiative that was led by the college president. In 2004 the advising center opened with three advisors. Since the investment in and creation of the advising center in 2004, the college has surpassed the retention and graduation goals articulated in the grant proposal. First, to increase the five-year graduation rate to 48% percent by 2008 and then to achieve a first-year retention rate of 78% for liberal arts. In 2008 the five-year graduation rate rose to an all time high of 66.8% and has remained between 57.5% and 66.5% in the years following (2009 to 2013). Although the increase in graduation rates cannot be attributed to one single initiative, the
advising center might be one of the factors that supported increased retention and degree completion.

Since the creation of the advising center, the college functions with a shared advising model of a small-centralized general advising center and decentralized faculty advisors who advises students in their major discipline. Advisors in the advising center assist incoming students with initial advising and registration, general education requirement information as well as provide training and support for faculty advisors. For liberal arts majors, their first-year seminar instructor serves as their advisors for their first semester. In the second semester, students who have declared a major are reassigned to a faculty advisor in their major. Faculty advisors only serve as an advisor to students in their major discipline (unless they are teaching a first-year seminar). Most faculty expressed being uncomfortable giving advice to students outside of their area of curricular expertise. One faculty explained how she advised students who had questions about majors outside of hers. “And I’m very careful to tell them that I simply can’t advise outside of their major because I don’t know how the courses should be scaffolded into their curriculum, and what the coreqs and prereqs are and things like that.” It seems that most faculty would direct students outside their major to the professional advising center for assistance.

Faculty training on academic advising practices varied. Faculty reported various experiences on learning or being trained on how to be an advisor. While some reported some brief formal training by professional advisors in the advising center, most reported learning from colleagues, reaching out to a trusted professional advisor in the advising center and just learning through trial and error. Senior faculty interviewed for this study all seemed to view that part of their role is too help the incoming faculty hires in navigating the college culture including the
faculty role in advising. One faculty stated: “I’m always happy to share those things…why remake the wheel, when ultimately it’s about our students being really comfortable or happy or at least satisfied with the courses that they’re taking, or feeling like somebody is on top of their academic career, and they’re a person, and not a number.” A newer faculty spoke of his experience in advising: “I’ve been to a bunch of different sessions on how to advise in the advising center and that’s been very useful. I think I found the director of the advising center, for example, really excellent…I just kind of trust their advice and their advice has proved to be useful, very useful.” And yet another faculty expressed:

I think advising is the portal to a happy student and to retention. Especially that personal dimension of advising and kind of getting to know someone, and maybe being able to make some assumptions about their personality, and what might gel for them, and those sorts of things. So, the AC director is always giving me new and innovative ways to approach my advising, and I rely on him very heavily.

Students reported a variety of experiences with their faculty advisor. All students have a faculty assigned advisor from their major. In addition, students accepted into the special EOP program are assigned an additional advisor from the EOP program staff. One EOP student talked about some frustration in navigating the two advisors. “It makes it difficult because you feel more inclined to talk to your EOP advisor, but you’re forced to go talk to this other person because they are the one that has to help you…I don’t like that, at least for me.” But another EOP student described her experience with two advisors differently, “I guess I also had two advisors: my sociology advisor and EOP, and I guess I had a good relationship with my sociology advisor. I took a course with her my freshman year, so I’ve built a relationship to senior year.”
Academics

Students overwhelming felt the academic courses and programs were the most important reason to stay at the college and graduate. As one student put it, “I think academics should be the main force of college.” When discussing how a sense of belonging and finding a group of friends might help students stay on track for their degree another student explained her feeling this way: “Academics are first, so I wasn’t really… I’m necessarily always looking for friends, but am not going to say no to friends.” Two sub-themes emerged in regards to academics from the interviews: impact of courses on the student experience and discussions around the required senior project.

Impact of Courses. Most students reported taking random courses led to their interest in a new subject in addition to having an impact on their decision of a major, adding a second major or adding minor.

I randomly took a higher level legal studies class my sophomore year and I fell in love with it and then I declared that as my second major. And then I took a psych class last semester that I loved it and I realized that I almost had a minor in psych because I had taken intro sophomore year and so I just took a bunch of psych classes this semester and now I'm graduating with a double major and a minor.

One student spoke about her feelings on the types of courses offered by the college:

There are a lot of good courses here that I really don’t think you could take at other colleges. I found that forcing myself to take courses that weren’t in my immediate comfort zone really opened up my academic horizons, and my major classes, as well…in general, I think that 90% of the classes, 99% of the professors here are amazing.
Other students expressed the impact courses had on their college experience:

• I’ve taken two law classes this semester and last semester, and it kind of changed me. I didn’t think I would be a law person, but it’s really interesting knowing the law and learning how it effects day-to-day life. So, even though I’m sociology, it’s definitely connected and I might want to be a social worker, so it’s going to be useful to have.

• I decided to minor in Spanish language and culture, and within the classes that I had to take, I had to take Spanish translation and translation theory. And growing up, I was always translating, so that was something that was normal to me, but actually taking a translation class, you notice how, for example, Google translate or a lot of movies that have subtitles don’t really translate properly. So, taking that class just opened my eyes completely. My professor is just a genius and he inspired me. I want to teach math, but I want to teach math…bilingual math so that my students that don’t understand English properly have…someone that speaks in both languages.

• Then I found out I was a couple classes away from achieving a media minor which is something I was wanting to go into, so I had tacked that minor on too kind of last minute.

Still a couple of students expressed frustration about courses they were required to take. One student stated: “I just really want to take the psych classes which are the best courses I’ve taken.” Students also discussed a few ways that the college could assist students a little better by having a sample syllabus available in addition to the traditional brief course description, “they should have the syllabus available so you can really look into the requirements, and the course load, to see if it’s a really good fit for you.”

The college website markets “Hands-On Learning” as part of the promise of the “undergraduate academic experience.” Internships are available to all students and required by
some, but not all majors. Many students in the focus group mentioned taking an internship and reported positive experiences. One student said of her internship experience: “I definitely met people through my internship that I did. People who were my onsite supervisors and academic supervisors. I was a peer advisor under advising the beginning of junior year and from that, they offered I think four students an internship.” The student went on to explain that she eventually was hired as the peer advisor coordinator for the advising center, and spoke about how that experience affected her: “With the connections that I've forged with them…they have given me so many opportunities and put in good words for me or written recommendation letters. I'm always in their offices and just popping in either to say hi or ask them for their advice or anything like that.” Another student was hoping an internship might help her clarify what type of job she would ultimately like, “Hey, I like this. I might apply to do this fulltime when the internship is done.”

While some students reported positive experiences with internships, students in one focus group expressed concern regarding the rigor of the internships, raised issues of pay for internships and difficulties paying for transportation to unpaid internships. One student explained the challenges of an unpaid internship for her:

There are bills that we need to pay. So to have an internship, and then a job on top of that. It’s very difficult to work around those hours, versus just having an internship that’s paid, that can pay for your bills, and then get you into the working world.

**Senior Project.** An extensive senior project is a requirement for students in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Senior project is a two semester, independent project. The college website describes the senior project as an important component of the undergraduate experience. “Every student has the opportunity to showcase his or her academic achievement with a senior
project. Beginning junior year, you’ll begin intensive, individualized work with a faculty member as your mentor. You’ll bounce ideas off your peers and have their support along the way.”

Students are assigned a faculty sponsor to work with, however student experiences varied in these areas, from feelings of no support to feelings of great support. One of the students who felt “out on her own” with her senior project expressed, “I feel like there's no support with senior project.” In referencing support for her senior project another student stated: “And I feel like I have no support other than when I reach out to my advisor.” Still another student expressed frustration with senior project support. When comparing faculty interactions when taking regular classes compared to senior project she said: “I feel like I can just stop in their office hours and ask them stuff. And most of my psychology professors also but not during senior project which was what really mattered.”

At least two students mentioned starting their senior project with one sponsor and then having to be reassigned to another sponsor due to sabbaticals. “It’s just difficult when they have two different writing styles.” The student went on, “So, I understand they have to go on sabbatical, but they also need to think of the students and how that’s going to affect them.” The other student interviewed who also had a senior project sponsor on sabbatical expressed a different experience, “But my senior project sponsor is the same as my advisor, and she’s really great. She’s on sabbatical, though, and even though she’s on sabbatical and also on maternity leave, she’s on top of it.” Other students reported strong connections and support from their senior project sponsor. In talking about their senior project experiences the students interviewed made comments such as:

• My senior project advisor was one of my professors and maybe it mattered that she's a black women and I can actually connect to her on that. But it sucks because she's an
adjunct and she's not on campus this semester so I don't really get to see her but she really helped me last semester with my senior project.

- But I feel like my senior project advisor has really been like the advisor I wanted and needed because she's someone I can identify with and she's someone… She genuinely cares and she knows me.

While expressing pride at attempting such a vast undertaking, some students expressed disappointment in the process and outcomes. One faculty talked about her concerns about how the senior project really translates to a career or graduate school. “The problem with the senior project is that it expends a lot of credits on something very narrow. And the outside world, at least in my discipline, wouldn’t know what to make of a senior project. Oh, you did like an honors thesis.”

**Co-curricular Programs**

The college offers numerous co-curricular programs, events and activities outside the classroom to compliment and integrate educational and learning outcomes with academics. The college website includes a Student Involvement page, which focuses on co-curricular programming such as clubs, service opportunities, major college events, and offerings by the Multicultural Center. The language on the webpages communicates the importance of involvement in college events, performances, lectures, etc. to a student’s success at the institution. The college also offers service-learning programs where students receive internship credit for participating in a college organized service-learning program where students will assist a community in need, bridging the skills and insights students have gained in the classroom and putting them to work in a real-world context. When reflecting on events and programming one administrator expressed his feelings,
I think we do a good job of creating a sense of belonging. There are a lot of clubs and opportunities for the students. There are so many events on campus that students can engage with. I like that we often have small classes. I think that's huge in terms of getting a connection to the campus. Things like the freshman seminar can create a sense of belonging.

Participants spoke about their experiences with the co-curricular programming. One student described her experience becoming involved in college programs in her junior year.

I was an orientation leader and then that just inspired me so much because I had the opportunity to learn more about the campus and really connect with it in a different way. I also got inspired to apply to be an admissions ambassador and since then I've been promoted in both orientation and admissions and I feel like everybody I know is because of those two experiences and I even am connected to incoming freshmen because I gave them a tour. I was their orientation leader. So that's made me feel really, really connected in a really great way.

Around the spring of 2006 the advising center created events to help build identity of students with their graduation cohort. Events provided information about degree requirements, opportunities to discuss major and minors with an advisor, declare or change a major in addition to giving each student a “Class of 20XX” t-shirt. Although the advising center stopped offering the “Class of” events several years ago, the Student Success Team reinstated the event in 2015 for the freshmen and sophomore class and redesigned the event to be more inclusive of the college wide support services available to support student success.
Other co-curricular opportunities to increase student involvement include working for the Learning Center as a tutor, serving as a resident assistance in the residential areas, service learning projects, being a peer advisor and serving as admissions ambassadors. All of these opportunities provide a way for students to be involved in supporting their fellow students, broadening their group of friends and engaging with offices and students, thereby increasing their involvement on campus.

It’s not always easy to introduce new programming, you have to get buy-in from a number of different departments. I’ve found it easiest when I can talk to somebody that I already know.

Student focus groups discussed their experiences and perceptions about the student government and the student clubs that are overseen by the student government as well. Many students reported getting involved in clubs their first-year of school. Many reported introducing friends to clubs and meeting new friends through the clubs. Students felt that the clubs were welcoming and open to all students regardless of race, gender or religious affiliation. This led one student to comment, “I like how the clubs kind of include everyone. Like you don’t need to be Jewish to go to Hillel.” One student spoke about the influence of her roommates in participating in a club stating, “Well, my roommates when I first transferred here, two of them were in Hillel. They were like, “Oh, come to Shavuot. There’s Chinese food.” I’m like, “Okay.” So I went, and then I’ve just been stuck there ever since.” Another student said, “I came here just as a bio major. At first, when I first transferred here, I still couldn’t make friends because I lived in a single. It was just myself, but then eventually I met people in my major. Then I joined clubs, and just kind of integrated. It was better that way.” While another student reporting helping a friend through a difficult time by encouraging her to start a club.
I think it's really contagious. I think people see other people starting clubs and doing things and then they're like oh, I could do that. Like my best friend was feeling kind of isolated and just like our friend groups kind of fell apart and then all of a sudden, we were kind of on rocky ground like socially. And I was like why don’t you start a club? And so she did and it's just been this amazing experience for her to have that as a resource… Yeah, I guess to like meet people and whatever. But I wouldn't have given her that advice if I hadn’t started a club and reaped the benefits of it because other people are starting clubs. Yeah, I think it's contagious.

Well, I am a member of Latinos Unidos freshman year I used to attend all the time. I believe it was mostly because the seniors were part of the E-board [executive board] and most of them were our mentors from our EOP group…So, I felt like I went and participated my freshman year. But, after that, I never really went back.

One of the commuters interviewed spoke about not being able to participate in clubs as a commuter and how this affected her feelings of integration to the campus stating, “Because commuting makes it super hard to make friends and super hard to keep on track with all the different events because usually they’re later at night. My bus does not run. It takes like three hours kind of to get here, so I can’t go to clubs at all because they’re always at seven…Unless I’m in a class, I can’t really do that. Being involved with clubs is really hard. Actually, I didn’t do any clubs because the commute.”

Student government was another co-curricular activity that students were involved in. “I was in the Senate for like two years when I was a sophomore and a junior. I met a lot of people through that. If I could go back in time I would have done that in the beginning.” However, a few student cited concerns about the management of the clubs and student government that
seemed to have a negative effect. In speaking about her experience with clubs and student
government one student expressed,

I was on e-board [executive] for a club and I was supposed to be their diversity outreach
person and I never really was able to do that because of the person who was running the
club basically didn't let anyone do anything. And then they were also doing student
government stuff so I feel like they're in such a position of power that they limit the
amount of involvement that other students can have in two different parts of the college.

Another student talked about her feeling about the student government association:

Student government as a whole is super unorganized and needs some major reformation.
Like people are really scared of them and I understand why as somebody who’s worked
with, not in, but with people in student government. I think it's totally valid and it's totally
elitist and work needs to be done there in the students and I guess they need to be willing
to do it.

In 2016, the college created a space on campus for a multicultural center and
hired a Coordinator for Diversity Initiatives. While still in its early stages, the center
provides a space for the collaboration outside of the classroom for faculty and student
affairs areas to provide lectures and workshops of issues of race, gender, and sexual
identity. Overall students, faculty and staff seemed aware of the multicultural center and
most had either attended an event at the center or participated in a lecture at the center.
When speaking of her experience with the multicultural center one student stated: The
multicultural center is amazing. I know I’ve had programs in there. I’ve had a Bollywood
day program, and a lot of people showed up. I was teaching dance, like Bollywood type
dancing, and I had south Asian food.” The student went on to say: “I feel like the school did a good thing with having that…It’s really interesting.” And one administrator echoed the student’s sentiment saying, “We have the multicultural center now, which I think is in its second or third year, and that has been a great benefit.”

**Residential Curriculum.** Building more intentional connections between academic affairs and student affairs is a recent initiative of the college. Charged by the Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, a task force consisting of student affairs staff and faculty is working on recommendations for a shared residential curriculum beginning 2018. If successful, this may institutionalize a structure that would facilitate continued collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs in the creation of a more purposeful college-wide residential curriculum.

**Conclusion**

The college offers a variety of academic programs, curriculum and co-curricular programs to support student personal and intellectual growth and to create a connection to the campus and build a sense of belonging and influence persistence outcomes. New policies and practices have also been implemented over time to address the needs of the changing student population and engage faculty and students in discourse and discussion relevant to contemporaneous problems, challenges and societal issues. Over the years, the college has worked to integrate academic and student affairs programs to build a stronger relationship and connection between the classroom and opportunities to apply the knowledge and skills developed in the classroom to projects outside of the classroom.
The creation of a professional advising center in 2004 to provide additional support to students and faculty, and to help reach the college’s goal of improving retention and graduation seems to have had a positive impact, both in providing support and training for faculty advisors, and student and in terms of increased graduation rates. Although increased retention and graduation rates cannot be attributed directly to the advising center, it would certainly have an indirect effect and shows that organizational behaviors can support improved outcomes.

Research participants did not mention or describe any type of intentional first-year program beyond the required courses of first-year seminar and college writing. While students viewed college writing as a helpful foundation course for their subsequent academic coursework, responses regarding first-year seminar were not as positive. The use of peer mentors in the first-year seminar was regarded as positive interaction, nonetheless many students felt that they did not learning anything in first-year seminar. Administrators viewed the impact of importance of first-year seminar more positively than the students in the focus groups.

Other academic courses however received wide praise from students. In general academic courses seemed to excite and engage students when compared to the responses to first-year seminar. Although the seminal senior project, received mixed feedback from students in terms of the support received from their faculty sponsor for this two semester independent project.

This section revealed that institutional behaviors that support academic integration and engagement can be meaningful in terms of student outcomes. Improving engagement and connections of faculty in a first-year program, improving student support of senior project and building more meaningful collaborations between faculty and student affairs are important findings in this section.
Faculty Culture

The final theme covers the faculty culture. This theme includes not only the academic and professional values the faculty hold but also the dominant philosophies of education, the perception of their roles as an advisor as well as their roles in student persistence. Formal and informal availability to students and willingness to be involved in first-year student activities is reflective of the faculty culture also (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). These perspectives and behaviors of the faculty culture are explored in this section and divided into sub-themes of: faculty perspectives, student perceptions, and diversity.

Faculty Perspectives

As discussed earlier in this chapter, all faculty interviewed for this study not only held their role in the classroom of utmost importance in preparing students to develop knowledge and to earn a degree, but also in their role as an advisor. The majority of the faculty interviewed teach courses to students both within their discipline as well as students from other disciplines. Most also teach courses that may fulfill college-wide general education requirements and would be open to all undergraduate students regardless of their major. Three of the faculty have taught a first-year seminar course at some point during their time at the college. One faculty stated that he would be teaching a first-year seminar in the future.

Faculty participants for this study all reported having conversations with students about their progress to degree as well as more stern conversations about their academic performance. “As an advisor I occasionally have…stern conversations where I say to the students you know I’ve had you in my class, you’re excellent, but I’m looking at your degree progress report and it’s not reflective of you and my sense is that we’re a little bit surprised that we’re having that
kind of conversation.” Building relationships seemed to be highly valued by faculty.

Relationships with their students, advisees and with the support services areas, registrar and the advising center were mentioned time and time again in the faculty interviews. One of the newer faculty interviewed shared his feelings:

…you let those relationships develop kind of organically…it’s interesting how much this is kind of conserving soft skills though... I’ve noticed that is useful to say to students.

“How are things going,” first… it’s about making enough time. If you try and see students within five minutes, you can’t do that. So, that’s been something I’ve just sort of learned by experience, don’t try and do too many things in an advising week, make sure you’ve got enough time for the students.

When discussing their role in student support and persistence, faculty and administrator participants acknowledged an awareness of the importance of their role in retention and graduation outcomes. The tools and interactions to support degree completion, of course, varied between faculty and administrators as defined by their job responsibilities and dependent on their participation on committees and input into programs, events and structures in pursuit of helping students stay in college and graduate. For instance, two of the administrators interviewed who began their careers in education as faculty members, but currently have oversight for some academic areas, spoke about their role with academic curriculum, course offerings, etc. to ensure students can graduate. “Very nuts and bolts” as one of the administrator stated. This administrator described her role also as fielding student complaints and hopefully keeping it from rising to the top. However she acknowledged, “that’s become less so as we’ve developed other structures.” She also felt much of her role in persistence and graduation was behind the scenes to ensure courses, faculty and curriculum were available. “It's really the stuff that faculty
and students don't even think about which other courses that students are going to need and want available when they need and want them.”

Informal faculty interaction and out of class activities were perceived as having a positive impact on student persistence by faculty. When discussing the impact of some student clubs, like philosophy or history, one faculty expressed: “the idea that you can encourage students that they’re a part of the community of learning is something that faculty needs to take a lead in and when they do I would say that the dividends are really encouraging, the results are really encouraging.” When asked about his perception of informal out of class interactions one faculty member stated:

That is why I am here five days a week and generally my door is open and people wander in and we talk. I had a kid come in and say, confide in me, I feel like I'm Dad, that he really liked this other student in the class and I said well I like you both, I can't say anything more but I wish you the best of luck. So, I feel, that's a social example, but the academic as well, problems with studying. How should I study for courses? If they know they can come in and get advice, they do. And I think that's something of value, particularly in smaller programs.

After several years of being displaced in temporary offices throughout the campus, one administrator discussed the benefits of being relocated back to their original home building, newly renovated, on informal interactions:

But also there's the running into people in the hallway and, "Oh, hello student in my class. This is professor Smith. You should take a class with him next year," that sort of thing. Students do perceive us now as a unit in a way that they didn't in the past…There's
an awful lot of this, both the academic work, but also the functioning of the college, that takes place when you run into people in the hallway, that can't be underestimated.

This same administrator also discussed an initiative that the faculty in his school had been working on to engage and interest first-year students in courses and majors within humanities.

One thing we've been working on now in the past year or so within the School of Humanities is we're trying to design small courses for freshmen only that will be almost a sort of seminar course, that level of work and that size of a class. We're trying to do this with our most exciting and dynamic professors. The idea is not to provide an introductory course, not a broad survey course of the subject, but something where students early on can go fairly deep into a subject and what the methodologies of a given field are.

When explaining how the discussion of this initiative developed the administrator explained:

It was a sense among a number of the faculty that we needed to do something to draw students into the School of Humanities. I think it has the additional effect of it will help with retention, because I think a kid who's in one of these courses is not going to feel lost or alienated from the college, and they'll have a bond with a good professor, which is probably the most important thing in student retention.

The administrator elaborately a bit more: “The idea is to get students exposed to both majors and the dynamic professors so that they feel a sense of being tied to the college in a deep and significant way.” This administrator went on to talk about the focus on student success:

There's an initiative for student success on campus that I think is really promising, has already shown some promise but has more potential, and there's the focus on student
success that people are paying attention to this, that we're not here... Our provost, says, "We're not here to make widgets." Since people are aware of that, I think that fosters an atmosphere where students can feel successful.

A faculty in another area also spoke about redesigning curriculum to improve student outcomes and success. She spoke about a course that had students enrolled with varying degrees of knowledge and skills in the course subject area. She strategically redesigned the course to ensure successful learning outcomes for students of different levels and knowledge in the course.

So, they all ended up feeling good about the class, and they all ended up feeling like they got a lot out of the class. And everyone who stuck it out, passed, but the class was intellectually at the right level for everybody. So, sense of belonging is one of them. Mindset, so if you view intelligence as a muscle instead of viewing it as a fixed quantity. So, all those affirmations where you reflect on your own values.

Although some faculty spoke about opportunities for formal training in advising, classroom management, course design, most faculty seemed to rely more on informal structures within their discipline. Faculty also spoke about learning from senior faculty and some senior faculty spoke about mentoring new faculty members. The college did begin a faculty mentoring program several years ago in which the deans and department chairs/directors assign a tenured faculty member to a new full-time faculty member. Care is made to assign mentors and mentees from different academic disciplines in an effort to broaden faculty understanding of areas outside of their discipline.
At least two faculty expressed concerns in the challenges of advising and assisting incoming transfers students. Helping transfer students to acclimate to a new college and ensure they take the requirements needed for graduation posed a major challenge for faculty advisors and some transfer students. “Transfer students can be very tricky. It’s very hard for us when we get somebody who’s perhaps transferring just for their senior year, has 90 credits, has never taken the junior seminar in history so they really don’t know what’s in the historian’s toolbox, and then we expect them to sit down and do a senior project in history and graduate on time. That’s always a big problem, and it’s always a very tough one to work out.”

**Student Perspectives**

The five faculty interviewed described a student-centered learning environment and most students in the focus groups seemed to echo this feeling in their interactions and respect for faculty. Several students spoke about the influence and encouragement of faculty on their college experience and success. One female math major reflected on her experience with female faculty members in the math department. “So, being that I’m a female and I’m a minority, they have been really influential, they’ve been role models to me, they’ve wanted me to keep on with my studies, they encouraged me to take classes that I wouldn’t have imagined that I could have even did well in, they encouraged me to partake in the symposium, too.” She went on to say: “Since they are female faculty and there’s not a lot of females in math and science courses, they really influence me and I have a good relationship with all of them.” In the focus group discussion many students reported that their experiences with faculty were a major factor in staying in college and completing their degree:

- It’s the classes, the professors, and the peers that raise the quality of life here.
- What I love is the professors.
• I learned a lot from my classes. The professors here are actually brilliant. It’s an honor sometimes being able to…knowing what they…what all they’ve accomplished. Being taught by them is just an honor. I’ve enjoyed it.

• I’ve also enjoyed my time here. The professors really are really, really smart. They actually care about the subject they’re teaching.

• Every professor I’ve had here, they were really passionate about what they were teaching. I have learned a lot from them. Just being in this environment you learn so much. From high school to college, you already grow so much, and you change so much. I felt like this was a great environment to fall into

• I don’t know if I have a specific course that made me pick a career. Pick what I want to do but definitely professors that I look up to that I’ve taken a lot of classes with not necessarily because their classes are amazing but because they’re so cool and I think I look up to a lot of my sociology professors even though I’m not in a soc major. I kind of just kept taking the same classes with the same people because they were really nice and really successful.

• Well, I feel like the professors in my major have been pretty encouraging. They always send out an email at the beginning before the semester starts of what the teachers have been up to which I always think is really interesting to see. One of my professors studies horseshoe crabs in Japan. Another is writing a book. They’re all up to really cool things, and you just kind of want to aspire to have that kind of life after graduation. To go on those kind of cool academic adventures and learn.
Diversity has been a topic on the campus over the past few years. In 2016, the president of the college created a task force on diversity and hiring. One administrator interviewed was on the task force and talked about her experiences on the task force a bit:

How do we create an atmosphere that lends itself more to diversity and getting people to stay? One of the issues we discussed was mentoring and the fact that, if you bring on people who are diverse and they don’t have anybody to connect with who looks like them or has the same orientations that they do, it can be difficult for them to navigate and to find their way. So, looking at more opportunities to create mentorship. I can say that, on a student level, very often, I get diverse students who come to me specifically because I look like them. So, part of my job...even though it’s not in my contract, part of my job is to mentor those students and to help them navigate. And I think that has made it easier for them to navigate. And the ones, who come to me, have stayed. They are still here, they are almost graduating, so that’s been good.

However, another administrator acknowledged the complexity of hiring faculty of color explaining:

Well we try but it's a bigger problem than us. I mean having the will to do it is necessary but not sufficient. There has to be a population. We want to hire diverse faculty but when you look at the number of African American Ph.D.'s in the liberal arts, it's ridiculously low.

While some students did talk about studying issues of race, gender, and sexuality within their courses, most felt that it should be better addressed outside the classroom. While the
diversity of the student populations in terms of race and ethnicity has increased at the college over the years, the majority of the student population is white. To increase diversity in the student body, one student suggested creating more programs like EOP to attract students from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

One administrator also felt that college had not made very many efforts to intentionally create a diverse environment. Although the college did have some diversity training for faculty and staff, one faculty member still felt it fell short, “Doing more real, authentic diversity training would be key. But I think that there's room for growth there.” Still other administrators had more positive views on diversity efforts by the college. One faculty member stated: “Well, with new faculty hires, there’s been a lot of care given to try to encourage diversity candidates to apply.” Another administrator cited the creation of an outreach center for Latin American Studies and also stated: “We have a lot of clubs on campus that support diversity, and those are encouraged. We have the multicultural center now, which I think is in its second or third year, and that has been a great benefit. I think we're in decent shape on that. For the students, we still have work to do in terms of a diverse faculty.” Another administrator talked about her feelings about diversity on campus stating: “I would feel comfortable if I were trying to recruit African American students and I were talking to their parents, I would say this is a good place for your kid or a Latino kid and a gay kid because I think we're sensitive and we have courses. Our faculty is progressive…And there are clubs. I think our counseling is probably sensitive to this issue.” However, one administrator did express her concern that when discussing diversity initiatives the college is not always inclusive stating: “It seems like when the campus thinks about diversity, they don’t consider disability diversity.”
One female student of color interviewed explained the importance of diversity in terms of her education experience and success:

For example, in my major, I’m the only female. Well, out of the whole major, there’s 17 kids. Out of the 17 kids, there are 2 girls, me included, another white girl. And I’m the only female Latina in the major. There is only one other Latino kid, he’s Mexican. But being that there’s not a lot of people that I can relate to, or role models that I could probably just speak Spanish to in class, or say a joke to in class, I didn’t have that. For my senior project, I explored that a lot and the results that I got were pretty much: the other female felt intimidated in most of her classes because she was one of the only females there. And me, for example, I did feel very intimidated in most of my classes because I didn’t have any other Latina or Latino students to relate to, or to speak to or to go for help that I didn’t want to ask any other white guy, because there’s just white guys in my major.

Conclusion

Overall, the faculty interviewed for this study described a culture of caring, awareness of resources available to help students and attention to the importance of retention and degree completion. While scholarship and the development of knowledge and skills by students are clearly of great importance to the faculty participants of this study, they also balance this with a student-centered mindset. Students expressed their feelings on the impact the faculty and academic courses had on their educational experience. The support of, and engagement with, faculty were reported as important factors that influenced their success and happiness at the college. In general, the faculty interviewed for this study seem to be sensitive to diversity and open to having discussions around this topic, even if it is not always an easy discussion. The
college seems to value diversity on various levels, as does the faculty interviewed. Although there is room for improvement in building a more prominent faculty role in persistence and student success, the faculty seems to be mindful of a culture that supports these values.

Conclusion

This chapter described the three primary themes, associated subthemes, and findings from the analysis of student focus groups, faculty interviews, administrator interviews and college documents. The primary themes were based on the organizational context portion of Terenzini and Reason’s comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence (2005). The primary themes are Internal Structures, Policies and Practices; Academic and Co-curricular Programs, Policies and Practices; and Faculty Culture. The multiple data sources for this case study were analyzed to answer the question of: How do institutional behaviors influence persistence and degree completion of undergraduate, liberal arts majors?

The research reveals that while the problem of student retention and persistence is complex and multidimensional, how a college chooses to act, structures itself and places resources can influence and shape the college culture, programs and policies to improve and support persistence to degree. Students, faculty and administrator’s perceptions of college structure, programs and practices varied, still several significant issues were voiced leading to the following findings.

Finding One: Internal Structures, Policies and Practices

The college should continue ongoing efforts to realign and adjust internal college policies and practices in efforts to support and improve persistence. Based on participant feedback
orientation, support services, internal structures for collaboration, and physical structures warrant more attention and investigation.

**Orientation.** Students felt there was often too much emphasis placed on socialization, which often seemed forced, and at times infantilizing. While social engagement has been shown to be an important factor in student retention (Durkheim, 1951; Tinto, 1975) the impact on persistence of academic integration and engagement cannot be overlooked. The perceptions of orientation were vastly different between students that attended only the one-day orientation when compared to the EOP students who had an additional residential orientation. The college should consider incorporating some of the programmatic elements from the EOP orientation to the one-day orientation, including ways to build faculty engagement with first-year students in the orientation program well ahead of the start of the semester.

**Support Services.** All participants groups felt that the support services offered by the college were factors that supported student success. For faculty and administrators, support services provided a connection to professionals who could provide advice and direction for advising, tutoring, and classroom management for students who may be facing behavioral issues or require assistance through the counseling office. For students additional advising support, tutoring and the availability of counseling and related services of health and wellness were perceived as valuable support structures to improve their college experience.

**Structures for Collaboration.** Faculty engagement in campus-wide structures proves problematic. While some faculty expressed a desire to be further engaged and knowledgeable as to the intricacies and changes in college structures they also expressed the overwhelming demands placed on their time such as teaching, research, publishing and departmental issues and concerns. Some faculty expressed an interest in the possibility of interdisciplinary course work,
co-teaching and co-authoring new courses but felt college funding and structures proved impediments.

Recent changes in the college governance structure are promising and allow a mechanism to allow for the entire campus community to have a voice in matters that govern the college. Still the student voice is limited in other administrative committees that make important decisions, which affect programs, policies and practices of the college. While collaboration and shared governance are practiced and valued, more structural support and resources need to be put in place to reduce isolation by departments, faculty and offices, and connect the campus community across divisions and not just within a division, in support of student success.

**Physical Structures.** Investment in the physical spaces and buildings is important to the campus community and require ongoing attention, particularly residential facilities.

**Finding Two: Academic and Co-Curricular Programs, Polices and Practices**

Formal academic and student affairs programing can be important factors and influences on student involvement, engagement and persistence. First-year program, faculty/academics, senior project, and co-curricular programing were the most prominent areas of discussion by the participants.

**First-year program.** Develop a more coordinated effort involving full-time faculty in a purposeful first-year program. Consider assigning a specific person or office to have oversight for and responsibility of assessment and outcomes of a comprehensive first-year program.

**Faculty/Academics.** Students’ highest regards and compliments were reserved for the faculty, and students considered the quality of pedagogical discourse as their main reason for engagement and completion of course work. Students credited faculty with inspiring them to
choose majors, minors and classes they might not of otherwise taken. The quality and variety of academic courses was also a major influence on students’ perceptions of their college experience. This supports ensuring earlier interactions with faculty. Academic integration and engagement appears to be of particular importance in the quality of students experience and ultimate success.

**Senior Project.** Although students highly praised and complimented faculty, several students contradicted this sentiment when it came to support of their senior project. As the senior project is touted as an important component of the undergraduate experience, resources should be allocated to support faculty sponsors and students to ensure the academic achievement of the project is realized.

**Co-Curricular.** Students described involvement in a variety of co-curricular opportunities such as clubs or student government as positive influences on their experience at college. Most students reported participation in clubs, especially in their first-year, and reported developing friends through the clubs they attended. Still many of the students expressed unhappiness with the oversight and administrative structure governing student clubs and student government which seemed to have a negative effect for participation by some students in the later years of their education. Accountability for the administrative procedures that govern clubs as well as a feeling that student government was highly political were both cited as the prominent issues to students in the focus groups. Other opportunities such as serving as a peer advisor or mentor, tutor, residence assistance, orientation leader or an admissions ambassador provided ways for students to broadening their friends and increase their involvement within the campus community.
Finding Three: Faculty Culture

A faculty culture that emphasizes the faculty role in student retention and persistence can be a significant institutional behavior that communicates an underlying commitment of student success for the campus community. The college should continue to build and expand a faculty culture that is engaged in issues and practices of student retention and persistence, both student-centered and learning-centered.

Chapter Five will further explore the findings in relation to the study’s research questions, literature review and theoretical framework. The implications for future investigations into the research, theory and practice will also be discussed.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to understand the effects of institutional behaviors on persistence and degree completion of undergraduate, liberal arts majors at a four-year liberal arts college. Previous and current research in this area has largely focused on “why students drop out of college.” This study by contrast considers “why” students persist and sustain their academic aspirations. By listening and learning first-hand from students who have arrived at senior status, and giving voice to the lived experiences of faculty and staff this study recognizes the complex challenges faced by all.

Student persistence has a series of causations, with this in mind a qualitative research approach utilizing a case study design provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain an experiential understanding of the issues at hand. The theoretical framework for this study applied Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence. The organizational context framework assisted the researcher in developing a deeper understanding of the complex nature of internal organizational structures, practices and policies through the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators.

This chapter is organized by the three major themes of: Internal Structures, Policies and Practices; Academic and Co-curricular Programs, Policies and Practices; and Faculty Culture. Findings under each theme will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework as well as the current literature in this research area to evaluate how the findings support or contradict previous research. Next, implications of the findings for future practice will be examined with specific examples of how the findings may be used in practice. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with suggested areas for future exploration and inquiry based on this research study.
Internal Structures, Policies and Practices

The findings under the theme of Internal Structures, Policies and Practices revealed that the college exhibits behaviors through its internal structures, policies and practices in an effort to influence student development, learning and persistence to degree. However, as would be expected, the various participant groups perceived some structures, practices and policies as more helpful than others in supporting student outcomes of learning, development and persistence. These included: the impact of the college’s internal structuring to support students’ transition to college, coordination of support services, mechanisms to encourage collaboration, communication systems, and governance structures. The college orientation program, support services, internal structuring, and physical structures were the most prominent subjects in participant discussions. These areas are also evident in college documents such as the college web site, meeting minutes, and internal planning documents. This aligns with the organizational context of the college experience of the theoretical framework used in this research study, which suggests that internal college practices and structures can influence the peer environment and outcomes of persistence.

Orientation

Orientation programs can serve as a way to introduce students to expectations, policies, rules, and regulations that govern the college community. It also familiarizes students with services and acquaints them with college staff members who can answer questions and help students navigate the college structures. Another function of orientation programs is to introduce new students to student organizations and clubs as well as to raise awareness of academic programs. Orientation programs can jump start the critical process of involvement through
social and academic integration, including the first introduction to the peer group, upper class peers and interactions with faculty and staff.

Participants in this study had varying views of the effectiveness of orientation on their initial transition to college. Faculty reported no or minimal involvement or in-depth knowledge of the college wide one-day orientation program. Administrators, however, did report participation in the college wide orientation and perceptions of the program were mainly positive. Students’ views on orientation and support for their transition in the first-year were split. Some students felt the one-day orientation program failed to provide a strong foundation for their transition during their first-year. Several students still reported feeling unsupported by the college at the beginning of their educational experience even though they attended orientation. Most student participants did not feel that orientation covered information on academic expectations.

The sub-group of EOP students who were required to participate in the one-day college wide orientation, plus an additional five-day residential program reported more positive outcomes of their orientation. The main differences in the two orientation programs were: extended time to bond with peer mentors, staff support and mentors, experience living on campus and modeling the first week of college, academic courses and interaction with faculty. While both the one-day orientation and the extended EOP orientations utilize peer mentors, the limited exposure to peer mentors during the brief one-day program may not impact the student experience or subsequent retention or persistence. Whereas, access to a mentor, both peer and staff, prior to the start of the semester was described by EOP students as an important component of an easier, less stressful transition to their first semester.
The college-wide orientation programs should also include an introduction to the academic rigors and expectations of college. While staff and administrators are invested in supporting the orientation program, faculty must also play a role. The critical role of faculty and the classroom experience are left out of the orientation experience for students who only attend the one-day orientation.

There does seem to be awareness by the college administration that the role of faculty and academics may be underrepresented at the summer orientation. Incorporating more faculty involvement can be challenging during the summer period since most faculty are not on campus and are not available during the summer period. To address this void, the college has instituted programing to try to bridge the summer orientation through the creation of a Phase T.W.O. program. This program introduces students to faculty and a topic for academic discourse and discussion and essentially kicks off the start of the academic year with convocation. This seems to be a step in the right direction, however the Phase T.W.O. program only occurs a few days prior to the start of classes, and it might prove more effective if it was complimented with faculty involvement in the summer one-day orientation. Simmons’ (1994) work on precollege programs which found that students attributed much of their success to working with faculty in a variety of experiential, hands-on learning projects. More recent research findings on the needs of millennial freshmen found that instructor-student relationship was a critical component to the social and academic integration process (Turner & Thompson, 2014). The college should consider stronger steps to encourage faculty participation in orientation. This may require the college to refocus faculty roles and reward faculty that participate in summer programming.

Based on the findings from this study, a closer evaluation of all the summer orientation programs offered should be undertaken to develop a deeper understanding of the role of each
program. To make effective changes and decisions on orientation programming, lessons learned from the summer one-day orientation, the EOP extended residential orientation, and the more recently instituted Phase T.W.O. program should be shared and discussed. These programs should not be run in isolation. All programs should be structured in such a way as to lay a foundation for and introduction to college during the summer, and then bridge student transition and support throughout the summer to the start of the first semester and beyond. A critical review may reveal opportunities to realign human and monetary resources to integrate faculty and mentors during summer orientation through the first-year as research suggests that frequent interaction with faculty can be one of the most important factors in student success and satisfaction (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1999).

**Support Services**

All study participants seemed to feel that support services offered by the college were important to their college experience. Various research studies have linked satisfaction with various support services to student success (Davidson, Beck & Milligan, 2009; Grillo & Leist, 2013; Lee, Locke, Michelson & Odes, 2009). Faculty and administrators depended on directors and staff in the support service offices for guidance, support and to provide students with referrals to appropriate services. Students relied on the services and support provided for their wellness, academic success and future career goals, although some students felt services were not marketed well by the college, leaving some students unaware of services that could have benefited their well-being and academic success. Lack of staff or under staffing in some offices, particularly in the counseling office, was cited by several students. Student participants voiced concerns as to the lack of the diversity of staff in some of the support service areas. Internal practices in these areas, as suggested by the literature, could improve support of students and
effect student outcomes of development, learning and persistence. Developing effective study skills was important to freshmen participants in Turner & Thompson’s (2014) research and affected students attitudes towards academic success.

The college in this research study does offer a full range of support services including academic support, wellness, counseling, career development and disability resources. However, based on participant feedback and current literature in this area, investment in the visibility of services as well as staffing seems necessary. Efforts should be made to promote the services available to students more broadly before issues arise. Attention should also be paid to the physical location of services. Since over 90% of first-year students enrolled at the college live on campus, locating some services around first-year housing areas could increase use as well as the effectiveness of services. The college also does not have a senior staff member who serves in the role of a residential first-year student support staff for first-year students. Creating opportunities for informal interactions and easy access to people within the institution who can discuss students’ personal and academic problems can also play a role in helping students work through their concerns and stay in college (Davidson et al., 2009). Effective interventions through a wide range of support services can help first-year students adjust to the academic and social demands of college and stay in school.

**Internal Structuring**

The findings indicate that the college has intentionally worked to improve collaboration in its governance structure as well as with other administrative restructuring. Berger and Milem’s (2000) research identified five core dimensions of organizational behavior: bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic and systemic. While colleges are thought to exhibit aspects of all five dimensions, one dimension may be more pronounced than others (Berger, 2001). Based on
his research on empirical studies on organizational behaviors and the links to undergraduate persistence, Berger (2001) identified several recommendations. These include:

- Providing students with information and clear lines of communication about campus, goals, values, policies and procedures, which is most effective with bureaucratic behaviors.
- Providing opportunities for students to participate in meaningful ways in the college decision-making process, which would require collegial behaviors.
- Provide balance between structure and responsiveness. Over reliance on any one organizational behavior may prove problematic.

Studies have shown that overly political or bureaucratic organizational behaviors can have a negative effect on persistence. Institutions must pay careful attention to the type of organizational behaviors utilized in their internal structures to ensure the types of organizational behaviors relied on support the goal of improved persistence.

The college in this study has successfully made changes to create a shared governance system. The shared governance structure is supported, not only by strong collegial organizational behaviors, but also demonstrates symbolic behaviors as outlined by Berger (2001). The underlying symbolic behavior signals to the campus the importance the college places on collaboration and campus wide input. Collegial organizational behaviors may also support a more caring institution. There is some evidence that more caring institutions foster and support persistence (O’Keefe, 2013). The recent changes in college governance have opened opportunities for the entire campus community, including students, to participate in important decision-making processes. Students input and voice in institutional decision-making as well the perceived fairness of policies and procedures can have a positive effect on the persistence
The amount of student participation in institutional decision-making was also cited by researchers as playing a significant role in persistence (Berger and Braxton, 1998). While the college has opened an avenue for student input into matters that govern the college, the college should take a closer look at administrative committees outside of the governance structure. These committees also make important decisions effecting the institution, however students are mostly left out of membership in these committees.

Some participants mentioned recent internal restructuring of departmental reporting lines as a positive change to improve collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, which could then improve student success. In his article “Rethinking the First Year”, Tinto (1999) stresses the importance of creating an “organizational environment within which collaborative partnerships between academic and student affairs professionals are valued and creative responses to the questions of the first-year are encouraged” (p. 9). Colleges should not view social and academic integration as two distinct, separate entities, as this masks the deeper relationship between the two (Tinto, 1991). A more accurate representation would be for the two entities to be nested within the larger context of a social system (Tinto, 1997). This would seem to support the philosophy behind the recent internal restructuring efforts by the college.

**Physical Structures**

Another function organizational behaviors can play is in the physical structures, design and architecture of the campus. Aspects of the living environment can be predictive of persistence (Aitken, 1982). Research in the early 1970’s revealed significantly higher graduation rates of students who lived in residence halls (Astin, 1973; Chickering, 1974). More recent research continues to support the earlier finding that living on campus is a positive influence on graduation (Pascarella 1984; Tinto 1987). Living on campus can strongly affect relationships
with peers and faculty, and involvement in social activities and academic support services (Tinto, 1987). Commuters interviewed for this study reported feeling less connected with peers and friends, and had less opportunity to be involved in clubs and other activities due to transportation issues or off-campus employment.

While all participants in this study discussed many negative aspects of campus buildings, classrooms and residential areas, student participants considered academic classroom spaces to be the most important to their educational experience. Some students felt the classrooms could have negative effects on their learning due to climate issues, lack of windows, and disruption due to ongoing construction projects. Classrooms have the potential to be an important link between learning and social activity (Tinto, 1997).

To date there is little research on the effects of physical structures of a campus and the impact on persistence. However, spaces that foster informal interactions between and amongst students, faculty and staff, and provide optimal learning and living environments, would be natural partners to programs and practices that help students transition to college. Properly designed and maintained physical spaces reinforce a culture of academic and social engagement and involvement in which to support persistence. Building a sense of community may foster feelings of community, which in turn can increase social and academic integration (Berger, 1997).

In his 1997 research on classrooms and communities, Tinto suggests that additional research on persistence include a network analysis and/or social mapping of student interaction patterns. Tinto (1997) goes on to say that this would “shed important light on how interactions across the academic and social geography of a campus shape the educational opportunity structure of campus life and, in turn, both student learning and persistence” (p. 619). Social
mapping could then provide the college with a better understanding of the way the geography of the campus shapes the educational process and incorporate future physical structures and space planning with student success initiatives.

**Summary**

The findings in the dimension of internal structures, policies and practices within the organizational context of theoretical framework support previous research that suggests how and what colleges do internally to improve student outcomes can impact retention and persistence. The participants interviewed provided rich descriptions of their experiences in regards to the college’s practices and internal structuring. It appears that the college is aware that its internal structures, services and practices impact the college community and the goals of improved student success. This awareness has led to changes in governance; focus on improved physical spaces for living and classrooms and internal restructuring. The creation of a summer, residential program for first-year, first-generation and low income students was also developed based on best practices to support persistence.

Additional assessment and feedback on programs intended to support students’ transition seems necessary to make sure programs meet the full needs of students. Critical components of social and academic integration which support persistence should be included in the program. The college must review its internal structures to ensure best practices from the research literature are incorporated. Monetary and human resources must be dedicated and placed strategically to improve the success of the internal programs, practices, and structures currently in place with the end goal of improved persistence to degree. As suggested by research by Kuh et al., (2008) “all students attending institutions that employ a comprehensive system of
complementary initiatives based on effective education practices are more likely to perform better academically, to be more satisfied, and to persist and graduate” (p. 556).

The following section will explore the findings from the second theme of Academic and Co-Curricular Programs, Policies and Practices, the relationship of the findings to the theoretical framework, and how the findings are situated in the literature.

**Academic and Co-Curricular Programs, Policies and Practices**

Research has linked first-year programs, faculty, research and co-curricular opportunities to improved retention and persistence, suggesting that what colleges do in these areas influences student outcomes of learning and persistence (Astin, 1999; Berger, 2000; Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 1999). Participant stories, discussions and college documents viewed through the lens of the theoretical framework of organizational context used in this study, provided a broader understanding of the influence of the college’s organizational behaviors in the area of Academic and Co-Curricular Programs, Policies and Practices on persistence and degree completion.

**First-year Program**

In the interviews, students, faculty and administrators viewed the first-year program as a series of courses and not a comprehensive, intentionally designed first-year program for liberal arts majors. This runs contrary to the college literature and website which heralds a first-year experience. However, a closer reading of these materials makes it clear that specifics as to academic components are absent. The college website provides information on the first-year undergraduate experience but mentions little about academics or a specifically designed first-year program. Full-time faculty are largely disconnected from the few required first year
courses. These may include first-year seminar, college writing and a science course designed for first-year liberal arts students. Only a small number of full-time faculty teach first-year seminar or college writing. It should be noted that the one required science course is taught largely by full-time faculty.

The paucity of information shared about any one of the first-year classes by participants elucidates the lack of a purposely designed and well thought out course curriculum of a first-year program. The required science course was not mentioned and student feedback on the first-year seminar course was mostly negative. Students reported learning little valuable information in the first-year seminar that assisted them in their future educational experiences. However, it should be noted that students in the focus groups reported college writing to be helpful in developing knowledge and skills that were needed to be successful in subsequent courses.

Elements of a well-designed, comprehensive first-year program should include frequent writing, critical inquiry, and the development of other intellectual and practical competencies (Kuh, 2008). In addition, the role of the faculty-student relationship in first-year programs cannot be overlooked (Tinto, 1999). These elements seemed to be neglected in a broad systematic way for the programming of the first-year at the college in this study. This may be due to the fact that the college does not have any type of first-year program planning committee or academic department charged with assessing the first-year or staying abreast of current research and best practices to support first-year students. There appears to be no clear philosophy of the faculty role in supporting first-year students or the communication of any real expectations of faculty outside the basic educational experience of the classroom. For the most part, faculty are not generally academic advisors for students in their first-semester either.
If the college is committed to improving retention and persistence, it must address the first-year program and the faculty role. Ownership of the first-year needs to shift from predominately an administrative function to one of shared ownership between faculty and administration. Investment and input from faculty is paramount. Faculty should lead the efforts with support from administrators who can assist faculty in launching a meaningful first-year experience. “The first year of college should be able to stand as a distinct institutional response to the question “How should the first year of college be structured to best promote student learning in that year and beyond?’” (Tinto, 1999, p. 9). The research from this study indicates that the college has not yet answered this crucial question.

**Faculty/Academics**

In the student focus group discussions undertaken in this study, faculty and academic courses were stated as the most significant and important influences on student satisfaction, engagement, and success. It might seem counterintuitive than, that students credit faculty as instruments of success while, decrying other academic components. This dichotomy may be due to the lack of faculty engagement in the development and instruction of the first-year program as previously stated as well as teaching behaviors associated with the senior project discussed in the following section. This further supports the need for interactions with faculty as early as possible in the educational experience. Seminal studies by Tinto (1999) and Astin (1999) have found that faculty interaction with students is a critical component of academic and social involvement and engagement.

According to faculty and students interviewed, engagement is largely relegated to the more traditional classroom course experiences as funding for off-campus educational experiences is limited, and faculty are not always available to participate in social and cultural
events at the college. Causation for this lack of engagement according to faculty interviewed is due to geographical and financial realities. The college in this study is located in the suburbs of New York City where cost of living is high, and housing near campus limited. Faculty often commute 1–3 hours one-way to get to campus. This makes frequent interactions and out of class socialization between students and faculty extremely challenging. “Frequent interaction with faculty may even increase satisfaction with other aspects of the college experience” (Astin, 1999). Studies have also provided modest evidence that informal student and faculty interactions have a positive impact on persistence (Pascarella, 1980).

Since research has stressed the importance of faculty interaction on persistence (Tinto, 1997) it may be prudent for the college to evaluate the role of full-time faculty in relationship to an intentional first-year program. Early involvement with other students and faculty appear to support retention (Miles & Berger, 1997). This reinforces the need for upper class peers in the first-year experience as well as the development of more intentional faculty interaction during the first-year. Kuh (2008) also suggests including faculty members’ own research in first-year seminars.

Kuh et al’s (2008) research recommends that college and universities assess and examine how they can make the first-year experience more challenging and satisfying for students. This would seem to support Terenzini & Reason (2005) suggestion that institution should assign a specific person or office to have responsibility for oversight and assessment of outcomes of a first-year program to gauge its effectiveness. Tinto (1999) contends that if colleges are serious about promoting retention of all students, the first-year should be “a year of inclusion that promotes the important ideal that all persons can and should have a voice in the construction of knowledge. All our learning would be enriched” (p. 9).
While involvement, engagement and integration may play a role in fostering student success, the student-faculty relationship matters the most (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1999). This suggests that institutions may be able to positively influence the types and extent of student-faculty interactions to positively affect student outcomes (Pascarella, 1980). Researchers were careful to note that not all interactions outside the classroom were beneficial, but that interactions must focus on intellectual discourse, artistic interest and future career options (Pascarella, 1980).

**Senior Project**

The college requires a two semester senior project which serves as a capstone research project for all students in the Liberal Arts and Sciences programs, and theoretically should improve student learning, engagement and persistence. Feedback from some students regarding the amount and quality of faculty support for the senior project, indicated that, not all, but many students felt faculty support was lacking for this critical capstone degree requirement. Capstone and undergraduate research have been lauded as important high impact practices that influence retention. Kuh’s (2008) research on high impact activities has shown that active learning practices such as capstone or undergraduate research increases student engagement and retention.

While research generally indicates a positive influence of capstone projects on learning and retention (Kuh, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), an assessment of the faculty teaching practices in this critically important experience should be completed. Faculty participants in this study cited minimal training or orientation for their responsibilities at the college, and most stated learning more informally through interactions with other faculty in their departments. Faculty teaching behaviors have been an area of study by Braxton, Milem and Sullivan (2000) and based on their work they have recommended that institutions develop workshops, seminars and discussion groups to improve faculty teaching practices. Faculty may have little training on
the teaching behaviors required to support students in completion of a two-semester independent senior capstone project. Teaching behaviors for an independent study, research-based capstone may vary significantly from teaching behaviors required for more traditional, in-person lecture or lab courses. Teaching practices and behaviors play a significant role in student departure and it is important for faculty and administrators to understand its effects on departure in order to improve retention (Braxton et al., 2000)

**Co-curricular Opportunities**

Students described co-curricular activities such as clubs, student government as well as on-campus opportunities to serve as peer mentors or advisors as positive influences on their experience. Social integration and development of friends can improve retention (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1999). The peer mentor-student relationship can have positive effects for student involvement, integration and persistence (Snowden & Hardy, 2013). Student participants who served as peer mentors/advisors, college ambassadors, or in other peer leadership roles reported feeling very connected to the campus community through these co-curricular activities. Additionally students viewed participation in clubs as being rewarding and helped to facilitate social integration and a place to develop meaningful friendships. These types of activities and opportunities can foster social and academic integration which can positively impact student success (Tinto, 1975).

Some dissatisfaction with oversight of the student government organization and other student-run clubs and organizations was mentioned in focus group discussions. Students described a highly political organizational behavioral style in the administration of some of the student-run clubs and the student government. Berger and Milem’s (2000) study on organizational behaviors revealed that as levels of political organizational behavior rise, the
levels of student attrition may follow. Careful attention should be paid to the communications of procedures and fairness in rules and regulations, which can have an impact on student retention (Berger, 2000). Since the social system and rules of the college can impact student retention and persistence, care should be taken to mitigate organizational behaviors that may negatively impact student success. Student feedback in this area would warrant a close review of student governance and clubs to ensure practices and processes are more collegial and less political in nature.

**Summary**

The findings in the Academic and Co-Curricular Programs, Policies and Practices dimension of the theoretical framework highlight the importance for programs and practices to be intentional, effectively designed and continually assessed in order to evaluate that college programs and practices have the intended effect on student outcomes (Kuh et al., 2008). The best practices of active learning and collaboration, as well as the impact of student-faculty relationship, should be thoughtfully incorporated into the first-year and beyond in order to improve student outcomes (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2008). Faculty and administrators should also be mindful of the proposed good practices in undergraduate education put forth from Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) research when designing co-curricular programs or residential curriculum. The seven principles include: “contact between students and faculty,” “reciprocity and cooperation among students,” “active learning,” “prompt feedback,” “time on task,” “high expectations,” and “respects diverse talents and ways of learning” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 2).

The college may need more assessment and feedback from students and faculty to ensure the wide variety of academic and social programs offered have the desired effects on learning
and persistence. How students experience the classroom matters and influences student persistence (Tinto, 1997). Colleges have largely looked outside the classroom to student affairs to implement programming to support engagement and involvement, missing the critical and important role active learning in the classroom can play in both social and academic involvement. “Administrators and faculty members must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice (e.g., class schedules; regulations on class attendance, academic probation, and participation in honors courses; policies on office hours for faculty, student orientation, and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits” (Astin, 1999, p. 523). Organizational behaviors discussed in this section have the potential to be strong influencers of student outcomes as suggested by Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) comprehensive model.

The following section will explore the findings from the third theme of Faculty Culture, the relationship of the findings to the theoretical framework, and how the findings are situated in the literature.

**Faculty Culture**

As noted by Reason (2009), increasing student persistence must be a college-wide venture. Findings in the area of faculty culture indicated that the faculty participants of this study expressed sensitivity to the issues of student success. Faculty also expressed awareness of college services to support student learning as well as the availability of professional staff that provide additional support to both faculty and students. This aligns with the organizational context of the college experience from the theoretical framework used in this research study, which suggests that faculty culture can influence the student peer environment and outcomes of persistence.
However, it would benefit the college to involve faculty much earlier in the student experience, preferably before the start of the first semester. Some researchers suggest this can be the single most important factor in student success (Astin, 1999; Pascarella, 1980). Colleges and universities must have a faculty culture actively involved in supporting students in summer transition programs and during their first year (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 1999). The college in this study does not have a faculty culture that includes large-scale involvement in first-year orientation, or a first-year program designed to influence student engagement, academically and socially. Faculty participation in this area is limited to only a small handful of faculty.

Faculty interviewed seemed concerned as to issues of retention, and aware of the important role faculty could play, particularly in the area of advising. Unfortunately the implementation of best practices that support retention and persistence goals seems to be largely a discussion generated and initiated by college administrators rather than faculty. The college administration initiated a Faculty Engagement Grant as an incentive for faculty to incorporate active learning into the classroom. The grant provides funding for activities outside of the classroom but at present the efficacy of these grants is unknown. So there is awareness of the importance of student-faculty interactions outside of the traditional classroom and student success. Still, based on the faculty interviews there does not seem to be widespread knowledge and understanding of the critical role that social interactions between students and faculty inside and outside of the classroom play, not only in social integration, but more importantly in academic integration. It was not evident through the interviews that there was an understanding that the student-faculty relationship can have a significant impact on learning, both social and academic engagement, and persistence.
Summary

The findings in the Faculty Culture dimension of the theoretical framework support previous research on the role of faculty and the impact of the student-faculty relationships (Astin, 1984; Berger, 2000; Kuh, 2008, Tinto, 1999). A commitment to increasing degree completion rates will require faculty to be more involved in retention and persistence initiatives. Input and ownership of the curriculum for the first-year must be more faculty driven. To achieve this goal, more training for faculty on best practices to increase academic engagement may be required. Incentives for faculty to be involved in the first-year program would also be necessary. Faculty must recognize they are a vital part of the persistence solution and their role in student success initiatives must be deeply rooted in the faculty culture.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the effects of institutional behaviors on persistence and degree completion for undergraduate, liberal arts majors. Research on student retention and persistence has often overlooked organizational behaviors of colleges and universities as an impactful construct, instead focusing more on the precollege characteristics of students or the characteristics of the college rather than its behaviors. In their comprehensive model of influences on student learning and persistence, Terenzini and Reason (2005) place the organizational context of the model before the student peer environment, indicating that organizational behaviors can be powerful tools influencing the peer environment and student outcomes.

The data and findings in this study indicate that the practices, policies, structures and behaviors that a college exhibits can influence, positively or negatively, student outcomes of
learning, development and persistence. This study is limited to the organizational behaviors of one medium-size public college in the northeast and findings may not translate broadly to all institutions of higher education. However this study does provide some insights on student, faculty and administrator perceptions of the effects of organizational behaviors on the educational experience and persistence. Based on the findings from this study, institutions should familiarize themselves with the research on organizational behaviors and take steps to evaluate their own organizations. Steps should be taken to ensure internal structures, programs, practices, academic and co-curricular programs, and faculty culture align with institutional goals of retention and persistence. Recommendations for practice and future research developed from the findings in this study will be discussed in the final two sections.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study highlights the potential for institutional behaviors to influence student persistence and signals possibilities for practical applications. It raises important issues for colleges and universities in retention and persistence efforts. It has become clear through this study that there is a need for a holistic approach toward student success that will require institutions of higher education to review and reconsider structures, policies and programs that have been put in place over time. In order to create meaningful praxis, the modern collegial environment must consider systems, structures, programs and policies, from a student-centric perspective while staying true to the history and stated mission of the college. To improve degree completion rates, it will be imperative for colleges and universities to be informed on empirical studies in the area of persistence, so that this knowledge may be used to implement recommendations of best practices to improve retention and persistence.
This section will discuss empirically grounded recommendations for colleges and universities in the area of institutional behaviors and their potential influence on persistence and degree completion. Additionally specific steps the researcher can take to bring the insights learned from the findings of this study into the actual framework and practices of the college will also be discussed.

**Orientation.** Orientation plays a pivotal role in students’ first collegiate experiences and should prove more than just a glancing blow for students entering an educational institution. Orientation should not be perceived as, or serve as, an initiation which ends after only a day or even a few days, but should function as an evolving system of support which seeks to aid in clarification, adaptation and accommodation. Colleges should investigate ways to build stronger connections with upper class peers, faculty and support staff mentors during this process.

Based on the research undertaken for this study I would recommend lengthening the orientation program to include a residential program to allow time for additional programming that could include faculty interaction, information on academic and social expectations, incorporating staff and peer mentors. With limited funding, a residential program may not be possible for all institutions, so colleges should find creative ways to facilitate the continuation of critical relationships started at orientation through the beginning of the first semester and throughout the first year. Mentors should stay in touch with and be available for students to answer their questions and concerns after orientation ends through the start of the semester a minimum. An effective orientation program should successfully transition students to a well-designed first-year program.

As a senior administrator who regularly attends meetings to discuss orientation programming as well as the outcomes and assessment of orientation, I am in a good position to
raise the awareness of factors, based on research and best practices, that could be incorporated into the orientation program to better support student development and persistence. As a result of this study I have developed a pilot summer “fellows” residential 3-day orientation program that incorporates faculty instruction, student and staff mentors, social programming, and an introduction to services and practices that can support student success. The initial effects of this program have been positive; the role of the faculty in the program should be enhanced. As administrator of this program I should take steps to have additional dialogue with faculty on how this might be accomplished. Establishing a strong and effective dialogue with faculty on their role in summer orientation programs could serve as a model to raise awareness of the importance of the role faculty play in persistence in the initial pre-college programs. This dialogue and awareness could then filter organically into the zeitgeist of the faculty.

**Support Services.** Support services benefit personal and academic well-being, and success, but many times are situated at the edges of the learning environment, often underutilized, misunderstood and even stigmatized. Making students aware of the benefits and existence of these services, and framing these services as advantageous and necessary to students’ academic, career and personal development would benefit students, and improve retention and persistence. Colleges need to find opportunities to raise the awareness of support services available. Colleges should take care to fund appropriate staffing levels required to support students’ needs. Support services should be introduced from the start of the first year and care should be taken to ensure they are welcoming and approachable. Additionally, colleges need to de-stigmatize support services and frame them as necessary and beneficial to lifelong well-being, and aids to personal growth.
My research and findings have had an impact in my thinking in this area. I have begun integrating the support services findings into key initiatives, structures and programming of the college. These changes will result in meaningful structural and programmatic efforts. My research will inform my proposals for the need of additional staffing in the support areas, and how staffing would support persistence. During focus group discussions, students expressed a desire for a more diverse staff, this should be a consideration for new hires. I will also convene an impactful working group of support services staff to develop a holistic marketing and communication plan to raise awareness and the importance of services, while at the same time de-stigmatizing these much needed services. These programs will be de-stigmatized by making them visible, advertising and encouraging their use. Additionally, I will strategize with the directors of support services, residence life and campus dining services to develop pathways to bring support services out of the traditional office setting into informal non-traditional settings which can serve to introduce, raise visibility and awareness of support services.

**Internal Structuring.** Internal structures can play an important part in securing student outcomes. Students, through their interactions with these structures, internalize and may even model these structures in their personal, academic and professional lives. Therefore it is important to find ways for students to have a voice in matters that govern the college, and in the implementation and development of internal structures and policies, which impact decisions on important matters of the college.

Initiatives and proposals I will make will focus building deeper relationships between academic and social integration within and outside the classroom. I will also create opportunities for collaborations between faculty, staff and divisions by encouraging funding and including faculty and staff voices. A visible structure needs to be put in place to allow for more
transparency, interaction and programming between academic and student affairs divisions, thereby reducing isolation between divisions.

College-wide structures should be paradigmatic and serve to illustrate effective, purposeful, and thoughtful systemization in an equitable, collegial structure, which serves to support collaboration, diversity and student success. Student government and clubs are important structures which support social and academic integration. However, they must be viewed as inclusive and fair. With this in mind, I will work with the leaders of student government and clubs to develop initiatives aimed in recruiting new and incoming students thereby creating a more diverse and potentially democratic, collegial, and inclusive student government and club structure.

**Physical Structures.** Architecture and design play an important role in our mood, sense of well-being and in the learning environment. The layout of buildings, common areas, lecture halls, classrooms, meeting spaces, residential halls, fitness areas, and outdoor areas may influence the discourse that flows from and within them.

Taking this into account, I would recommend a thoughtful analysis and social mapping of student interaction patterns, in order to illuminate how interactions occur within the physical structures of the campus. This knowledge should be used to raise resources for, and awareness of, the importance of physical structures that reinforce student-faculty, student-staff and peer-peer interactions, and improve academic and social integration, student development, learning, and persistence.

As more residential space on campus becomes available, college administration should consider having a designated “first-year” coordinator/administrator who lives on campus near the
halls where most first-year students live. The first-year staff member could be an excellent resource for students, while at the same time, be in the unique position to provide administration with key insights from observed and direct contact with first-year students.

The physical location and lay out of support services such as advising, tutoring, academic skill development and career development should be addressed. I have been able to include some of my research findings in discussions on this topic over the past two years. Currently these services are housed in an administrative building, hidden away on the second floor. Ongoing discussions lead to the recommendation of the creation of a Success Center to house these important support services in a highly trafficked, visible location. A good recommendation would be the central location of the college’s library. Findings from this study validate the administration’s planning and creation of a Success Center in the library and can be used to support the transition from the planning and discussion phase to the actual funding and construction of the Success Center.

**First-year Programs.** Research, critical inquiry, collaborative learning and frequent writing should be included in the first year program, this requires the design and implementation of a well-conceived program. Full-time faculty must be placed purposefully in roles to introduce students to high quality first-year experiences; they cannot remain in the shadows. Upper class peers should be used strategically to provide support for students in small group settings throughout the first-year.

By sharing my research and including student perspectives of the current first-year program with the provost, academic deans, and student affairs professionals I will raise awareness for the need of a more purposeful and dynamic first year program. I would encourage the creation of a committee charged with rethinking, redesigning and reestablishing a meaningful
first-year program. Ideally this committee would be inclusive and mutable, responding to research and results, and driven, not, toward a status quo, but toward excellence and academic achievement. This program should articulate what is best and unique about the college; reify its stated mission, through behaviors and ambitions. With the help of the provost and academic deans I would recruit the colleges most accomplished faculty, student affairs staff, and upper class peers to take part in this initiative. Once this committee is formed, and its mission articulated and implemented, it should continue to reassess its success and failures through engagement with student and peer criticism. It is my express hope that the creation of this committee and program would prove paradigmatic, and help serve as a model for future committees and structural undertakings. This would help to ensure that courses, structures, and resources are put in place to reinforce effective strategies that support students in the first-year and ongoing success.

Faculty/Academics. The faculty-student relationship is critical to student success and must be developed early on. At the same time, colleges must reinforce behavioral expectations of the role of faculty in learning, retention and persistence by incorporating more training. Training and education for faculty will be required to ensure a broader understanding of the important role the classroom plays in social and academic integration. Training must include development of teaching behaviors and practices required for capstone, research projects. Academic administrators should not assume all faculty are knowledgeable in the behaviors and practices required to assist students with advising, support services, and career advice, or how to effectively work with students on independent research projects. All these areas are important components in supporting persistence.
By sharing the research from this study with the provost and academic deans, I will suggest the formation of a faculty work group charged with the creation of a training manual/best practices manual for teaching, advising and working with students on the independent senior project required for all liberal arts and sciences students. As an incentive for faculty, the college should consider a stipend for one or two faculty to write said manual. A manual created by faculty for faculty should include information on teaching behaviors to support student learning, ways to incorporate learning outside the traditional classroom setting, advising, and internal college grants for funding that are available to encourage and support social and academic integration into the curriculum. Faculty should also be charged with the creation of a senior project guide for students. Senior projects vary by discipline, yet there are many commonalities that could be explored to provide students with a clearer understanding of the process. This might help students manage their expectations, reduce their anxieties, and layout a timeline and structure of the project which could improve the senior project experience and completion rate.

**Faculty Culture.** Institutions must put structures in place to include and encourage faculty participation in important discussions on retention and persistence initiatives. A faculty culture that is engaged and aware of their responsibility in student success is paramount. Faculty must be knowledgeable on the best practices to use inside and outside the classroom that lead to student outcomes of learning, development and persistence.

I have begun to incorporate information and insights gleaned from my research into committee discussions and other interactions with faculty. In order to have more immediate and long-lasting effects in changing the faculty culture, I will encourage the provost and academic deans to reinforce expectations of faculty in persistence initiatives. Onboarding of new faculty on their role and expectations in terms of student persistence as well as ongoing training and
discussions by faculty will be required to develop a faculty culture that embraces and identifies with their role as stewards of student persistence. I could also offer to do presentations to various faculty groups to raise awareness and knowledge on persistence research.

In summary, as a senior administrator, I have the opportunity through committees, offices, and relationships, to make recommendations for practices, processes, structuring and behaviors grounded in theory and research on student persistence. Sharing the results of this study with upper administration may be the first step in building support to communicate more broadly with the campus community. The findings in this study should be considered by upper administration as they evaluate financial resources, hiring and structuring of offices and divisions. Communicating the findings broadly will establish a common understanding of practical applications of theory and research on organizational behaviors which support improved persistence, thus providing a forum for encouraging ongoing discussion and reflection on this subject that may eventually become second nature for the entire campus community.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study suggests the need for future research on the impact of institutional behaviors on student outcomes of persistence and degree completion. Much of the early research in college completion focused on the reasons students’ dropout, and on individual student precollege characteristics (Bean, 1981; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). “Few studies have focused on what colleges can do to create conditions that foster student persistence” (Berger & Milem, 2000, p. 269). The limited exploration and research on organizational behaviors and persistence currently available warrants additional research to provide more evidence as to the role organizational behaviors have on persistence.
Future research should consider causation as to why students stay in college, succeed and complete their degree. Remembering that leaving an institution is not the exact opposite of staying (Tinto, 2005). Institutions truly committed to fostering an environment of success must develop a strong understanding of its environment and behaviors in order to employ strategies to change behaviors and better support institutional goals of degree completion (Reason, 2009).

Future research should include the incorporation of more qualitative research studies in the area of retention and persistence. Research on student outcomes has largely been quantitative in nature. The student experience told through the first-person student perspective might lead to a deeper understanding of retention and persistence questions and could be used to confirm earlier findings from quantitative studies. Qualitative research may help to contextualize the student experience more fully and has the potential to add additional layers of understanding to the persistence puzzle.

This research study was a qualitative case study undertaken at the end of the student participants’ senior year. Future research might include a more complete picture and understanding of the student experience throughout the entire educational experience. A longitudinal qualitative study that included students’ perceptions during each of their years in college could provide a better understanding of their initial perceptions of organizational behaviors and how their perceptions may or may not change as they progress to graduation.

Student persistence is a complex, multifaceted problem that requires further investigation from a wide range of viewpoints. To improve degree completion rates, researchers will need to continue to question current and previous research. It is inevitable that when data is parsed and weighed it may end up suggesting more questions than answers, requiring further investigation.
from new angles. It will be vital for researchers to continue to elucidate the factors that contribute to the complex problem of student persistence.
Appendix A - Recruitment Email - Student

Subject Line: Patty Bice Requests your Participation

Dear (Student),

My name is Patty Bice and I am currently a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and am seeking research participants.

I am researching how college institutional behaviors influence persistence and completion of a bachelor’s degree. Institutional behaviors can include internal structures, policies, programs, practices, architecture of the campus, design of academic programs intercontextual behaviors of campus life, support services and campus culture. My intent is to learn more about how students feel college structures, policies, programs and services affect their college experience and efforts to receive their bachelor’s degree. The information learned can be shared with faculty, staff and administrators that design programs, policies and services to support students in completing their degrees. Not much is known about the effects of college organizational behaviors on degree completion of undergraduate students.

For this study, I am recruiting participants that meeting the following criteria:
- First time undergraduate students (started college as a freshman)
- In your senior year
- Completing a BA or BS with a liberal arts major

If you choose to participate in this study, I will be conducting focus groups of 5 students. Focus group questions will be concerned with your college and academic experiences relating to completing your degree. The expected time commitment is about one hour. You will be offered a $25 gift card for participating. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not volunteer to participate, you will not be contacted again regarding this research.

If you are interested in volunteering to participate in this study, please email me at bice.p@husky.neu.edu and include the information listed below. Any emails to my employee email address must be deleted with no response per Northeastern University’s IRB.

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<td>Email:</td>
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<td>Phone Number:</td>
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<td>Preferred days and times to meet (Monday – Friday).</td>
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If you volunteer, I will provide you with additional details about the study.
Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Patty Bice
Appendix B - Recruitment Email - Faculty

Subject Line: Patty Bice Requests your Participation

Dear (Faculty),

My name is Patty and I am currently a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and am seeking research participants.

I am researching how college institutional behaviors influence persistence and completion of a bachelor’s degree. Institutional behaviors can include internal structures, policies, programs, practices, architecture of the campus, design of academic programs intercontextual behaviors of campus life, support services and campus culture. My intent is to learn more about how faculty feels college structures, policies, programs and services affect the college experience and influence their ability to educate students and support the goal of a bachelor’s degree. My goal is to raise awareness and strengthen institutional behaviors that may influence and support degree completion. Not much is known about the effects of college organizational behaviors on degree completion of undergraduate students.

For this study, I am recruiting participants that meeting the following criteria:

• Full-time, faculty member who teaches and advises students in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences

If you choose to participate in this study, I will be conducting individual semi-structured interviews. Interview questions will be concerned with your experiences at this college relating to degree completion. The expected time commitment is about one hour. You will be offered a $25 gift card for participating. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not volunteer, you will not be contacted again regarding this research.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me at bice.p@husky.neu.edu and include the information listed below. Any emails sent to my employee email will be deleted with no response per Northeastern University’s IRB.

After you contact me to volunteer, I will provide you with additional details about the study.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Patty Bice
Appendix C - Recruitment Email - Administrator

Subject Line: Patty Bice Requests your Participation

Dear (Dean/Director/VP),

My name is Patty Bice and I am currently a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and am seeking research participants.

I am researching how college institutional behaviors influence persistence and completion of a bachelor’s degree. Institutional behaviors can include internal structures, policies, programs, practices, architecture of the campus, design of academic programs, intercontextual behaviors of campus life, support services, and campus culture. My intent is to learn more about how college administrators’ feel college structures, policies, programs, and services affect the college experience and influence degree completion.

My goal is to raise awareness and strengthen institutional behaviors that may influence and support degree completion. Not much is known about the effects of college organizational behaviors on degree completion of undergraduate students.

For this study, I am recruiting participants that meeting the following criteria:

- Directors, Deans or Vice Presidents who have some oversight for policies, services and programs at the college.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will be conducting individual semi-structured interviews. Interview questions will be concerned with your experiences at this college relating to degree completion. The expected time commitment is about one hour. You will be offered a $25 gift card for participating. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not volunteer to participate, you will not be contacted again regarding this research.

If you are interested in volunteering to participate in this study, please email me at bice.p@husky.neu.edu. Any emails to my employee email address must be deleted with no response per Northeastern University’s IRB.

If you volunteer, I will provide you with additional details about the study.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Patty Bice
Appendix D - Recruitment Flyer Students

**Graduating May, August or December?**

**Research Study Looking for Senior Purchase Students**

Participate in a research study on student perceptions of college institutional behaviors and their influence on persistence and degree completion (IRB #CPS17-02-05 and IRB #161743). Participants receive a $25 gift card.

The study involves one 60-minute focus group session consisting of five seniors. Focus groups take place on the Purchase College campus.

Patty Bice, a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University, is currently conducting a study for her doctoral thesis and seeking research participants.

**Sign up for one of the followings focus group sessions by emailing bice.p@husky.neu.edu with the subject line Senior Research Study.**

- Tuesday, May 2 2:00pm – 3:00pm
- Wednesday, May 3 12:30pm – 1:30pm
- Wednesday, May 10 12:30pm – 1:30pm

For more information please contact Patty Bice at bice.p@husky.neu.edu with the subject line Senior Research Study.

Additional details will be provided to all volunteers.
Appendix E – Recruitment Flyer Faculty

Research Study Looking for LAS Faculty Advisors

Participate in a research study on how college institutional behaviors influence persistence and degree completion (IRB #CPS17-02-05 and IRB #161743). Participants receive a $25 gift card.

The study involves one 60-minute semi-structured interview. Interviews take place on the Purchase College campus.

Patty Bice, a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University, is currently conducting a study for her doctoral thesis and seeking research participants.

Sign up for an interview session by emailing bice.p@husky.neu.edu with the subject line Research Study.

For more information please contact Patty Bice at bice.p@husky.neu.edu with the subject line Research Study.

Additional details will be provided to all volunteers.
Appendix F - Informed Consent Form (Student)

Title: A Case Study on the Effects of Institutional Behaviors on Persistence and Degree Completion

Principle Investigator (PI): Dr. Daniel Volchok, Northeastern University
Co-Investigator: Patricia Bice, Northeastern University

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

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a liberal arts major and in your senior year.

Why is this research study being done?
The study will explore the effects of college institutional behaviors on degree completion of liberal arts majors with the goal of improving institutional behaviors to help support timely degree completion. Institutional behaviors can include internal structures, policies, programs, practices, architecture of the campus, design of academic programs, intercontextual behaviors of campus life, support services and campus culture. Through this study, I hope to gain insight into the influence of college institutional behaviors on student outcomes of persistence and degree completion.

What will I be asked to do?
This study will involve participation in one focus group. Focus groups will consist of five senior liberal arts majors. The focus group will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes. The focus group session will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

Procedure
If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in one focus group of five students. All focus groups will be conducted in person will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. Any information you provide in writing will also be analyzed. All materials will be stored securely and your name will be omitted. Instead, a pseudonym, which you may select during the initial meeting, will be used to organize the information.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
While there is minimal risk involved, there may be a slight possibility that you feel some discomfort in discussing any struggles you had during your time in college. The researcher will respect your boundaries during the focus group discussion and your level of participation will be your decision. The researcher will provide you with resources for seeking additional guidance relative to your situation if needed.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the researcher hopes that the information gathered through this study will raise awareness of the importance of college programs, services, policies, and practices in supporting the ability of students to complete their bachelor’s degree, particularly students with a liberal arts major. The findings from this study will be shared with faculty, staff, and administrators with the intention of strengthening programs, policies, services and practices that support degree completion for liberal arts majors.

Confidentiality. Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher will see the information about you. If you decide to participate, you will select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study to protect your identity. Any reports, presentations, or discussions associated with this study (i.e. doctoral thesis, journal articles, and conference presentations) will utilize this pseudonym and will not include any personal information linked directly to you. Information about your age, gender, race, and field of study will be included to help others understand and interpret the research findings. Focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. If any faculty or staff is directly identified during the focus group discussion, a pseudonym will be assigned to protect their identity before the transcription is provided to you for verification. The researcher will code the written transcript to identify patterns and themes within your interview and across interviews with other participants. All physical documents or files related to this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All electronic files will be stored in a password protected online file storage program and on an external data storage device. Only the researcher will have access to these storage mechanisms. All data will be retained for seven years and then destroyed.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decide not to participate and you may withdraw at any time. You are not obligated to answer all questions that are asked during the focus group.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be offered a $25 gift card for your participation.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
You will be responsible for the cost of traveling to the college, if necessary, for the focus group.

Is there anything else I need to know?
Participants must be 18 years of age.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Please contact Patricia Bice at (914) 420-2095 or via email at bice.p@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Daniel Volchok who is overseeing my research at d.volchok@neu.edu if you have any questions about this study.
Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies; phone: 617-390-3450; k.skophammer@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of the person agreeing to take part  Date

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to  Date
the participant and obtained consent

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix G – Informed Consent Form (Faculty/Administrator)

Title: A Case Study on the Effects of Institutional Behaviors on Persistence and Degree Completion

Principle Investigator (PI): Dr. Daniel Volchok, Northeastern University
Co-Investigator: Patricia Bice, Northeastern University

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

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being invited to participate in this study because you are either a full-time faculty in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences or a college administrator.

Why is this research study being done?
The study will explore the effects of college institutional behaviors on degree completion of liberal arts majors with the goal of improving institutional behaviors to help support timely degree completion. Institutional behaviors can include internal structures, policies, programs, practices, architecture of the campus, design of academic programs, intercontextual behaviors of campus life, support services and campus culture. Through this study, I hope to gain insight into the influence of college institutional behaviors on student outcomes of persistence and degree completion.

What will I be asked to do?
This study will involve participation in one individual interview. The interview will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

Procedure
If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to participate in one individual interview. You may select a location that is convenient and comfortable to you. All interviews will be conducted in person will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. Any information you provide in writing will also be analyzed. All materials will be stored securely and your name will be omitted. Instead, a pseudonym, which you may select during the initial meeting, will be used to organize the information.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is minimal risk involved. The researcher will respect your boundaries during the interview and your level of participation will be your decision.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the researcher hopes that the information gathered through this study will raise awareness of the importance of college programs, services, policies, and practices in supporting the ability of students to complete their bachelor’s degree, particularly students with a liberal arts major. The findings from this study will be shared with faculty, staff, and administrators with the intention of strengthening programs, policies, services and practices that support degree completion for liberal arts majors.

Confidentiality. Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers will see the information about you. If you decide to participate, you will select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study to protect your identity. Any reports, presentations, or discussions associated with this study (i.e. doctoral thesis, journal articles, conference presentations) will utilize this pseudonym and will not include any personal information linked directly to you. Information about your age, gender, race, and field of study will be included to help others understand and interpret the research findings. Focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed into writing. The researcher will code the written transcript to identify patterns and themes within your interview and across interviews with other participants. All physical documents or files related to this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet. All electronic files will be stored in a password protected online file storage program and on an external data storage device. Only the researcher will have access to these storage mechanisms. All data will be retained for seven years and then destroyed.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decide not to participate and you may withdraw at any time. You are not obligated to answer all questions that are asked during the focus group.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be offered a $25 gift card for your participation.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
You will be responsible for the cost of traveling to the college for the interview but the researcher will schedule a time that is convenient for you and when you may be on campus for other activities.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Please contact Patricia Bice at (914) 420-2095 or via email at bice.p@husky.neu.edu or Dr. Daniel Volchok who is overseeing my research at d.volchok@neu.edu if you have any questions about this study.
Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies; phone: 617-390-3450; k.skophammer@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of the person agreeing to take part  Date

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to  Date
the participant and obtained consent

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix H - Participant Questionnaire (Student)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Personal Information

Today’s date: ________________________________________________
Full name: __________________________________________________
Pseudonym: ________________________________________________
Age: _______________________________________________________

Where did you grow up? Please include city, state/country.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

To which racial or ethnic groups do you most identify?

__ African-American (non-Hispanic)      __ Asian/Pacific Islanders
__ Caucasian (non-Hispanic)            __ Latino or Hispanic
__ Native American                     __ Other:

Work

Did you work while attending college? _____Yes _____No
If yes, did you work: _____ On campus _____ Off campus _____ Combination of on and off campus
How many years did you work while attending college: _____________

Academic Information

Major(s): ____________________________________________ GPA: _____________

What major did you enter the college as? ____________________________________________

How many times did you change your major before deciding on your eventual major?
______________________________________________________________________________

Why did you decide to attend this college?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Appendix I - Participant Questionnaire (Faculty/Administrator)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Today’s date: ___________________________________________________
Full name: _______________________________________________________
Pseudonym: _______________________________________________________

To which racial or ethnic groups do you most identify?
__ African-American (non-Hispanic)  __ Asian/Pacific Islanders
__ Caucasian (non-Hispanic)  __ Latino or Hispanic
__ Native American  __ Other:

What subject areas do you teach courses in (if applicable)? __________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

How many years have you taught or worked at this college? ________________

How many total years have you taught or worked at any college or university? _______

Where did you attend college? (Please list all that apply)

Undergraduate (degree & major): ________________________________

Masters (degree & major): ________________________________

Doctorate (degree & major): ________________________________
Appendix J - Student Focus Group Guide
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

You have been selected for this focus group today because you are a senior in a liberal arts major. My research project focuses on institutional behaviors which include culture (beliefs), structures (programs, communication, social interaction, procedures, policies), architecture of campus and services. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into types of institutional characteristics that support persistence to degree completion. The purpose is to identify ways in which organizational behaviors, which are often overlooked, and student outcomes of degree completion are interactive and dynamic. The information learned can be shared with faculty, staff and administrators that design programs, policies and services to support students in completing their degrees.

1. How would you describe your academic transition from High School to college?
   Possible prompts: Were there programs or services that helped your transition? Were there missing services, programs or support that could have helped your transition more? What was the most difficult adjustment for you? Were there college offices that reached out to you if you had academic difficulties? If not, would it have helped if they did?

2. Can you speak about your experiences with any social involvement during your time in college? These may include student clubs, study groups, sport teams, participation in social programming, etc.
   Possible prompts: What events or social activities influenced your persistence to your senior year? In what ways do you think your involvement in this area may have affected your ability to persist to your senior year? Did it increase or reduce the number of semesters (or keep you on track) to your senior year and why? In what ways do you feel the college could improve social engagement, social trust, sense of community and interconnectedness?

3. In what ways do you think the college has attempted to create a sense of belonging for it students?
   Possible prompts: Were there specific programs or services? Were there opportunities for students to have input and help build a sense of belonging to the community for students? What structure or programs were missing? What role did your peers play in this area?

4. Can you describe ways in which the physical conditions of the campus, building design, student housing, study space, cleanliness of facilities, library, siloing of departments, offices, etc. impacted your educational experience and degree completion?
   Possible prompts: How has it facilitated or obstructed your interactions with faculty? How has it facilitated or obstructed your interactions with your peers? How has it facilitated or obstructed your ability to find services and resources needed to support your
persistence to your senior year? How was it helpful? How was it problematic? How do you think it could be improved?

5. **Can you describe your experiences in handling academic obstacles, demands or challenges during college that helped you persist to your senior year?**
   *Possible prompts:* How did you overcome the obstacles, demands or challenges? Who did you turn to for guidance and support and why? What services or programs did you use to overcome the challenge? Who did you talk to for advice and help to over the challenge? What was the faculty and staff or your advisor attitudes in providing you assistance to overcome the challenge? Would you have liked more or less support?

6. **Can you describe an experience or experiences of when you had difficulty handling obstacles, demands or challenges outside of the classroom?**
   *Possible prompts:* How did you overcome the obstacles, demands or challenges? Who did you turn to for guidance and support and why? What types of colleges services and programs did you utilized? How did you know who to ask or where to go for assistance? How did the college encourage or reinforce seeking out assistance from peer mentors, counseling, wellness programs, faculty or staff? What role did your advisor play?

7. **In what ways has the college created a diverse environment where students can freely share their views?**
   *Possible prompts:* What structures are in place to ensure students have a voice? Have you been able to have a voice in college programs, policies and services? What is the importance to you of a campus culture that allows students to freely share their views? Can you imagine how your voice in this area may help in retention and degree completion?

8. **Can you describe how college communications on academic programs, social rules and degree requirements have impacted your progress to your senior year?**
   *Possible prompts:* How would you describe the helpfulness of the communications? In what ways did communications in these areas impact your progress to your senior year? In what ways were college staff and faculty open to resolving issues in this area that may have impacted your ability to stay in college? What communication channels were most helpful?

9. **Did courses you took change your feelings about your potential major or potential career plans? How?**
   *Possible prompts:* What offices or services did you use or visit to discuss your feelings and help you make a decision about your major or career options? How did you know where to go for assistance?

10. **Can you speak about your experiences navigating the college process, from financial aid process to course selection to registration to graduation?**
    *Possible prompts:* In what ways do you think your ability to navigate these college processes affected your ability to persist to your senior year? Did it increase or reduce the number of semesters (or keep you on track) to your senior year and why?
11. During your time in college did you make any lifestyle choices or changes that helped you progress to your senior year? If so, were they in response to any college behaviors, programs or services? Describe?
   Possible prompts: In what ways did your peers affect your choices? What behaviors, services, programs had the biggest influence? What ways did the college encourage positive lifestyle choices and change?

12. What are your concerns regarding your transition from college life to the working world?
   Possible prompts: Has this ever been a source of anxiety? Do you feel the college has addressed these anxieties and/or concerns? Do you feel your academic program addressed career transition and exploration? What college services, programs or offices did you utilize as you began to consider your transition from a college graduate to the working world?

13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience at this college on your journey to your senior year?

Please note that this interview protocol is a guide in order to assist the researcher answer her research questions and that qualitative research does allow for new questions to emerge which may not appear in this protocol.

Additional questions if time allows:

1. Have college communications on financial literacy, financial aid and payment options helped or impacted your progress to your senior year? How?
   Possible prompts: How would you describe the helpfulness of the communications? In what ways did communications in these areas impact your progress to your senior year? In what ways were college staff and faculty open to resolving issues pertaining to your financial situation that impacted your ability to stay in college? What communication channels were most helpful?

2. Thinking back to your early experience as a freshman or sophomore, what could your professors/academic advisors/staff/peers have done or said to support you better?
   Possible prompts: What resources would have been helpful? Would you have liked more or less support?

3. In what ways did you feel supported or not supported by the college in pursuing your degree?
   Possible prompts: Can you describe any specific college programs or services that helped you persist to your senior year? In what ways do you think your faculty supported you? How would you describe your advisor’s role and attitude? How would you describe college staff’s role and attitude to supporting student degree completion? What type of support was lacking? How were your peers able to support you?
Appendix K - Faculty Interview Guide
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

You have been selected for this interview today because you are a full-time faculty and advisor in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. My research project focuses on institutional behaviors which include culture (beliefs), structures (programs, communication, social interaction, procedures, policies), architecture of campus and services. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into types of institutional characteristics that support persistence to degree completion. The purpose is to identify ways in which organizational behaviors, which are often overlooked, and student outcomes of degree completion are interactive and dynamic. The information learned can be shared with faculty, staff and administrators that design programs, policies and services to support students in completing their degrees.

1. **What specific challenges have you experienced with your students in the classroom over the last 3 – 5 years?**

2. **What strategies do you employ to help students who are having academic difficulties persist to senior year?**
   Possible prompts: What strategies do you think are most effective? What resources are in place to help you employ these strategies? How is information and guidance on new strategies communicated to you?

3. **What strategies do you employ to help students who are having non academic difficulties stay at this college and persist to senior year?**
   Possible prompts: What strategies do you think are most effective? What resources or structures are in place to help you employ strategies to support students? Do you have strategies to support and engage academically high achieving students stay and graduate?

4. **What is your perception of the effect of informal faculty interaction or out of class experiences on student persistence to degree?**
   Possible prompts: What strategies do you use to create informal or out of class experiences with your students? In what ways do college structures or programs help you to create informal or out of class experiences with your students?

5. **How did you learn to advise students in your major as well as students outside of your major?**
   Possible prompts: Can you describe any specific college programs or services that provided assistance in this area? What type of support or trainings was lacking? What role did support from your colleagues play?
6. Can you speak about your experiences advising your majors? What specific challenges have you experienced with your advisees on their path to degree completion?
*Possible prompts:* How did you overcome these challenges? What support did other faculty or any college services or programs provide to help you? What helped and what was missing that could have improved your ability to be an effective advisor? Can you describe how college communications on academic programs and degree requirements have impacted your ability to advise and support your students to graduation?

7. What has been your greatest challenge in helping your students reach their senior year?
*Possible prompts:* In what ways do you feel supported or not supported by the college in your efforts to help students persist and graduate in your major?

8. In what ways do you think the college has attempted to create a diverse environment for students and faculty to be actively involved in academic and social exchange?
*Possible prompts:* Were there specific programs or services? In what ways do you think participation by the campus community in academic and social exchange impacts retention? Were there opportunities for faculty to be involved in having input into the availability and types of academic and social exchange opportunities?

9. Can you describe ways in which the location and/or physical conditions of the campus, building design, classrooms, student housing, study space, cleanliness of facilities, library, departments, offices, etc. impacted your pedagogy or interaction with students?
*Possible prompts:* How has it facilitated or obstructed your interactions with students? How has it facilitated or obstructed your interactions with other faculty and staff? How has it facilitated or obstructed your ability to find services and resources to assist you and/or your students? How was it helpful? How was it problematic? How do you think it could be improved?

10. In what ways has the college created a diverse environment where faculty can freely share their views with administration?
*Possible prompts:* How and where were you able to share your views? What is the importance to you of a campus culture that allows faculty to freely share their views? In what ways does this help faculty help student reach their academic goals and complete a degree?

11. How have you been able to have a voice in college programs, policies and services?
*Possible prompts:* What structures are in place to ensure faculty has a voice? Can you imagine how your voice in this area may help in retention and degree completion? What is needed to ensure faculty have input in this area?

12. Can you speak about your experiences with social programming collaboration and opportunities?
*Possible prompts:* In what ways do you think your involvement in this area may have affected your students’ persistence to senior year? In what ways do you feel the college
could improve faculty involvement in social engagement, social trust, sense of community and interconnectedness?

13. How has technology systems impacted your abilities as a faculty member and advisor to help students persist to senior year?
   *Possible prompts:* In what ways do you think your ability to navigate these college technologies affected your ability to assist your students? Did it increase or reduce the number of semesters (or keep you on track) to your senior year and why? Can you describe both positive and negative aspects of technology resources?

14. What are your concerns regarding your students’ transition from college life to the working world?
   *Possible prompts:* Can you describe instances when students shared their anxieties about graduating? Do you feel the college has addressed these anxieties and/or concerns? How? Can you describe how your academic program addressed career transition and exploration for your students?

15. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience at this college education and supporting students through graduation?

Please note that this interview protocol is a guide in order to assist the researcher answer her research questions and that qualitative research does allow for new questions to emerge which may not appear in this protocol.

Additional questions if time allows:

1. **What do you perceive as your successes as a faculty member and advisor?**
   *Possible prompts:* What people, programs or services helped your success as a faculty member and advisor?

2. **In what ways do you think the college has facilitated collaboration between other faculty and boards of study?**
   *Possible prompts:* Were there specific processes or programs that help to encourage collaboration? Were there opportunities for faculty to have input and a structure to support collaboration? What role were you able to play in this regard? What structure or programs were missing?
Appendix L - Administrator Interview Guide
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

You have been selected for this interview today because you are an administrator at the research site. My research project focuses on institutional behaviors which include culture (beliefs), structures (programs, communication, social interaction, procedures, policies), architecture of campus and services. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into types of institutional characteristics that support persistence to degree completion. The purpose is to identify ways in which organizational behaviors, which are often overlooked, and student outcomes of degree completion are interactive and dynamic. The information learned can be shared with faculty, staff and administrators that design programs, policies and services to support students in completing their degrees.

1. Can you describe your role in student persistence and support?

2. Can you speak about your experiences in helping students navigate the college process, from the financial aid process to course selection to registration to graduation?
   *Possible prompts:* In what ways do you think the ability of students to navigate college processes affected their ability to persist to senior year? Did it increase or reduce the number of semesters (or keep you on track) to their senior year and why?

3. What ways does the college provide opportunities for you to introduce new programs or services that may support student persistence?
   *Possible prompts:* Were there specific processes or programs that help you to implement or introduce new programs or were services? Were there opportunities for you to have input and a structure to support collaboration? What role were you able to play in this regard? What structure or programs were missing?

4. In what ways do you think the college has facilitated collaboration between areas (academic and non academic)?
   *Possible prompts:* Were there specific processes or programs that help to encourage collaboration? Were there opportunities for you to have input and a structure to support collaboration? What role were you able to play in this regard? What structure or programs were missing?

5. Can you discuss the types of services the college offers to address physical and psychological well-being and success?
   *Possible prompts:* How do you know about this programs and services? In what ways are you able to provide feedback on the impact of these programs/services or make suggestions?

6. Can you describe the type of services the college has in place to support academic expectations, social expectations and student success?
Possible prompts: In what ways are you involved in designing programs or services? How are you able to have input into the programs or services that are designed to serve the needs of students as they transition from high school to college to graduation?

7. What ways does the college provide opportunities for you to interact with students?
   Possible prompts: What structures are in place to ensure staff has opportunities to interact with students? Can you imagine how your ability to interact with students may help in retention and degree completion? What is needed to ensure staff has opportunities to interact with students?

8. What strategies do you employ to help students who are facing challenges and difficulties persisting to senior year?
   Possible prompts: What strategies do you think are most effective? What resources are in place to help you employ these strategies? How is information and guidance on new strategies communicated to you?

9. In what ways do you think the college has attempted to create a diverse environment for students, faculty, and staff to be actively involved in academic and social exchange?
   Possible prompts: Were there specific programs or services? In what ways do you think participation by the campus community in academic and social exchange impacts retention? Were there opportunities for staff to be involved in having input into the availability and types of academic or social exchange opportunities?

10. Can you describe ways in which the location and/or physical conditions of the campus, building design, classrooms, student housing, study space, cleanliness of facilities, library, departments, offices, etc. impacted your interaction with students?
    Possible prompts: How has it facilitated or obstructed your interactions with students? How has it facilitated or obstructed your interactions with other faculty and staff? How has it facilitated or obstructed your ability to find services and resources to assist you and/or students? How was it helpful? How was it problematic? How do you think it could be improved?

11. How have you been able to have a voice in college programs, policies and services?
    Possible prompts: What structures are in place to ensure staff has a voice? Can you imagine how your voice in this area may help in retention and degree completion? What is needed to ensure staff have input in this area?

12. Can you speak about your experiences with social programming collaboration and opportunities?
    Possible prompts: In what ways do you think your involvement in this area may have affected your students' persistence to senior year? In what ways do you feel the college could improve staff involvement in social engagement, social trust, sense of community and interconnectedness?
13. How has technology systems impacted your abilities to help students and impact persistence to senior year?

_Possible prompts:_ In what ways do you think your ability to navigate these college technologies affected your ability to support students? Can you describe both positive and negative aspects of technology resources?

14. What are your concerns regarding students’ transition from college life to the working world?

_Possible prompts:_ Can you describe instances when students shared their anxieties about graduating? Do you feel the college has addressed these anxieties and/or concerns? How? Can you describe how college programs have addressed career transition and exploration for your students?

15. Can you describe how college communications affect your ability to assist students and provide important information that impact student progress to senior year?

_Possible prompts:_ How would you describe the helpfulness of the communications? In what ways did communications in these areas impact your ability to provide meaningful information to students that supported persistence to senior year? What communication channels were most helpful?

16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience at this college education and supporting students through graduation?

Please note that this interview protocol is a guide in order to assist the researcher answer her research questions and that qualitative research does allow for new questions to emerge which may not appear in this protocol.

Additional questions if time allows:

1. **In what ways do you think the college has attempted to create a sense of belonging for it students?**

_Possible prompts:_ Were there specific programs or services? Were there opportunities for students to have input and help build a sense of belonging to the community for students? What structure or programs were missing?

2. **What has been your greatest challenge in helping students reach their senior year?**

_Possible prompts:_ In what ways do you feel supported or not supported by the college in your efforts to help students persist and graduate in your major?
Appendix M - Inventory of Documents Reviewed

College Website

- Redesign launched in February 2017
- Events and programming to engage and support students
- Freshman Experience
- Student Portal
- President’s Statement
- Student Government
- Student Clubs
- Success Network: Listing of all support services available to assist students
- Success Fellows program
- Construction of new Center for Media, Film and Theatre (CMFT) building which will serve as a place for collaboration between disciplines.
- Drop in hours for Assistant Deans

Internal Documents

- Strategic Plan
- Change in Governance
- Proposal for an Advising Center
- Announcement regarding new VP of SA and Enrollment position
- Residential Curriculum Committee
- Meeting Minutes
  - Enrollment Management Implementation Team
  - Student Services Committee
  - Student Success Committee

Collaboration

- Orientation Committee membership
- Residential Curriculum Work Group
- Student Engagement Grant

Programs

- Required first-year Orientation
- Phase T.W.O. Orientation
- Admissions Ambassadors
- EOP summer orientation
- Success Fellows Summer Program schedule
- Class of 20XX Essentials: Online course for new students after orientation but pre class start/welcome email
- Express Check in
Internal Meetings

- Success Center Planning
- Potential Collaboration of the Bonner Program
Appendix N – Debriefing Statement

Study of Influences of Institutional Behaviors on Degree Completion

Thank you for your participation in this study. The study you have just completed was designed to investigate the influence of institutional behaviors on persistence and degree completion of undergraduate liberal arts majors. In this study you were asked questions regarding your experiences and perceptions of college internal structures, policies, programs, practices, architecture of the campus, design of academic programs intercontextual behaviors of campus life, support services and campus culture in supporting and aiding your persistence to completing your degree.

I am particularly interested in the relationship between organizational behaviors and degree completion. Research on student persistence and degree completion has been varied and inconclusive, most likely because it is a multidimensional, complex problem and there is little consistency between institutions, students and lack of clear definitions of the factors used to assess persistence. Little qualitative research has been done in this area as well. This study is of importance since there has been also been minimal research on the effects of organizational behaviors on supporting and aiding students to complete an undergraduate bachelor’s degree.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Patty Bice at bice.p@husky.neu.edu.

If you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies; phone: 617-390-3450; k.skophammer@neu.edu.

Thank you again for your participation.
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