Stop-Out Students’ On-Leave Experiences:
How Interactions Affect Institutional Commitment and Re-Enrollment

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Abstract

College students may sometimes feel they need to take a break from college life. These students may return to their original campus, may transfer, or may permanently discontinue their educations. For colleges and universities pursuing positive enrollment management outcomes, these students represent opportunities to make measurable improvements in retention/persistence rates as well as college completion. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how on-leave interactions affect students’ institutional commitment and motivation to re-enroll. Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist model of student departure provided a theoretical framework for investigating the problem of stop-out student attrition. The key finding of this study suggests that Schlossberg’s (1989) conception of marginality and mattering applies to the stop-out student experience and explains the step between interactions and integration in Tinto’s model. Interactions that made participants feel mattered by their individual points of contact were more meaningful and influential in building affinity with the college environment, positively affecting the desire to re-enroll. Additional research is needed to further explore the stop-out student experience and investigate the reasons students decide not to return to their original institutions.

*Keywords*: stop-outs, student retention, institutional commitment, social engagement, marginality, mattering
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Some college and university students are not able to continue their studies without interruption, often putting them behind schedule for a four-year graduation from a baccalaureate institution. These students withdraw or take leaves of absence for a number of distinct reasons but are together defined as “stop-outs” because they return to their original institutions (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Stop-out students leave for a number of multidimensional reasons (Tinto, 1975), and make their re-enrollment decisions while absent from their campus community. At times, their intentions shift, and they never make it back to their original institutions. Failing to acknowledge the impact of stop-out student attrition may result in nonexistent or ineffective policies and practices for engaging with students while they are away. The purpose of this case study was to discover how on-leave stop-out students interact with their college communities at a small liberal arts college in the United States. Interactions were generally defined as any communications between stop-outs and any college community members. Knowledge generated from this study informs enrollment management practices related to stop-out student re-enrollment and persistence.

Statement of the Problem

Stop-out behavior by undergraduate students is prevalent. O’Toole, Stratton, and Wetzel (2003) found that approximately 30% of students pursuing a degree leave college at least once. Because most college and university withdrawal policies provide some form of academic forgiveness, it is assumed that these students will be intrinsically motivated to return to school. Further, colleges may believe that because stop-out students often intend to return at the time of departure, they will do so in lieu of any intervention from the institution. Many colleges and universities do not provide formal support to stop-outs, nor do they develop strategies to
encourage re-enrollment. The institution under study, Goucher College, engaged in formal outreach with stop-outs only if they had not registered for classes with the semester of expected return approaching. The frequency and substance of other informal communications with faculty, staff, and peers was unknown. Woosley, Slabaugh, Sadler, & Mason (2005) found that 55% of departing students intended to return to their original institutions, but only 40% re-enrolled – expressed by a 72.7% re-enrollment rate. At this rate, three out of every ten previously-enrolled students who originally intended to return, failed to do so. This population of students should therefore be seen as quite vulnerable to dropping-out. Accordingly, the problem of practice under review is stop-out student attrition at a small residential college.

**Significance of the Problem**

Goucher College is a small, private, liberal arts institution serving approximately 1500 undergraduate students. Being a school that is heavily dependent on tuition revenue, it is vital for Goucher to enroll and retain as many students as the physical plant and academic mission allow. From 2002 to 2016, Goucher’s retention rate hovered in the 75%-85% range with no evidence of a measurable trend in either direction (Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2016). Though the retention situation was not demonstrably worsening, losing tuition dollars to attrition became a major concern, and the college has engaged in a number of retention initiatives to encourage student persistence. A revamped first-year experience and orientation program, new advising structures, and the construction of a first-year village emerged as major projects expected to positively impact retention. However, there has been little attention given to students who stop-out and intend to return in the future. Given that first-year cohorts averaged 387 between 2002-2015, the attrition of only a small number of students could significantly impact the retention rate.
Beyond Goucher, the ability of colleges to retain students has become a key point for understanding the effectiveness of higher education institutions. Prospective students and their families often seek out retention and completion rates and take them into account when making their college choices. These figures also play a major role in college rankings algorithms that evaluate the quality and value of a school’s education. For these reasons, colleges and universities invest heavily in retention initiatives and establish programs and services that are designed to build strong connections between students and their communities. Due to the size of their student populations, small colleges are particularly wary of increased attrition. Losing only a handful of students at these schools can endanger retention and graduation rates, cause forfeited revenue, and negatively impact standing in the U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges Rankings (Ortagus, 2016; Meredith, 2004).

Colleges and universities are under constant pressure by internal and external forces to maximize the efficiency and revenue-generation of strategic enrollment management processes (Dennis, 2012; Hope, 2017; Sutton, 2016). These pursuits seek to attract and enroll prospective students and often emphasize retaining students after matriculation. Complicating the matter, small private colleges in the United States are facing unique challenges related to enrollment management. Changes in the political, economic, and technological landscapes has impacted how prospective students make their college choices – causing small institutions to consider how they compete with their peers (Liu, 2011). Career- and trade-based education options have become more attractive for students and their families seeking specific employment outcomes from their educations. This trend may force tuition-dependent liberal arts colleges to close or consider shifting towards a more vocational philosophy. Indeed, evidence supports the liberal arts declension narrative, particularly since 1970 (Kimball, 2014). Small colleges have also
recently experienced increased competition for academically-strong students seeking low-enrollment institutions (Ferrall, 2011; Ledesma, 2009). The decreasing availability of federal and state appropriations have led many institutions (particularly private colleges, including Goucher) to rely heavily on tuition and fees as a primary source of revenue (Archibald & Feldman, 2008). All of these challenges heighten the urgency for colleges to work to retain as many students as possible.

Considering that tuition-driven colleges are desperately seeking out solutions to the student departure problem, it is strange that retention policies and practices targeting stop-out students are so uncommon. Stop-outs represent a population of previously-matriculated students that often have hopes to persist but are simultaneously particularly vulnerable to drop-out (Woosley et al., 2005). The lack of attention to stop-out students also creates an incongruence between academic missions and practice. Goucher College’s Community Principles emphasize the pursuit of understanding privilege and oppression, and channel a commitment to equity in the college’s Diversity Statement (“Community Principles,” 2017). Based on the evidence that non-white (DesJardins et al., 2006; DesJardins & McCall, 2010), disabled (Kilpatrick et al., 2017) and socioeconomically-challenged (Niu & Tienda, 2013; Schatzel, Callahan, Scott, & Davis, 2011; Terrizuez & Gurantz, 2014) students stop-out and drop-out with greater frequency than their more affluent peers, colleges and universities focusing retention-related resources primarily on continued-enrollment students may be failing to adequately support their most vulnerable populations. The lack of institutional programming (and subsequent assessment) that focuses on stop-out student support systems suggests that individual case studies may reveal important information related to stop-out students’ relationships with their college communities.
This research sought to identify meaningful and impactful interactions between stop-out students and their faculty, staff, and peers. College administrators would benefit from a better understanding of how these interactions affect a stop-out student’s decision to re-enroll or drop-out. Findings may serve to inform enrollment management initiatives, student support services, and communications strategies at small colleges addressing student persistence.

**Research Question**

How do interactions with their college communities while on leave affect stop-out students’ institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors?

**Definition of Key Terminology**

A number of definitions of important expressions for this study differ depending on the scholar utilizing them. The following definitions provide context for their utilization specific to this research study.

*Retention* – Continued enrollment at a single institution.

*Persistence* – Often defined as divergent from *retention* based on its emphasis on completion of a degree. Because this study does not take graduation rate into account, this term will be used interchangeably with *retention* and refer to the ability to remain an active student. Students who take temporary leaves of absence, but eventually re-enroll are considered by this research as demonstrating *persistence*.

*Attrition* – Leaving an institution prior to the completion of a program of study.

*Stop-out* – A student who takes a temporary break from college, but eventually re-enrolls at their original institution.
Drop-out – Students who depart from their original institution and do not pursue further education elsewhere.

Transfer – Leaving a college or university and subsequently enrolling elsewhere.

Interactions – Individual communications between a student and other members of the college community, and the student’s perceptions of those communications.

Integration – The degree to which a student incorporates the values and norms of a specific community into their own value system.

Tinto’s Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure

Introducing his seminal model in 1975, Vincent Tinto sought to contend with the narrative that student attrition could essentially be blamed on the attributes and shortcomings of students dropping out (Tinto, 2012). To Tinto, this attitude reinforced issues of race and class inequalities and failed to give weight to the myriad reasons and unique circumstances that lead students to depart. He developed a counter-narrative based on sociological assumptions inspired by the research of Emile Durkheim (1951) and William Spady (1971). Durkheim posited that suicide is likely to occur if individuals are not integrated in the society with which they live. Spady directly inspired Tinto’s work by examining college dropout behaviors through Durkheim’s social withdrawal lens. He put forth that a lack of integration leads to low levels of institutional commitment, increasing the likelihood that a student will seek to change their environment. Expanding on Spady’s work, Tinto acknowledged that both the academic and social environments of a college or university directly affect student commitments in distinct ways (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012).
A major tenet of Tinto’s original (1975) model emphasized a principle that is currently most commonly understood as engagement (Astin, 198; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012). The broad conception of engagement refers to how students participate in “educationally purposeful activities” (Hu, 2011, p. 97) that contribute to their learning experiences and development. These activities include taking part in curricular and co-curricular programs, but Tinto highlights the importance of how involvement leads to more frequent and significant interactions, which provide the building blocks for meaningful institutional relationships.

It is important to note that Tinto believed that a student could achieve high levels of academic or social integration through engagement, but that these two types of integration are experienced distinctly. In other words, a student thriving academically and experiencing intellectual fulfillment, may still choose to leave school if they are not engaged in the social environment on campus. Though he acknowledged that students enter college with important and meaningful attributes and levels of commitment, Tinto theorized that institutions can provide transitional guidance to first-time students to influence their persistence decisions (See Figure 1).
Pre-college attributes and background. Tinto’s (1993) conception of student departure presents a longitudinal process defined by shifting goal and institutional commitments that are impacted by interactions and experiences within a college community. This process naturally begins with a consideration of a student’s pre-college attributes, background, and experiences – each of which has been shown to directly impact student success (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Goenner, Harris, & Pauls, 2013; Herzog, 2005). Tinto argued that these pre-college factors shape the development of students’ academic and social expectations, as well as their commitments to their goals and the institution. Therefore, while values, motivation, previous
academic performance, and other pre-matriculation factors play a role in the attrition decision, a student’s continuance in college relies heavily on their ability to successfully integrate into their new environment.

**College transition.** Tinto’s (1993) revisiting of his original (1975) model explicitly addresses a concept only indirectly alluded to in his first work – first-time student adjustment to college. He presents three stages of the integration process – separation, transition, and incorporation. In the separation stage, it is imperative that students break from the norms and behaviors of their pre-college lives and begin to reduce the levels of involvement with their former environments. Succeeding through the transition stage relies on the ability of students to begin to adjust to new academic and social systems. Finally, the incorporation stage represents the translation of student engagement and faculty/peer interactions to the establishment of strong goal and institutional commitments.

**Academic integration.** Basing his examination of the concept of academic integration on prevalent research at the time, Tinto (1975) identified two clear factors for understanding student performance in the academic system. Grade performance provided a clearly visible and measurable statistic in the form of student GPA. It was simple and convenient to draw correlations between the numeric representation of academic performance and a number of outcomes, which led a number of researchers to identify GPA as possibly the most important factor predicting persistence (p. 104). The second, intellectual development, was described as reflective of how students value their college education. Students demonstrated stronger persistence behaviors if they viewed learning as the acquisition of knowledge and ideas, rather than a necessary vocational process.
In his latest visitation of his departure framework (2012), Tinto updated his lines of thought, moving away from GPA as a primary indicator of academic integration. Rather, he suggested that actual grade performance is less impactful than thoughtful assessment and feedback practices. Early assessment programs allow institutions to measure readiness for college and identify individualized assessments of learning skills deficiencies. Pre-college and classroom assessment practices should lead to the establishment of feedback loops that impart students with the tools and guidance to adjust their behaviors and pursue academic success. Though it may be challenging to provide ongoing and immediate feedback to students in a large classroom setting, small colleges with lower student-to-faculty ratios should be well-equipped to engage in these practices.

**Social integration.** Generally speaking, Tinto’s (1975) assessment of social integration relies on the various interactions between students and their peer associations, activities, and encounters with faculty and staff. These interactions allow students to experience heightened degrees of support through friend-making and faculty/staff relationships. This acquisition of social rewards builds a sense of belonging and satisfaction with a student’s environment, which is accompanied by greater levels of goal and institutional commitments. He further suggests that associating with smaller subcultures or peer groups that are part of the college system enhances institutional commitment, even if the student does not necessarily perceive a commitment to the broader system. In other words, a struggling student may outwardly express discontent with their college as a whole but have no interest in leaving the smaller social support structure provided by a small number of community members. The formation and initiation of these groups may be informal comings-together of individuals sharing interests or proximity, or pre-existing structures like athletic teams, student organizations, or other extracurricular establishments.
The manner in which a student experiences the classroom can also have a major impact on their social integration (Tinto, 2012). This setting is, after all, the primary place where students interact with faculty and peers in direct pursuit of their educational goals. Communications and relationships with faculty are unique in that the derivation of value from those interactions can be attributed to either (or both) social and academic integration. In this respect, faculty interactions may be supportive, challenging, or grounded in academic advisement, with varying effects on students’ social satisfaction, grade performance, and intellectual development. Though Tinto (1975) spends little time expounding on the impact of staff (non-instructor employee) interactions, his model purports that quality interactions with any college community member has an impact on social integration.

**Institutional congruence.** Within the context of Tinto’s (1975) model, institutional congruence is understood as an agreement between the student and the characteristics and climate of an institution. Students are more likely to persist when they believe that a college can provide them with the tools to accomplish their goals. His later iteration of his model (2012) suggests that congruence may be defined by a matching between student expectations and the support systems made available to them. Institutional congruence builds positive emotional associations with a college or university that lends to a sense of comfort and belonging with the community. Conversely, incongruence is often a result of a failed or flawed adjustment to the campus environment and its systems and lost opportunity to establish emotional ties.

**External impacts.** Recognizing that individual students may choose to leave college for a number of reasons other than their interactions within the college community, Tinto (1975) suggests that these external factors may still be taken into account under his departure framework (despite omitting any explicit reference to them within his original model). He argues that
external factors may alter a student’s evaluation of their commitments to their goals and their institution, but this does not impact the model’s applicability. A student’s perception of how they derive benefits and costs (financial and otherwise) from their enrollment is constantly shifting and reflective of the commitments identified in this model. Tinto has revised and modified his research continuously throughout the last 40 years, with other scholars proposing numerous adjustments and reconsiderations.

**Related theory.** Following Tinto’s 1975 work, several subsequent theorists critiqued or suggested modifications to his work. Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, though similar to Tinto’s framework, emphasized different assumptions about the definition and impact of student involvement. In defining his conception of student involvement, Astin approached the idea by considering the energy expended by students in pursuit of the academic experience. Contrasting slightly with Tinto’s theorizations, Astin’s framework focused on student behaviors, not their emotional connections. His involvement theory grounds itself on five postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy.

2. Involvement occurs along a continuum – students display varying degrees of involvement in various activities/programs.

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features.

4. The amount of learning and development associated with any program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement.

5. The effectiveness of any policy or practice is directly related to its capacity to increase student involvement. (Astin, 1984, p. 298).
Astin’s theory was developed in the context of a study of college dropouts (Astin, 1975). Although his original written theory does not explicitly address retention/attrition behaviors, he acknowledges that studying involvement against dropout behaviors may be an ideal model for understanding his theory (Astin, 1984, p. 303). Importantly, Astin’s work reinforced and agreed with Tinto’s promulgation that integration or involvement can increase persistence behaviors in college students.

John Bean’s (1980) model of student attrition focused on factors influencing the departure decision and applied concepts pulled from workplace job turnover to college persistence behaviors. His work reflected assumptions from previous researchers and examined the interplays of pre-matriculation student characteristics, interactions with the community, organizational attributes, and external factors. The perceptions of students in relation to these variables were thought to influence institutional commitment and attrition. His original model stressed the importance of pre-college academic preparation and background characteristics – an accentuation that diverges from Tinto’s (1975) longitudinal model of retention. In his later revisions, Bean gave greater attention to social influences, especially peer interactions (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Bean (1981) drew from Tinto’s emphasis on attitudes and student emotions and identified four variables that have direct or indirect effects on intent to leave college: background variables, organizational variables, environmental variables, and attitudinal and outcome variables. Under this framework, these variables impact how students appraise the value of their inclusion in the college community. Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler (1992) compared the models of Bean and Tinto and found that they are complementary, and that Bean’s work could potentially serve a supplementary role in expanding upon Tinto’s seminal theory.
**Criticisms.** Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure and student integration model are highly influential works but are not without their limitations or critics. The generalizability of his framework has been questioned, as some researchers have suggested that it may be most applicable only to residential baccalaureate institutions (Braxton et al., 2014; Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016; Mohammadi, 1996). Community colleges, in particular tend to serve students with much different circumstances and aspirations than those of four-year institutions and establish different associations with their college as commuters (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). This suggests that community college students experience goal and institutional commitments in various ways that may not fit into Tinto’s theoretical structure.

Compiling a review of six studies that assessed the validity of Tinto’s (1975) framework, Terenzini & Pascarella (1980), concluded that the student departure model was a conceptually useful model for understanding attrition behaviors. They further confirmed that the frequency and quality of interactions with faculty outside of the classroom increased first-year retention behaviors. Despite generally finding agreement with Tinto’s work, findings suggested that in isolation, background characteristics and other pre-college attributes are not reliable predictors of student persistence. This assertion is qualified by the acknowledgement that individual students interact with their campus environments in ways that reflect their own background and characteristics. The authors posit that Tinto’s model provides a useful and simple starting point for understanding student departure, but that future research should work to understand the vast complexities related to the problem.

Empirical research evaluating Tinto’s (1975) model have yielded mixed results. Assessing the 13 primary propositions of Tinto’s original framework, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) found that single-institutional tests categorically support just five of those
propositions. Importantly, this study found that only limited support for the inclusion of academic integration in the model of persistence. Furthermore, their findings raised questions regarding the relationship between shifting goal and institutional commitments to the goal of college completion, challenging the longitudinal nature of Tinto’s model. Findings did however support a number of propositions related to social integration and its causal relationship to student persistence. In the end, the authors recommended theory elaboration and additional research considering organizational theory integration. Subsequently, Berger & Braxton (1998) found evidence that organizational attributes at single institutions have significant and direct effects on social integration and first-year persistence. The authors suggest that organizational behavioral theory might help explain processes of social integration, institutional commitment, and student persistence.

Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, and Bracken (2000) attempted to assess Tinto’s (1975) framework through a student questionnaire distributed to first-year students but found that their results could not be explained by his theoretical model. The authors also criticized the philosophical appropriateness of Tinto’s decision to base his student integration construct on a theoretical model of suicide behaviors. Taking issue with likening the college transition to a rite of passage, Tierney (1992) argued that Tinto’s model inadequately acknowledged differences in the ways that students experience college based on their own cultural contexts. Viewing the problem through a social constructivist lens, Tierney criticized the framework’s anthropological shortcomings related to the student departure question. Other studies have found that the applicability of Tinto’s theories vary greatly depending on the type of institution (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983), student gender (Bean, 1980; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Stage, 1989),
student age (Tierney, 1992) and race/ethnicity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015; Wolfe, 1985).

Rationale for Selected Framework

Despite the age of Tinto’s (1975) work and abundant availability of newer updates, revisions, and elaborated-theory, the current topic under study provided an excellent opportunity for utilizing his seminal framework. This research examined how interactions with a college community impacts stop-out students’ institutional commitment and subsequent re-enrollment behaviors. The causal nature of this case study aligned with Tinto’s longitudinal model that suggests that persistence behaviors can be explained by an experiential process. The relative simplicity of Tinto’s theory established a foundation through which the current research method was built.

Tinto (1975) emphasized the importance of separation and transition as a primary factor in predicting student persistence. He posited that students who fail to move on from their pre-college lives often struggle to stay in school. Unlike continued-enrollment students, stop-outs experience the transition in-and-out of college multiple times. While on-leave, they typically spend several months back in their pre-college environments. Tinto is clear that these changes are stressful and unique challenges arise during each stage of the process. During this time, students’ academic and social integrations with their colleges may diminish. For this reason, any theoretical framework for a study focused on stop-out student persistence should adequately acknowledge the transitional element.

A primary difference between Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984) is the emphasis on student emotions and attitudes towards an institution versus their levels of involvement. Astin’s
exploration of student involvement measured the energy expended by students in pursuit of educationally-enriching activities. In the case of on-leave students, this definition of involvement with the departed institution becomes a non-factor. Tinto’s model, on the other hand, established that student’s perceptions of the benefits and costs (financial and otherwise) derived from their enrollment reflects the process of building goal and institutional commitments. His interpretation of congruence builds upon the internal and experiential process of integration through the consideration of students’ emotional affiliations with their institutions. This emotional and attitudinal aspect of integration provided this study with a lens through which the impact of student interactions was interpreted.

Tinto’s (1975) model is intended to be applied to understand the student departure puzzle at a single institution. He reinforced that the drop-out decision is a multidimensional process that relies heavily on a student’s interactions with their institution. For that reason, the distinct people, structures, systems, services, and characteristics of a college or university have important effects on a student’s integration experience and subsequent persistence. The collective case study approach of this research lends well to the utilization of a single-site model. Under this methodology, the researcher is guided by their interest in the case itself, seeking to understand the problem within a clearly-defined context (Grandy, 2010). Tinto’s single-institution applicability aligns well with this exploratory context-based approach to research.

Questions related to the generalizability of Tinto’s (1975) framework show that the applicability of the model may be limited. Research has found that his theory has limited applicability for community colleges and institutions with robust commuter populations (Mertes & Jankoviak, 2016; Mohammadi, 1996; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). The setting for this research however, was a small baccalaureate institution with an extremely high percentage of residential
undergraduate students – approximately 95% (Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2017). The On-Campus Residency Policy (2017) requires that all full-time undergraduates live on campus and participate in a college meal plan (with limited exceptions). This requirement is stated to be in line with the college’s educational mission (Goucher College Mission, 2017) that emphasizes close interactions with faculty and peers, extracurricular involvement, and nurturing a sense of community. These ideals with which this institution pursues its educational mission are congruent with major concepts held by Tinto’s interactionalist framework for student departure and provides this study with an ideal theoretical model.

**Summary and Organization of the Study**

This research was structured according to the steps of inquiry taken to examine stop-out students’ interactions with faculty, staff, and peers through the lens of student persistence in higher education. Chapter one reviewed Tinto’s interactionalist theory of student departure as the theoretical framework of this study. Chapter two provides a review of the literature related to stop-out student experiences and re-enrollment behaviors, college retention initiatives, and the impacts of faculty, staff, and peer relationships. Chapter three outlines the research methodology utilized to investigate the problem, including descriptions of the sample population and participant selection, data collection and analysis, and measures taken to ensure validity and credibility. Chapter four presents a detailed analysis of data collected from participant interviews, observations, written communications, and institutional data. Finally, chapter five discusses how the findings reconcile with current research and Tinto’s framework, concluding with recommendations for the site institution and implications for future research.

**Conclusion**
This study sought to understand how stop-out students’ institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors are affected by interactions with their college communities while on leave. With the argument made for the alignment of this study’s research problem, question, and theoretical framework, the following chapter will review the body of literature related to stop-out student re-enrollment, institutional retention strategies, and the impacts of interactions and relationships with faculty, staff, and peers.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the collective scholarly knowledge related to the research question – how interactions with the college community while on leave affects stop-out students’ institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors. This collective case study examined this topic in the context of a small residential college in the United States. Small colleges that depend heavily on revenue sources related to enrollment suffer a great number of consequences when students fail to persist, from direct financial implications to significant reputational damage (Marthers, Herrup & Steele, 2015). The problem of stop-out student attrition is particularly disheartening considering that these students often intend to return to school. In consideration of the topic and problem of this study, the following review of literature will summarize scholarly work related to three conceptual strands of research: college stop-out students, institutional retention strategies, and the effects of interactions and relationships with a college community. This chapter will synthesize these interrelated research strands in order to inform the development of this study’s underlying assumptions and methodology.

College Stop-Out Students

For the purposes of this study, college stop-out students are those who temporarily leave college but return to their original institutions at some point in the future. Regardless of the reason for the interruption, unlike students who drop-out or transfer, a stop-out student finds their way back to their school. Many colleges and universities utilize semester withdrawal policies that permit students to withdraw from courses without any impact on the students’ GPA or academic standing (Woosley, 2003). These policies allow students struggling with some type of academic, financial, social, health-related, family, or personal hardship to take a break and leave
the door open for an easy return to campus. Despite the hope that students leaving school will take advantage of this second opportunity to pursue advanced education, many students intending to re-enroll at their original institution never seek reinstatement (Horn, 1998; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Porter, 2003; Woosley, 2003).

In order to investigate and understand the unique experiences of stop-outs, it is necessary to first evaluate the current body of research on this group of students. Early research studying student departure tended to assume that attrition behaviors are alike in their permanence (Stratton, O’Toole, & Wetzel, 2008). Researchers recognizing temporary semester withdrawal and leave of absence policies subsequently focused on simply establishing that the stop-out student experience should be studied in distinction from other forms of student departure (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Stratton, O’Toole, & Wetzel, 2008).

Following his seminal (1975) study on attrition that primarily focused on drop-out and transfer behaviors, Tinto’s (1993) revised model explicitly pointed to stop-outs as a unique category of departure. More recently, Tinto (2012) discussed the complex challenge that stop-outs pose for retention scholars in categorizing students as stops or drops. He explained that he elects to define student attrition as the rate at which students leave college without a degree (p. 128). Therefore, for Tinto, students that have left their colleges but intend to come back should not be included in attrition research amongst the ranks of drop-outs or transfers.

**Stop-out decisions.** Acknowledging stop-outs as a distinct group, researchers began to consider the unique behaviors, intentions, and motivations of these students in relation to their enrollment decisions. Laura Horn (1998) compiled an extensive review of students who leave college in their first year. She found that 16% of first-year undergraduate students at 4-year institutions interrupted their enrollment before the completion of their first year. Of those
students, 64% returned to college, but less than half (42%) returned to their original institution – 58% transferred. Following a review of a compilation of data sources related to retention and attrition, Porter (2004) found that the decision to stay in school, transfer, or take a break is multidimensional and extremely complicated. He recommended that researchers and college administrators commit to collecting data from departing students in order to analyze the reasons students choose to leave, depending on the nature of their exit. In agreement, Hoyt & Winn (2004) profiled the subpopulations of non-returning students, finding significant differences between drop-out and stop-out student characteristics, as well as differences in the reasons these distinct students choose to depart. Across all groups of students, financial concerns were the most frequent motivating factor for departure, followed by family responsibilities, other personal reasons, academic factors, and health concerns. More than half of stop-outs included in this study cited financial difficulties as a primary reason for leaving. The authors conclude by suggesting that retention/attrition research that fails to disaggregate stop-outs from other types of departing students is severely limited in scope.

A number of studies from the 1980s to the most current research have attempted to identify correlations between student characteristics, background, and pre-college experiences that influence the departure decision (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Huang, Roche, Kennedy, & Brocato, 2017; Pascarella, Duby, Miller, & Rasher, 1981). Investigations into basic student demographic characteristics like gender and race/ethnicity have yielded varying results. While some researchers have concluded that women exhibit stronger rates of persistence than men (Conger & Long, 2010; Hagedorn, 2005), other studies have revealed no significant differences between genders (Reason, 2003; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). There is also a lack of consistency in the research regarding the impact of race on attrition and interrupted enrollment. DesJardins,
Ahlburg, & McCall (2006) examined stop-out behaviors and theorized that differences in persistence behaviors that were related to race were more appropriately attributed to socioeconomic factors.

Several studies have examined the barriers that affect access to higher education for poor students and found that a family’s financial resources affect outcomes related to student success (Huang, Guo, Kim, & Sherraden, 2010; Lareau & Weininger, 2008;). Controlling for academic ability, research has also shown that high-achieving low-income students are less likely to graduate from college than high-income peers demonstrating the same levels of academic achievement (Wilson, 2016; Wyner, Bridgeland, & Dilulio, 2007). Focusing on pre-college education, Niu & Tienda (2013) found that students who graduated from affluent high schools had the highest levels of persistence, and students from poor high schools had the lowest. First-generation students have lower family incomes and more financial responsibilities than continuing-generation students (Bui, 2002; Mehta, Newbold, & O’Rourke, 2011). As typically poorer students, first-gens have been found to display higher risks of discontinuation and departure (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich, & Powell, 2017; Horn, 1998; Ishitani, 2006). These studies indicate that there is a direct relationship between socioeconomic status and readiness for college (or perceived readiness).

In addition to establishing that students carrying financial challenges demonstrate lower retention rates, research has sought to determine how the burdens of specific financial motivations affect the departure decision (DesJardins et al., 2002; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Kerkvliet & Nowell, 2014). Herzog (2005) found evidence that the disbursement of disappointing second-year financial aid offers affected students’ willingness to return for their sophomore years without interruption. Findings from Terriquez & Gurantz (2015) indicated that financial
constraints, particularly those related to family background characteristics, correlates with stop-out behaviors at community colleges and baccalaureate institutions. Supporting this claim, Stewart et al. (2015) tracked student demographic data and persistence behaviors across several years. They identified a relationship between financial aid status and subsequent persistence, claiming that students reevaluate the costs of their educations after their first year of attendance. This reconsideration of their financial burdens may lead to harsh realizations, shifted self-perceptions and expectations, and result in interrupted or discontinued college enrollment.

DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall (2002) studied how individualized financial aid packages affect student departure decisions. They found that awarding financial aid increased retention, but also determined that those impacts were dependent on the type of aid. Institutional scholarships had the highest impact on persistence, followed by work-study, with student loans preventing stop-outs only slightly. From these findings, the authors hypothesized that different types of aid are associated with different meanings to students. Evaluating these results through the lens of Tinto’s (1975) framework, one might suggest that the perception of a give-and-take form of aid increases the individual’s commitment to an institution. Following up on this research, DesJardins & McCall (2010) examined various aid strategies and observed that Princeton University’s strategy of replacing loan-based aid with grants and scholarships increased graduation rate and prevented interrupted enrollments. Unfortunately, for most colleges, this aid strategy is not fiscally viable – it does however demonstrate the importance of how students perceive their aid packages. In agreement, Stratton et al. (2008) found evidence that grant and work-study aid were most strongly-related to persistence behaviors, and that students receiving grants were the least likely to elect to stop-out. These studies show that different financial aid packages have different effects on the permanence of student departure
decisions and that institutions should develop intervention plans that differentiate between drop-out and stop-out behaviors.

Taking a look at student engagement and involvement, Woosley (2003) concluded that students’ perceiving a strong “fit” with the institution demonstrated a higher ability to remain in school, while those feeling less-connected were more likely to leave. Additionally, the study found that students who attended co-curricular events and joined student organizations were more likely to persist than those who displayed low levels of engagement. The existence and depth of social structures have also been found to be important for retaining students. Yazedjian, Toews, Purswell, & Sevin (2007) utilized an online survey instrument and a series of focus groups that examined the importance of relationships as students transitioned from high school to college. Incoming first-year students reported that peer relationships were vital in contributing to their social integration and connection with the institution. Similarly, Goguen, Hiester, & Nordstrom (2011) asked if peer relationships could be linked with academic performance and student retention. After distributing questionnaire booklets to randomly-selected first-year students, the researchers found evidence that the number and closeness of friendships at a student’s institution could predict persistence. In particular, students who reported having a trusting and loyal relationship with another student enrolled at their college earned higher GPAs in their first semesters. Additionally, conflicts with new peers could result in detrimental effects to academic performance, including GPA and persistence. The importance of these effects on academic performance should not be understated. Several studies have linked grade achievement in college to likelihood of persistence. A student’s earned grade point average (GPA) in college has been found to significantly impact student motivation to persist without interruption (Johnson, 2006; McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stewart et al.,
Horn’s (1998) review of student departures included an examination of GPAs, which agreed that the stop-out decision is commonly linked to academic difficulties. Additionally, Horn utilized Tinto’s (1975) conception of academic integration and measured student involvement with faculty and peers. Students who scored low on the academic integration scale were more susceptible to early departure behaviors, while stop-out students were more integrated than drop-outs.

Social behaviors and student involvement have also been shown to affect health-related quality of life. Growing bodies of research in mental health issues on college campuses has given heightened attention to how emotional wellness can affect persistence. Studies have shown that student mental illness and low-resilience significantly affect an individual’s ability to remain enrolled (Hartley, 2011; Salzer, 2012). Asserting that related research on selective small private liberal arts colleges is limited, Gansemer-Topf, Zhang, Beatty, & Paja (2014) confirmed previous research that college transition struggles, social integration, and interpersonal relationships affected mental wellness and retention. The authors’ interpretation of the data also suggested that modern college students struggle to manage adversity. Academic failure may therefore have a compounding negative impact that can affect student wellness and increase the likelihood of attrition. The authors further note that colleges and universities are responding too slowly to growing mental health needs. For this reason, mental and emotional wellness can play a primary role in determining whether a student remains in school without interruption. Supporting this claim, Nordstrom, Goguen, & Hiester (2014) examined the possibility that social anxiety may cause social and emotional problems that lead to early attrition. They found that college environments can expose students to unmanageable personal and academic failures that inflate negative self-esteem and lead to withdrawal.
It is vital for researchers investigating stop-outs to understand the student characteristics and factors that increase the probability of a leave. Though any student may be motivated to take a break from college for a number of reasons, the body of research has provided scholars with profiles of students who exhibit particularly high risk of stopping-out. These students tend to have access to low levels of socioeconomic supports, struggle with grade performance, and/or fail to develop a strong commitment to their institutions. Fortunately for colleges and universities, stop-outs hope to return – it follows that scholars have sought to learn the nature and motivations of the return decision.

**Stop-out re-enrollment.** Once researchers established that stop-outs should be studied as a distinct population of departing students, they sought to identify factors that could predict re-enrollment following the decision to take a break from school. Woosley (2003) utilized Tinto’s (1993) departure model and found that students who demonstrate higher levels of goal and institutional commitment are significantly more likely to re-enroll than students with lower levels of commitment. This study confirmed Tinto’s theorization that mid-semester withdrawals occurring early in the first semester lead to high levels of attrition – these students do not spend sufficient time at a college to begin to build strong levels of institutional commitment. Similarly, several studies have found a link between the total number of credits earned, and the likelihood of a return to the original institution (Berkovitz & O’Quin, 2006; Desjardins, Aihburg, & McCall, 2006; Rodriguez-Gomez, Meneses, Giarin, Feixas, & Munoz, 2016).

Expanding on previous work, Woosley et al. (2005) examined the re-enrollment behaviors of withdrawing students. In addition, the study looked at educational commitment and institutional commitment of participants. At the time of the decision to leave college, 55% of participants intended to return to their original institution, but only 40% completed re-
enrollment. Results indicated that student goals, educational commitment, institutional commitment, and previous experience at the institution all predicted the intentions of withdrawing students. In fact, a student’s total experience in school was more closely correlated with re-enrollment than academic success. Employing a GPA of 3.000 as a benchmark, the authors found no meaningful difference between withdrawing students above or below that threshold. In regards to grade performance, GPA has been found to be a significant predictor of re-enrollment (Berkovitz & O’Quin, 2006) or confirmed to be a non-factor (Horn, 1998). As a result, Woosley et al. suggested that levels of educational commitment should be considered as more impactful than academic performance in understanding stop-out re-enrollment behaviors.

This assertion is supported by Horn, who found that academic integration factors like faculty interactions, participation in study groups, and relationships with advisors were predictive of higher levels of re-enrollment for departing students. Schatzel, Callahan, & Davis (2013) determined that students displaying strong goal commitments (as framed by Tinto, 1993) and measures of academic integration were more likely to return to their schools.

Hoyt & Winn (2004) differentiated behaviors of stop-outs to transfer-outs and drop-outs and found that each group emphasized different challenges affecting their ability to remain enrolled (or return). Over half of the student participants who stopped-out cited financial issues as a major roadblock to a return to school. These students also reported the need to work on a full-time basis in order to fund their academic pursuits. Health concerns were the third most common reason for withdrawal given by stop-outs. Stop-outs were found to be generally satisfied with instruction and the social aspects of life on campus but felt the need to improve the condition of their finances prior to re-enrolling. Conversely, drop-outs cited low GPA and/or poor academic performance for the primary reason for their attrition. Interestingly, both stop-outs
and drop-outs cited family responsibilities and child-care as contributing to their decisions to put their studies on pause. These results indicate that stop-outs exhibit fewer concerns related to the institution and its qualities, and that the primary motivations influencing interrupted enrollment lie more frequently with external factors that are often beyond the institution’s control.

Additional studies on the stop-out experience have attempted to identify the specific experiences during leave that may help students build the capacity to return and thrive in the college environment. Papke’s (1978) review of the College Venture Program provided an early example of the benefits of securing employment during a student’s time off. The initiative connected students with employers and maintained communication with participants and their supervisors throughout the process. The author stated that in general, approximately 50% of intended stop-outs eventually become drop-outs, but of the College Venture Program students, 85% returned to their original institutions. Gomez (2014), in consideration of the financial hardships often cited by stop-out students, recommended that colleges and universities collaborate with workforce agencies to encourage on-leave students to work towards funding their educations. These efforts would be particularly useful for students close to completing their degrees but would help all students feel that their institutions share a commitment to the attainment of their goals. In addition to the focus on employment, these two periodicals (published 35+ years apart) share a common thread in demonstrating the potential importance of maintaining a connection with students during their leave experience. Along those lines, Hoyt & Winn (2004) found that stop-outs are more likely than other groups of non-returners to want someone from the institution to reach out and discuss coming back to school.

It may be commonly believed that taking classes at another institution (often a community college close to the stop-out’s home) can keep students engaged in their own
educations and improve the odds of eventual re-enrollment. However, research has shown that this is not necessarily the case. Johnson & Muse (2012) define “student swirl” as simultaneous attendance at multiple institutions of higher education. Asserting that non-enrolled students frequently enroll at other institutions, researchers investigated how student swirl affected original institution re-enrollment of swirling students. They found that return rates are substantially lower for students who attend other colleges after their departure from their original institutions – they instead tend to complete a full transfer to another college. Additionally, they determined that return rates became smaller as leave-periods grew longer. Other studies have confirmed that the longer a student is away on leave, the less likely they are to resume their studies (Desjardins et al., 2006; Desjardins & McCall, 2010). For these reasons, college administrators tending to retention rates may be wise to reconsider the recommendation that stop-outs take courses elsewhere while on leave.

For the population of stop-outs leaving school to address health and emotional wellness issues, it appears that their health-related experiences have a strong impact on the likelihood of their return. Woosley (2004) posited that students pursuing semester withdrawals or leaves of absence for health reasons are naturally well-suited to re-enroll because their interruptions likely had little to do with their academic progress or student experience. The study measured withdrawing students’ reasons for withdrawals and tracked their re-enrollment patterns. Of the 25 reasons included in the study, students attributing their withdrawals to personal health-related problems were the most likely to re-enroll.

Schatzel, Callahan, & Davis (2011) investigated stop-out behaviors and found an absence of support systems addressing many of the challenges faced by stop-out students during leaves of absence. The authors recommended that colleges work to develop resources and tools for these
students that provide assistance in transitioning back to the college environment. Their findings and implications for policy development are intended to help stop-outs re-integrate into their communities, and it may be reasonable to accept that the existence of these programs would encourage more students to return. However, these benefits are not truly delivered until after a student re-enrolls. Finding that on-leave stop-out students were left with a number of important unanswered questions related to taking time away from school, Kesselman (1976) suggested that colleges and researchers could do more to provide support to students while away from school. Kesselman expresses a hope that institutions of higher education will acknowledge this gap and invest resources in stop-out support services. More than forty years after this article, it is clear that limited progress has been made.

**Conclusion.** The research related to stop-out students and their experiences provides valuable insight into factors that are relevant to this study. It is clear that stop-outs deserve specific attention as a sub-group of non-returning students. The material covered in this literature review begins to provide a general picture of what makes stop-outs unique, as well as the causes of stopping-out. Additionally, the research establishes a basic understanding of the experiences that may encourage re-enrollment. Stop-out researchers may benefit from investigations into retention-related practices that have been shown to keep students in school. Though stop-out student characteristics and needs are unique, these policies and programs could shed light on factors influencing re-enrollment.

**Institutional Retention Strategies**

Although they do not fall into the same category as drop-out or transfer-out students (that are often the focus of retention studies), research on the attributes, characteristics, and challenges faced by stop-out students provides an opportunity to draw from the body of knowledge on
retention initiatives. Retention research very frequently refers to, or reflects Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) student departure framework. Many of these studies seek to directly investigate how college and university programs and policies affect institutional commitment, and subsequent persistence (Hartley, 2011; Perrine & Spain, 2008; Valentine et al., 2011). The evaluation of these initiatives provides valuable insight related to college practices and their effects on student motivations related to retention. The foundations of the lessons learned from retention research provided this study with useful information for framing the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data.

**First-year programming.** First-year orientation programs have become a heavily-utilized strategy for colleges and universities attempting to build connections and prepare incoming students for their lives on campus (Jaffee, 2007). These programs typically take place prior to the start of the semester, in the few days leading up to the first day of classes. They often focus on ensuring that students have clear and realistic expectations for the institution and its resources, while hoping to build a sense of belonging to the college (Mckendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014). Orientation curricula and philosophies differ depending on the institution’s mission, vision, and affiliation, but the goals related to retention and persistence tend to remain aligned. First-year orientation has been shown to facilitate socialization and encourages a positive adjustment to college (Pascarella et al., 1986; Law, 2014). The effectiveness of first-year orientation has been shown to positively impact academic performance, retention, and completion (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Cambridge-Williams, Winsler, Kitsantas, & Bernard, 2013; Noble, Flynn, Lee, & Hilton, 2008). Many of these programs focus heavily on college adjustment and emphasize education and experiences that serve to acclimate students to their new environment and available resources (Cambridge-Williams et al., 2013; Hendel, 2007). In
addition to environmental adjustment, familiarizing students with academic expectations and rigor often involves skills-development related to time management (Schnell & Doetkott, 2003). Addressing how students experience college transition is reflective of Tinto’s (1975) model that links a student’s ability to let go of their pre-college life and embrace their new community.

Some institutions offer or require additional and ongoing orientation program attendance throughout the student’s first semester. These specialized initiatives reinforce lessons from traditional orientation programs and expand upon topics to emphasize the social and academic components (and challenges) of campus life. Noble et al. (2008), assessed the efficacy of a voluntary first-year experience called ESSENCE (Entering Students at South Engaging in New College Experiences) at the University of South Alabama (UoSA). ESSENCE was launched by the university’s Office of Student Affairs in 1998 as an effort to increase first-year academic performance and retention. Researchers collected data from participating and non-participating first-year students enrolled in similar numbers of credit hours. They found that students successfully completing the extended first-year program earned higher GPAs and were more likely to graduate within five years than their counterparts participating only in the basic orientation.

In agreement with previous research, Huff & Burek (2016) examined the goals and outcomes of a first-year program at the College of Health and Human Services at Bowling Green State University. Findings confirmed that first-year orientation and extended orientation programs are beneficial for students making the transition from high school to college. Taking it a step further, the authors considered follow-up practices centered on sustained communication and continued engagement between their graduate student instructors and participants from the program. After gathering qualitative feedback from administration and instructors, and analyzing
student course evaluations, Huff & Burek recommended that first-year programs require that instructors maintain their advisory relationships with students. They also suggested that program leaders avoid the temptation to cover too much material during the experience. Some students reported that they found it difficult to focus on specific topics while also touching on broader issues related to student success and behaviors. Yazedjian et al. (2007) similarly concluded that orientation and further first-year programming can be overwhelming for student participants who may feel that the totality of the material is not directly relevant to their lives.

In contrast to studies demonstrating positive outcomes for first-year programming, Perrine & Spain (2008) evaluated the New Students Days (NSD) program at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). Like other orientation programs, NSD encouraged social and academic interaction and integration of incoming students (including transfer-ins). Their research found that the program had little impact on the future credits earned, GPA, or retention of NSD-participating students, when measured against non-participating new students. These findings suggest that first-year orientation outcomes may vary depending on institutional characteristics and varying attributes of incoming students. Colleges should therefore evaluate student support systems and seek greater understanding of the needs of their specific cohorts to develop effective orientation programs.

A smaller number of colleges and universities address student adjustment to college by offering pre-orientation programming for incoming students. Wilderness experiences prior to formal enrollment are a popular iteration of pre-orientation (Bell, Holmes, & Williams, 2010; Galloway, 2000). These trips are intended to provide an opportunity for students to overcome mental, emotional, and physical challenges while experiencing developmental growth in a short period of time (Frauman & Waryold, 2009). The hope for these programs is that a sense of
accomplishment and empowerment translates to a smoother transition to college (Bell, 2006; Lien & Goldenberg, 2012). Additionally, the experience of being placed with a group of peers with shared goals can result in the formation of meaningful social support structures on campus (Bell, 2006). Utilizing the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire instrument developed by Neill, Marsh, & Richards (2003), Frauman & Waryold (2009) examined the First Ascent program at Appalachian State University (ASU). This program was created in response to growing concerns regarding transition-related anxiety observed in freshman students. ASU staff pioneering First Ascent identified six primary outcomes:

1. To provide a supportive experience that students can use as a reference point during their transition to college and beyond,

2. To develop a peer-based support network through a shared experience,

3. To promote independence while fostering interdependence,

4. To immerse students in the great outdoors with the intent of creating meaningful relationship amongst students without the distractions of technology and the everyday environment

5. To reduce feelings of fear and/or anxiety associated with interactions with staff and faculty, and

6. To welcome students to the “Appalachian family” (Frauman & Waryold, 2009, p. 192).

Citing research on outdoor adventure-based education and the value of living/learning communities, ASU researchers drew from a random sample of participants and non-participants and distributed the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire. They found that First Ascent students
scored significantly higher in six of the eight life effectiveness dimensions – providing evidence for the beneficial effects of the First Ascent program. The authors state that the goals of this program are consistent with other pre-orientation programs, suggesting that their findings are generalizable. Indeed, a number of studies evaluating the efficacy of college wilderness orientation programs have been shown to positively affect the transition experiences of new college students (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2010; Bobilya, Akey, & Mitchell, 2011; Lien & Goldenberg, 2012). Compiling survey results from 57 pre-orientation wilderness programs, Galloway (2000) found evidence that these experiences positively impact students’ social integration, but there was little indication that they influenced academic readiness.

Alternative pre-orientation experiences offer pre-college programming that focus on academic integration and/or specific areas of study. Thompson & Consi (2007) reviewed and evaluated the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) pre-orientation initiative called Discover Engineering, which launched in 2002. The program was intended to provide incoming students with immersive experiences in the academic realm of engineering. MIT staff hoped to create a fun and memorable experience that exposed students to new topics of study and improved the quality of the freshman experience. Thompson & Consi compiled qualitative and quantitative assessment data to measure the results of the program from the first several years since its inception. They found that the opportunity to interact with student mentors and faculty members improved participants’ transition experiences, developed positive relationships, and increased student interests in engineering programs.

Acknowledging that readiness for college depends on a number of factors, some colleges offer summer bridge programs that are typically targeted to historically disadvantaged students believed to be at high-risk of attrition (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Lopez, 2016). These
programs frequently focus on academic preparation and social integration, while helping students develop the skills to succeed in the new college environment (Cabrera, et al., 2013). Mccurrie (2009) interviewed students participating in a summer bridge program and found that those students felt better prepared for college-level writing. However, during the second and third years in school (after progressing past remedial courses), summer bridge students withdrew at a higher rate than their peers. Conversely, Mcevoy (2012) found evidence that students participating in a bridge learning community were almost twice as likely to be retained, and more than twice as likely to graduate than their peers. These results related to grade achievement and positive retention have been confirmed by subsequent research (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Cabrera et al., 2013; Lopez, 2016). The body of research related to summer bridge programs suggests that historically disadvantaged students benefit from pre-college transition and integration programming to a greater degree than traditional, continuing-generation students.

The final relevant aspect of the pre-matriculation experience is prospective student participation in special events hosted by admissions departments. These programs are designed to help prospective or admitted students get a feel for a college campus and the educational experience while assisting enrollment management offices in maximizing yield opportunities. Examining these events through a retention lens, Goenner, Harris, & Pauls (2013) found evidence that students participating in college fairs, overnight visits, and welcome weekends were more less likely to stop-out after matriculation. The authors conclude by suggesting that colleges and universities could reduce interrupted enrollment rates by increasing and improving pre-matriculation interactions. It is necessary to acknowledge that both pre-orientation experiences and participation in admissions events are voluntary. Goenner et al. (2013) explicitly limit their findings by recognizing that students choosing to participate in these events very
likely exhibit higher levels of motivation, and consequently are intrinsically more likely to persist. In order to impact persistence across the board, it may therefore be necessary to develop mandatory programs and intervention strategies for students transitioning to college.

Some researchers have suggested that retention programming requires a higher reliance on individualized intervention, rather than (or in addition to) blanket programming for all students (Brown, 2012). Utilizing the term Success Challenge Programs to describe these initiatives, Pan, Guo, Alikonis, & Bai (2008) found that participation in early intervention programs enhances the likelihood of first-year retention. Additionally, referring to Tinto’s (1993) assessment of academic and social integration, the authors found that interactions with faculty, staff, and peers increased the odds of a second-semester return. Law (2014) presented an evaluation of a single-site orientation program targeting students scoring low on pre-college testing. The initiative focusing on intensive advising, constant personal contact, and referral to campus resources achieved nearly identical continued enrollment rates as higher-testing students in the same cohort. Law recommended that colleges establish early-warning systems designed to quickly identify at-risk students and provide them with personalized guidance and the tools to succeed on campus.

In summation, American institutions of higher education seem to understand the importance of reaching students early in their college careers. The transition from secondary to tertiary education can be extremely difficult, and the research indicates that administrators would be well-advised to work actively to socially and academically acclimate students to their new communities. Despite the diversity of programming and scope of topics, these early retention initiatives share common goals: to provide opportunities to establish social structures and relationships and build an emotional connection to an institution. Colleges and universities
should determine desired outcomes and tailor goals to their distinct institutions and student bodies. Barefoot (2004) suggested that the simple goal of student retention/persistence is far too broad, and consequently, ineffective. The retention conversation must center around a clearer understanding of non-returner experiences and action-based approaches that improve student learning and engagement. For the purposes of this study, the lessons learned from retention research may be directly relevant to the stop-out experience. These initiatives often focus on new student transitions and navigating the adjustment to college, which can be a major factor for stop-out students coming in-and-out of school. The foundations and frameworks of programs that successfully keep students in school may also increase the likelihood of a return from leave.

**Family involvement.** One of the major challenges for colleges and universities seeking to improve re-enrollment frequency of withdrawn students is that they are not physically present on campus, and thus more difficult to actively support. It is therefore important to consider potential at-home partners in the pursuit of re-enrollment. Currently, very little research touches on the role of parents during a leave from school. However, stop-out scholars do have access to a body of research related to investigating the general roles that parents play and how interactions with their students affect success.

Parent engagement is a topic that has received growing attention in research, college personnel associations, and publications focused on higher education (Mullendore & Banahan, 2007). College administrators may speak of challenges related to strained and complicated relationships with parents, particularly those perceived by staff as “helicopter parents” (Merriman, 2007). While it may be assumed that both parties should have the best interests of the student in mind, they may be at odds regarding how to achieve success on campus, and how parents should participate in the educational experience (Chapman, 2017; Harper, Sax, & Wolf,
2012). Recently, scholars have moved on from attitudes that parents were harmful or irrelevant when it comes to student success, to an interest in understanding the importance of family involvement (Harper et al., 2012; Tierney, 2002).

Harper et al. (2012) encouraged administrators to understand that parental involvement does not affect students in the same ways. They suggested that the effects of family relationships are conditional, and rely on factors like gender, race, socioeconomic class, and credits earned. Confirming this recommendation, Nichols & Islas (2016) compared differences between parents of first-generation students and continuing-generation students. They found that both groups of students relied on their parents during the first year of college, but with different support styles. Parental involvement for continuing-generation students was characterized as a “pull” that involves specific advice from their parents centered on their own experiences in college. Alternatively, parents of first-generation students were found to “push” through much more general words of encouragement. These findings confirm that social, cultural, and socioeconomic differences play an important part in student success. First-generation students reported higher levels of discomfort with interacting with faculty members. Under Tinto’s (1975) model, the apprehension to develop relationships with faculty can negatively impact academic and social integration, and subsequent persistence.

Although the nature of family relationships can be varied and complex, studies have shown that parents can significantly influence student behavior and motivation. Yazedjian, et al. (2007) found that parents’ emotional support was important for the mental well-being of college students. Maintaining a connection with their students and demonstrating care had positive impacts on their student’s experience at school. Kranstuber, Carr, and Hosek (2012) examined how specific parent messages affect outcomes related to student success and found that message
characteristics predicted college motivation and institutional satisfaction, among other outcomes. Finding that millennial students in emerging adulthood still value the opinions of their parents, Pizzolato & Hicklen (2011) channeled Tinto (1975) in theorizing that some students inhibit their transition to college by relying too heavily on parent support. However, their findings indicated that parental interactions focused on consultations are healthy interactions that do not foster harmful dependence behaviors. In agreement, Lefkowitz (2005) showed that the transition and adjustment to college plays a major role in shifting parent-child relationships to a more adult form of communication. Pizzolato et al. characterized this shift as a swing towards a higher degree of mutuality between college students and their parents.

Seeking to better understand how parents can actively participate in their students’ educations, the theory of shared agency has recently gained popularity in higher education research. In their conceptualization of the framework, Chang, Heckhausen, Greenberger, & Chen (2010) identify three distinct types of shared agency: accommodators, collaborators, and supporters. Accommodators actively allow their students to pursue their own preferences, collaborators engage in joint decision-making and discussions, and supporters utilize positive reinforcement to communicate shared ownership of goals. The authors briefly refer to the opposing non-shared agency behaviors of direction and un-involvement. The study confirmed that when students perceived (any of the three types of) shared agency with parents, they displayed positive indicators of academic adjustment. These students believed that their parents were partners in their education and subsequent goal achievement and that this relationship led to comparably higher levels of satisfaction with their academic progress and/or institution. Continuing with this work, Kriegbaum, Villarreal, Wu, & Heckhausen (2016) established that shared agency is defined by parents and students sharing academic goals and displaying dual
participation in achievement. This form of shared agency was associated with higher academic achievement, motivation, and less amotivation. Other research has also found that shared agency reflects a beneficial relationship between parents and students that improves academic outcomes and skill development while improving student motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). The results of these studies suggest that the theory of shared agency may be an effective model for educating parents on their role in college completion.

Colleges and universities have responded to increased numbers of parent interactions (Cullaty, 2011) by finding ways to engage parents in targeted programming and services (Cutright, 2008; Wartman & Savage, 2008). Boyd, Hunt, Hunt, Magoon, & Van Brunt (1997) developed a two-day program for parents interested in receiving training on serving as referral agents. Participants were provided with information on campus resources and given strategies to encourage their students to utilize services when faced with difficulties. Researchers measured both academic persistence and academic persistence in good standing (continued enrollment and the absence of negative academic actions like probation or academic warnings). They found that students of parents who completed the program displayed no statistically significant differences in academic persistence but did persist in good academic standing with higher frequency than students of non-participant parents. It may therefore be concluded that parents possessing knowledge of institutional support structures can positively impact their student’s academic performance.

Boyd et al. (1997) demonstrated that parents may be utilized as effective communication conduits between colleges and their students. Because students tend to believe that parents are strong stakeholders in their lives and academic successes, they are likely to place greater weight in the information originating from those sources (Wartman & Savage, 2008). Institutional
communications are not always the most effective method of transmitting important messages – relying on a partnership with parents can increase the efficacy of communication between the administration and the student body (Cutright, 2008). Colleges and universities need to decide what type of parent partnerships best result in student success.

The body of research in family and parent engagement consistently shows that students’ relatives can impact their academic performance and persistence, and that these individuals can serve as collaborative partners for student affairs and student support services. While none of this research focuses specifically at students taking a leave of absence from their studies, it may be useful for retention purposes to work to understand how parental and familial support systems affect stop-out student re-enrollment behaviors. Furthermore, researchers investigating stop-out students’ sense of integration while on-leave may benefit from understanding the nature of parental relationships with their at-college students. When the situation is reversed, and on-leave students are home, colleges seeking to encourage re-enrollment may take lessons from research related to college parent support strategies.

**Conclusion.** The rise of college and university initiatives to promote retention and completion demonstrate that many schools consider increased persistence to be a primary strategic objective. Research clearly support a number of theorizations set forth in Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist model of student departure. Early immersion and first-year orientation programs are intended to ease the transition to the new college environment, while providing immediate opportunities for academic and social integration. These initiatives also commonly focus on the development of relationships – emphasizing the value of establishing student-faculty connections, peer social structures, and capitalizing on family support systems. The findings
provided by inquiries into effective retention strategies and programs served to frame this study examining stop-out students’ on-leave interactions with their campus communities.

**Interactions and Relationships**

The building of relationships with faculty, staff, and peers is a primary component of Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) longitudinal model of student departure. A number of retention studies have found evidence supporting Tinto’s emphasis on the development of connections and institutional commitment when determining persistence (Huff & Burek, 2016; Pan et al., 2008; Thompson & Consi, 2007). Although many of the studies covered in the following section do not relate their findings directly to retention, they do find evidence for factors within his model that affect persistence behaviors. As the central focus of this study, and a heavily researched topic, the following review will provide a summary of current research on the impacts of student interactions and relationships.

**Faculty and staff interactions.** A college or university community including individuals with diverse interests, backgrounds, and functions within the organization provides an environment rife with the opportunity to build relationships. This may be particularly important for incoming first-year students who are likely leaving a familiar support structure and entering into a completely different and relatively unfamiliar situation. The benefits of relationship-building aspects of first-year programming were covered in the previous section, but additional research unrelated to formal orientation practices seeks to identify links between faculty interactions and student success outcomes. Drake (2011) asserted that faculty advising provides an opportunity for each new student to develop a close and consistent relationship to an individual who (if practiced properly) cares about the student. Yazedjian et al. (2007) found that an important factor in facilitating college adjustment was giving students reasons to believe that
faculty were friendlier and more student-centered than at other institutions. Generally speaking, this study concluded that establishing connections with institutional staff or faculty helped freshman students adjust to the college environment. Participants in this study however, also reported that they were aware of campus support resources, but often did not take advantage of these services. Some felt that the institution under study simply provided information on college resources and left it to students to access them. Tarun (2011), also investigating first-year integration, determined that students found comfort in working with a familiar faculty member and credited those advisers with directing them to become involved and utilize support resources. These studies demonstrate that it may be more likely for students to pursue support services if they are referred by an individual with whom they have some level of rapport.

Academic advising, in its many forms, is a heavily utilized strategy for the promotion of student success (Girves, Zepeda, & Gwathmey, 2005). No matter the institution type, makeup of the student body, or community characteristics, researchers and administrators consistently link advising to persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). When students and advisers are committed to the development of the relationship, those students tend to earn higher first-semester GPAs and demonstrate lower first-year attrition (Chiteng Kot, 2014). Colleges however practice very different methods of advising, with varying quality outcomes. In fact, Coll (2008) found that the style of advising affects student satisfaction and retention to a greater degree than student background and characteristics. In terms of advising efficacy, Lillis (2011) evaluated student-faculty interactions to better understand retention behaviors. He determined that frequency of contact and faculty members’ levels of emotional intelligence impacted the influence they wielded over attrition intentions of their students. Similarly, Harrison (2009) identified authenticity and accountability as the most important characteristics of an effective
advisor. These studies agree in the determination that non-classroom interactions grounded in a genuine care for students significantly enhanced the quality of the adviser-advisee relationship. For this reason, other research suggests that institutions could do more to provide faculty advisers with skills-training and materials to improve the attainment of advising program outcomes (Lowe & Toney, 2000; Titus & Ballou, 2013).

It may be assumed that the classroom and formal advising models are the most logical venues for faculty-student interactions. However, building informal relationships outside of the classroom can positively impact multiple factors related to student success, including retention (Lillis, 2011; Pompper, 2006; Tinto, 1975). Cotten & Wilson (2006) looked at the interactions between faculty and students and found that out-of-classroom interactions yielded positive benefits for students and the institution. Utilizing semi-structured qualitative interviews with students, researchers drew a number of conclusions related to student-faculty interactions. As a result of misunderstanding faculty boundaries and time constraints, students reported feeling uncomfortable with initiating out-of-class contact. As a result, outside of strong student-faculty relationships, these interactions occurred infrequently. Additional findings suggested that students felt more positively that someone from the institution valued their thoughts, felt more connected to the community, and were more academically motivated as a result of faculty interactions. Based on these responses, Cotten and Wilson recommended that faculty attempt to balance the nature of these interactions between the academic and the social. They encouraged faculty to show personality and a sense of humor in order to build rapport, and avoid short, transactional, traditional advising meetings. The researchers suggested that colleges and universities should seek to improve advising strategies by increasing not only the frequency, but the value and depth of student-faculty interactions. Jaasma & Koper (2009) further found
evidence that the effectiveness of out-of-class communications between faculty and students relies on the balance between trust, frequency of interactions, and the student perception of instructor behaviors. Additionally, this study concluded that effective out-of-class communications affects academic motivation.

Colleges and universities interested in providing opportunities for student-faculty interaction frequently consider mentorship as a useful framework. Mentorship, as defined by Sheridan, Murdoch, & Harder (2014), requires interactions between individuals with differing levels of experience, using formal or informal structures to achieve growth. Faculty advising and mentorship are sometimes used synonymously, and there is a clear interplay between the terms. However, advising may be thought of as a direct (and sometimes required) function of the faculty, whereas mentorship refers to the nature of the relationship (Titus & Ballou, 2013). Mentors may be academic advisers, and advisers may develop a mentoring relationship with their students. The faculty mentor-mentee relationship has received abundant scholarly attention as schools attempt to understand the most productive mentoring models.

In an effort to examine effective faculty mentorship models and programs, Fuentes, Ruiz Alvarado, Berdan, & DeAngelo (2014) compiled results from three widely-utilized survey questionnaires distributed to college students. Data from The Freshmen Survey, Your First College Year, and the College Senior Survey were collected between 2006-2011. The researchers questioned if early faculty contact lead to productive mentoring relationships later in a student’s college career. They confirmed their hypothesis and found that establishing a connection early in a student’s first semester lead to more beneficial faculty connections, whether with that specific professor or with others. Early contact also helped students make the shift to college academics and develop social structures on campus.
Although much of the current mentorship research centers on academic achievement, the cultivation of institutional commitment through mentorship may have an equally impactful effect on persistence. Campbell, Smith, Dugan, and Komives (2012) compared different types of mentorships on a college campus and found that they each yielded unique results. Relationships with student affairs staff members tend to emphasize identity development and formation of socially responsible leadership skills. Faculty tended to base interactions on academic advisement and only occasionally progressed to deeper mentoring relationships. Though these results might be attributed to differences in roles and expertise, they indicate that institutional relationships built on foundations of personal development tend to be strong. Sheridan, Hubbard Murdoch, & Harder (2015) surveyed faculty and staff mentors and found that the availability of education and training opportunities received the lowest scores when evaluating mentorship practices. Similar to the identification of weaknesses in advising structures (Lowe & Toney, 2000; Titus & Ballou, 2013), participants provided feedback that mentorship models lacked infrastructure and clarity in stated purposes and outcomes. Because mentoring relationships are strong predictors for intention to persist past the first semester of college (Baier, Markman, & Pernice-Duca, 2016), institutions should consider more formalized structures for these practices. With this in mind, it is important that colleges and universities leave some flexibility in these processes. Bernier, Larose, & Soucy (2005) warn administrators against assuming that all mentorships are equally useful for all students. Requiring students to invest significant time and energy into these interactions could have detrimental effects if students and faculty fail to connect in meaningful ways. The implications of Bernier et al. provide insight into possible negative consequences of on-leave interactions with stop-out students. It may be theorized that overbearing communications could make for decreased interest in re-enrollment.
Focusing completely on classified staff interactions with students, Schmitt & Duggan (2011) used interviews, observations, and focus groups to gather information on how employees interact with students. Following an analysis of qualitative data, they found three common themes related to student-classified staff interactions:

1. **Classified staff members address a broad range of student needs** – participants reported wide variance in length of interactions and topic of initial inquiry. One staff member simply hoped that students came away feeling like they received helpful information,

2. **Classified staff members recognize that students have personal barriers that hinder goal achievement** – participants acknowledged that different students manage very different issues.

3. **Classified staff members contribute to the educational process** – participants reported feeling responsible for providing students with the information to achieve their goals. They often spent time explaining policies and procedures, as well as the consequences for failing to follow them.

Schmitt and Duggan conclude that each and every interaction can affect the success and satisfaction of students. Colleges and universities that acknowledge this are better suited to set clear expectations for the promotion of positive exchanges between the institution and its students. If students can expect help and care from all college constituencies, institutions can expect positive changes to student success and retention rates. This research shows that when it comes to relationships and student interactions, simple efforts can build positive associations between students and schools.
Insofar as the stop-out student experience, little is known about the effect of maintaining connections with institutional contacts while students are away from school. Research suggests that encouragement from mentors or advisers could positively impact re-enrollment behaviors, particularly if those individuals have established quality relationships with stop-outs. It is further important for institutions to acknowledge that stop-out students (depending on their personality traits, support systems, motivation, etc.) may hesitate to initiate the return process on their own. Tarun’s (2011) findings emphasized the importance of familiarity when it came to strategies for encouraging students to seek help. They were much more likely to do so if referred by an individual with a previously-established positive relationship. If, as Schmitt & Duggan (2011) demonstrated, simple gestures of helpfulness and care can yield positive outcomes, sustained communication from specific community members could be an avenue for institutions to increase withdrawn student retention.

Peer social structures. According to Tinto (1975), student interactions with their peers are a crucial factor in predicting academic success and persistence. Although his model emphasized the importance of student involvement, Tinto (1993) put forth that the day-to-day informal personal communications and experiences between students have the greatest impact on social integration and institutional congruence. Confirming research has found that social connectedness with peers develops a sense of belonging within smaller social structures, but also with the college environment (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Turner & Thompson, 2014).

Seeking to better understand the steps colleges can take in helping students connect with each other, Bai & Pan (2009) assessed four different types of retention interventions (advising, academic help, first-year experience, and social integration) being used at a single university. They found that different students demonstrated very different outcomes from participation in
the same interventions but established that social integration programs were particularly effective during the first year of college. Silver Wolf, Perkins, Butler-Barnes, & Walker (2017) tested a social-belonging intervention and found that it was correlated with a statistically significant increase in GPA. Though this study did not directly measure the intervention’s impact on retention behaviors, because GPA has been shown to positively affect persistence (Horn, 1998; Johnson, 2006; McGrath & Braunstein, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stewart et al., 2015), it is fair to conclude that they found a demonstrable indirect link to retention. Research has also shown that students of color attending predominantly white institutions have a more urgent need to develop social structures quickly (Baker & Robnett, 2012; Fischer, 2007; Tinto, 1993). For that reason, Marciano (2017) suggested that culturally-relevant college adjustment initiatives provide imperative opportunities for students to connect and seek support from students with whom they have a greater level of initial comfort.

Peer mentorship is frequently utilized as a relationship-focused retention practice during first-year orientation and seminar programs (Astin, 1999; Kiyama & Luca, 2014; Tinto, 1975). Ward, Thomas, & Disch (2012) adopted a holistic understanding of peer mentorship and identified a number of themes resulting from an analysis of qualitative data provided by mentors and mentees. Among those themes, connectedness to others generally described social integration, and referred to comfort and confidence in making new friends, overcoming shyness or antisocial tendencies, and developing a desire to participate in more campus activities. In 2014, Ward, Thomas, & Disch expanded on this work and found that peer mentor service was most frequently related to the provision of guidance and emotional availability or supportiveness. Importantly, they found that quality peer mentors had the time and ability to respond to the distinct, personal needs of their mentees. In this role, the authors suggest that mentors should
consider themselves as “sensitive instruments” (p. 576). Kiyama & Luca (2014) examined the mutual benefits of the peer mentor-mentee relationship and found that participation in either side of the relationship aided retention. They theorized that mentors received abundant training in skills-building and familiarity with campus resources, positively impacting their own abilities and access to support services. In the case of this study on stop-out student interactions, peer mentorship research provides an understanding of the possible impacts of maintaining a communicative relationship with a trusted peer.

An important piece of college adjustment for many students is the transition to living on campus in residence halls while cohabitating with many new peers. Research shows that residential students benefit from deeper and more frequent social interactions that give them a retention advantage over off-campus commuter students (Schudde, 2011). Tinto (1993) acknowledged the importance of living on campus (ideally with roommates), and theorized that dormitories combat social isolation, provide opportunities for interactions, and create smaller, more intimate social groups that help students become comfortable with new surroundings. Similarly, Kuh et al. (2008) found that commuter students earned lower GPAs and were less likely to persist than their on-campus counterparts. For the purposes of this study, residency status is generally irrelevant when investigating stop-out students’ on-leave experiences. However, the research focusing on the benefits of living on campus indicates that students who spend more time away from campus are at higher risk of social isolation and receive fewer opportunities to socially integrate. This presents a problem for researchers seeking to address re-enrollment behaviors and reinforces the need to better understand how stop-outs interact with their campus communities.
Conclusion. Tinto (1993) suggests that students fail to achieve academic and social integration when they are socially isolated and/or lack a sense of institutional fit. Isolation results from insufficient interactions and the subsequent absence of supportive relationships. Institutional fit, or congruence, is also related to interactions, and refers to a student’s perceptions about their institution, and the ways they experience a sense of belonging. Isolation and incongruence are, according to Tinto, clear causes of student attrition with a clear solution – the development of opportunities for frequent and quality interactions that may lead to meaningful relationships. Stop-out students typically do not have access to on-campus resources, residence halls, or student activities while they are away from school. In this case, communication with college community members may represent the only opportunity for pursuing continued integration and commitment to an institution.

Summary

The body of higher education research covered in this review summarizes current knowledge on the student stop-out experience, commonly-utilized retention initiatives, and the impacts of interactions and relationships with individuals within a college community. The material covered provides this study with a basis for understanding the factors that impact the decision to leave school, as well as basic implications for experiences affecting re-enrollment. Colleges and universities invest heavily in retention initiatives but seem to place little effort into encouraging stop-outs to come back to finish their degrees. This study endeavored to understand the interactions between stop-out students and their campus community in order to determine impacts on re-enrollment and institutional commitment. The literature covered in this review indicates that Tinto’s (1975) interactionalist theory of student departure was an appropriate framework for the purpose and setting of this study.
Chapter Three: Research Design

In response to the problem of stop-out student attrition, this research sought to examine the ways in which stop-outs at a four-year college interact with their campus community while away from school. Collection of qualitative data focused on how stop-out experiences affect commitment to the institution and re-enrollment behaviors. Student interactions, the primary phenomenon of study, were defined by Tinto’s (1975) student departure model that emphasizes students’ interactions with faculty, staff, and their peers. The following question guided the research and sought to bring meaning to the problem:

How do interactions with their college community while on leave affect stop-out students’ institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors?

This chapter will summarize the philosophical assumptions and chosen research methodology guiding this study. A detailed plan for data collection, analysis, and interpretation will be provided. This section will conclude with an evaluation of important ethical considerations, including questions related to researcher bias, credibility, transferability, and study limitations.

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research utilizes philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks to investigate a problem related to human or social behaviors and issues (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This method of inquiry is philosophically grounded in the constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm. The constructivist position relies on an assumption that reality is a construct that relies on subjective interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005). Essentially, constructivist scholars seek understanding through the discovery of knowledge. This hermeneutical approach is based on discovery guided by open-ended inquiries. Data is collected in a natural setting, meaning that
researchers typically collect data through examination of documents, observation, and interactions with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The acquisition of knowledge is highly dependent on both the participants’ perspectives and the researcher’s interpretation of the collected information. Because the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm maintains that multiple realities exist depending on the perspective and experience of the individual (Ponterotto, 2005), qualitative research is highly dependent on the context defining the phenomenon of study. Qualitative researchers, therefore, strive to develop a holistic understanding of a problem to better ascribe specific meaning to their findings.

This research employed the qualitative case study (QCS) approach to better understand the experiences of stop-out students at a single institution. The QCS method differs from other qualitative research strategies in that there are a number of epistemological approaches that provide opportunities for varying QCS frameworks. In general, each of these methods represents an investigative attempt to answer “how” or “why” questions, often seeking to determine causal relationships (Yin, 2014). QCS researchers collect information about a problem from a variety of sources, and attempt to explore or describe a phenomenon within a specific context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Where phenomenology seeks to understand a set of circumstances, QCS pursues explanations. According to Baxter & Jack, QCS studies allow researchers to explore individuals or organizations by collecting data that informs the interplay between people, communities, systems, and processes, in order to understand a specific phenomenon or phenomena. In addition to answering “how” or “why” questions, Yin puts forth that QCS is appropriate when participants’ behaviors cannot be modified, when researchers endeavor to include contextual conditions that are relevant to the problem, and/or when the boundaries between issue and context are unclear.
It is important to understand what a “case” really is when thinking about QCS. Miles & Huberman (1994) suggest that a case should be thought of as a certain phenomenon (which becomes the topic of a study) that occurs in a clearly-defined context. A case can simply be understood as a researcher’s “unit of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). Depending on the design of a study, QCS can involve multiple cases with a focus on understanding and analyzing different setting, or a single case involving one individual or own set of individuals (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case for this research was an individual stop-out student’s on-leave experience from the institution serving as research site.

Approaches to QCS also vary depending on the philosophical foundation of the researcher. Many QCS researchers (Baxter & Jack, 2008; De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Tetnowski, 2015; Wrona & Gunnesch, 2016) adopt some form of Yin’s (2014) three classifications of case-study design: the descriptive (seeking to describe a phenomenon), the exploratory (seeking to understand a phenomenon more deeply), and the explanatory (seeking to establish and understand causal relationships). The phenomenon at current study was the interactions between stop-out students and their college communities while they are away from school. Though there were exploratory factors influencing this research, because it sought to understand how the phenomenon may affect institutional commitment and re-enrollment, it is most accurate to describe this work as an explanatory case study. Alternatively, Stake (1995) classified QCS research into three categories: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. For this research, cases were understood as stop-out students’ on-leave experiences. Because this study investigated commonalities and inconsistencies between cases within the defined context, this study was collective in nature. Combining Yin’s and Stake’s classifications of QCS research, the researcher approached this work as an explanatory collective case study.
The intended outcomes and focus of this study were congruent with the characteristics of QCS research. Rather than simply understanding the student stop-out experience, the research sought to explain the impacts of a phenomenon – on-leave interactions at a single small college. Under the theoretical framework provided by Tinto (1975), the specific context, including institutional characteristics, pre-existing relationships, and community practices influenced the effects of the phenomenon on the issue. In order to gain a complete contextual picture, data was collected from several sources, through different means. Both participants and the researcher played a role in the acquisition of information with emphases on perspectives (related to the context) and interpretations (of collected data).

**Seminal QCS approaches.** Despite a large number of potential approaches and scholars contributing to developing various QCS designs, Robert Stake (1995) and Robert Yin (2014) are often credited as the primary drivers of QCS methodology. Given the nature of QCS, each researcher utilizing the framework must reflect on their own epistemological tendencies, amount of existing research in the topic of interest, nature of the research question, data sources, and consider a number of other factors when selecting a framework for loose emulation. It may be safe to say that QCS researchers are responsible for the customization and alteration of an existing methodology. Stake and Yin do however offer frequently-cited foundational bases for the development of QCS research designs. The following summaries will focus on the philosophical bases and structures of each scholar’s research designs.

*Robert Stake. The Art of Case Study Research*, (1995), established Stake as an early advocate of QCS and architect of a widely-studied methodology. Stake’s interpretation of QCS is based on constructivism (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013; Yazan, 2015) – where knowledge and reality are socially constructed and researchers seek to
describe or understand phenomena through the collection of (typically) qualitative data (Wrona & Gunnesch, 2016). Cases are defined as “bounded systems” (Stake, 2005) whose bounds allow researchers to identify characteristics or features within the system, and characteristics or features outside that system (Laws & McLeod, 2004) in order to better understand a phenomenon. Under Stake’s guidelines, the researcher starts only with an idea of the issues and respective issue questions that provide a conceptual focus for the inquiry.

Keeping with standards of qualitative inquiry, Stake-ian researchers interact directly with the phenomenon, and participate in the collection of information (Boblin et al., 2013). They serve as interpreters of this information and gatherers of others’ interpretations of factors influencing the phenomenon (Yazan, 2015). They are simply responsible for reporting their interpretations of the knowledge they gain through their work. This work is comprised of the assembling and analysis of rich, think, qualitative data (Snyder, 2012). Stake’s (1995) design is defined by an adherence to qualitative data collection and a flexible structure that allows for a truly open, constructivist philosophical framework.

Robert Yin. Now in its fifth addition, Yin’s (2014) interpretation of QCS proposes a methodology based on post-positivist assumptions of reality and knowledge. Contrasting Stake’s (1995) flexible design, Yin relies on a tightly-structured method that provides meticulous guidelines for the QCS research process. Yin’s approach begins with a general research interest that informs the purpose and design of the study (Tetnowski, 2015). His method is highlighted by the logical sequencing that connects empirical data to research questions and conclusions (Yazan, 2015). Researchers are expected to develop their designs early in the inquiry process and firmly adhere to their initial frameworks (with an openness to minor changes). In many Yin-ian QCS works, an important step in the research design process is the development of propositions.
Propositions should further bind a study and provide direction and scope for the collection of data and conceptual structure. In other words, propositions are statements made by researchers that attempt to predict possible outcomes of the exploration and contribute to the development of a study’s conceptual framework. They provide an opportunity for confirmation and falsification (Boblin, et al., 2013), and often serve as a point of reference for QCS researchers seeking to maintain consistency.

Yin’s (2014) post-positivist leanings and expectations for structured inquiry emphasize the importance of prioritizing the quality, validity, and reliability of research. Some scholars (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013) utilize the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that lists credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as measures by which to determine research quality or rigor. Yin himself focuses on validity and reliability and puts forth that researchers should attempt to honor those criteria by building consistent and cohesive procedures. Yin believes that QCS researchers must be concerned with control and adherence to design – a stance that starkly contrasts with Stake’s (1995) preference for open and flexible inquiry with researchers directly involved in the discovery of knowledge.

**Scholarly debate and criticisms of QCS.** Given the lack of a standardized structure of QCS research, there are multiple layers of debate related to the approach. Key contributing scholars including Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) acknowledge the disparities between different QCS methodologies and write to increase the availability of guidance for potential case study scholars. It is important to note that it may be more accurate to acknowledge difference between QCS approaches, rather than treating divergence as a debate. In determining the specific case study framework for their study, Boblin, et al. (2013) stated that their decision to utilize Stake
(1995) was based on “our combined consideration of the intent of the research and our philosophical orientation.” (p. 1268). Selection of an approach should therefore depend on the researcher’s own epistemological tendencies and the nature of the inquiry. Neither Stake nor Yin have been universally accepted as the right way to do QCS research, and each has their own strengths and weaknesses, depending on the context of the case and phenomena under study.

Stake’s (1995) framework is most often criticized as too lacking in structure (Boblin, et al., 2013). This problem begins with the definitions of “case” and “case study” – some critics claim that under Stake’s definition, the looseness of his structure allows for anything to be a case and any research to be a case study. Tight (2010) goes as far as to suggest that case study research is sometimes used as a label for research that simply lacks format. The danger here is that Stake’s flexible design opens up the door for significant researcher bias. Though Stake-ian QCS scholars intend on approaching their research with openness, Wrona and Gunnesch (2016) assert that the blank slate approach is unrealistic. Beginning with only “issues” (rather than with propositions) might therefore lend to a bias towards verification – where researchers’ preconceived (but un-acknowledged) notions related to their issues drives their work in an unnatural direction. Compounding these problems, Stake’s method has also been criticized as giving little attention to ensuring the quality of research in terms of reliability and validity (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010; De Massis & Kotlar, 2014; Noor, 2008). On the other hand, Boblin, et al. (2013) focused on a more heuristic approach to their research, frequently finding that participants were providing them with perspective that they had simply not considered prior to their interviews. While his method may not satisfy the expectations of some postpositivist-leaning scholars, Stake’s flexibility and emphasis on open data collection and research design allows for those moments of unexpected discovery.
Yin’s (2014) approach, emphasizing consistency, cohesion, and the pursuit of research rigour may protect him from the critiques targeting Stake’s (1995) method. However, some researchers worry that his rigid standards for staying the course of the preconstructed research design might constrain the collection and analysis of data that might otherwise provide rich insight into a phenomenon (Boblin, et al., 2013). It does appear reasonable to assume that the process of developing propositions to understand a case could cause verification biases. Constructivist qualitative scholars may also assert that the use of propositions in Yin’s method integrates extant theory too early on in the research process, and that preexisting theory should primarily be taken into consideration following the collection of data.

In addition to the questions surrounding each major approach to QCS, the general, overarching case study method draws debate from critics. The lack of standardization of QCS allows for the development of a number of diverse approaches to inquiry, but also creates challenges. Because there is no set method for understanding QCS, there are no clear ways to determine research quality (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014, p. 15). Although Yin (2014) attempts to address quality issues with his emphasis on consistency throughout his design, scholars continue to consider QCS as lacking in scientific rigour and reliability. Critics also commonly claim that QCS research may not be generalizable (Noor, 2008; Tight, 2010) because any knowledge or understanding gained is applicable or relevant only within the boundaries of the case. For this reason, assertions are made that QCS cannot contribute to theoretical development. If this is the true, case study is capable of generating hypotheses, but should not be considered the ideal method for testing, verification/falsification, or creating or assessing theory. Noor (2008) responds to the generalizability problem by suggesting that although findings are specific to the context of the case, they can lead to replication and a subsequent deeper collective understanding
of broad issues. Other scholars suggest that quality case study research should honor the reality under investigation, and not worry about generalizability. Flyvbjerg (2004) even asserts that quality QCS studies should read like narratives. In this way, QCS research excels in developing holistic perspectives on the phenomena under investigation.

**QCS Framework for Current Study**

This research investigating stop-out student experiences was structured in general congruence with Stake’s (1995) approach to QCS research. The research question guiding this study reflected the researcher’s interest in a general issue at a single institution – the problem of stop-out student attrition. As a collective case study, the researcher sought to understand each case on an individual basis in order to identify potential contextual links between cases (Grandy, 2010). Prior to the completion of this study, the researcher and the institution had a limited understanding of the frequency, scope, and value of on-leave interactions. It was therefore most appropriate to think of the intent of this study as an explanatory case study intent on understanding the phenomenon under a defined context, the setting of the study. Stake’s open-ended and flexible framework provided this study with an opportunity to understand a potential causal relationship. However, the nature and extent of that relationship were, prior to the collection and analysis of data, entirely unclear. For that reason, the researcher was in no position to develop and test hypotheses (or propositions). It was more appropriate to work towards a holistic understanding of the issue within the context of the college in order to discover meaningful insights that explained stop-out students’ behaviors and experiences.

The choice to emulate Stake’s (1995) QCS approach shaped the lines of interview questions, types of data collection, and the analysis of information. Semi-structured interviews were guided by a number of open-ended questions intended to tease out experiences and
perspectives related to the issue under investigation. Questioning framed the intent to understand each individual case in order to identify commonalities that could explain the issue within the specific context (Stake, 1995). Other data sources were triangulated with interview transcripts to provide additional information related to the case. The aggregated data was analyzed to develop holistic, rich descriptions of cases and identify themes from the data that informed the interplay between on-leave interactions, institutional commitment, and re-enrollment behaviors.

Site and Participants

The chosen research site was a small private liberal arts institution located just outside of Baltimore, Maryland. At the time of this study, approximately 1500 undergraduate students were actively pursuing baccalaureate degrees at Goucher College in a wide range of disciplines ("Facts & Stats," 2017). Students choose from 33 majors and/or concentrations in pre-med or pre-law but may also work with their faculty advisors to develop their own direction of study ("Facts & Stats," 2017). Goucher prides itself on one-on-one interactions and individualized student support. Average class size sits at 17, with a student-faculty ratio of 10:1 ("Facts & Stats," 2017). A heavily residential campus, nine out of ten undergraduates reside in Delany residence halls (Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2017). First-year students with permanent addresses greater than 30 miles from the college are required to live on campus. Through a curriculum that reflects the philosophies and values of the liberal arts, the Goucher community strives to promote a global perspective and requires that undergraduates study abroad at least once before graduating – the first college in the country to do so ("Study Abroad,” 2017). Goucher utilizes an academic forgiveness policy for early-semester withdrawals (before the tenth week of class) and mid-semester withdrawals for medical or compassionate reasons. Leaves of absence may be taken for a maximum of two semesters, with an option to petition for extended
leave. Students electing to stop-out are understood as intending to return in the future. There were no formal or standardized processes or practices related to interactions between stop-outs and faculty or staff. The level, depth, frequency, and significance of peer interactions with on-leave students was unknown.

The participants in this study were undergraduate degree-seeking students attending Goucher College who returned to the institution following a period of interrupted enrollment. The sample population included 17 students enrolled in classes for the fall 2017 semester ranging in age from 19-27. Of these students, in the fall 2017 semester, seven lived in on-campus residences, and ten lived off-campus. The nature of the stop-out process varied, with students returning from mid-semester withdrawals, leaves of absence, and official withdrawals from the college.

This population was selected using a simple method of purposive sampling. Given the size of the institution, it was very likely that a suitably-sized sample population would only be filled if all students returning from an interrupted enrollment experience were included. Therefore, the researcher coordinated with the Office of the Registrar to compile a list of all students expected to return to Goucher College for the fall 2017 semester. Of those students, 17 were actively enrolled at the beginning of the academic year and those individuals were invited to participate in this study. Recruitment communications were sent via email to the 17 students qualifying for this study. Emails outlined the purpose of the study, sample selection process, researcher contact information, and expected commitment of time.

1. Initial email (see Appendix A) introduced researcher, briefly outlined the purpose of the study, and established expected commitment of time. Students that were interested in
participating in this study were asked to respond to the researcher directly with contact information and preferred meeting times.

2. Students responding to the message indicating that they were interested received a response email (see Appendix B) with more detailed information about the study. This message included the informed consent form (see Appendix C) and interview guide (see Appendix D) as attachments. The researcher also proposed a meeting date and time (based on preferences provided by the participant).

Follow-up interviews with faculty, staff, or peers named by stop-out participants as individuals with whom they interacted while on leave were also coordinated through similar email recruitment messaging.

1. Initial email (see Appendix E) introduced researcher, briefly outlined the purpose of the study, and established expected commitment of time. Individuals that were interested in participating in this study were asked to respond to the researcher directly with contact information and preferred meeting times.

2. Individuals responding to message indicating that they were interested received a response email (see Appendix F) with more detailed information about the study. This message included the informed consent form (see Appendix G) and interview guide (see Appendix H) as attachments. The researcher also proposed a meeting date and time (based on preferences provided by the participant).

In qualitative research, purposive sampling is often used to identify individuals or groups who are familiar with or have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2013). Samples should represent the individuals who are most likely to
provide rich accounts, thick descriptions, and detailed explanations related to the issue (Curtis, et al., 2014). It is generally understood that predicting participation rates is extremely difficult prior to the data collection phase of research (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015), but the target range for this research reflected the study’s aims and assumptions. QCS research strives towards a holistic understanding of a case within its context, a process that requires the collection and triangulation of several sources and types of data. It follows that interview-based research requires a limited sample size in order to engage in intensive analyses (Robinson, 2014) and collective interpretation of data. For these reasons, the target participation range for this sample population (17) was set at 4 – 12. At this range, contextually-limited cross-case themes could be identified, while the constructivist-interpretivist philosophical assumptions related to data-richness remained. In QCS research, despite the pursuit of cross-case themes, it is vital for researchers to preserve distinct participant voices (Robinson & Smith, 2010). For the purposes of this research, seeking active participation from 4 – 12 re-enrolled students was both appropriate and practical.

**Procedures**

The following sections outline the methods through which the researcher sought to answer the research question. Data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted according to the guidelines presented below. Stake (1995) contended that qualitative case study data collection and analysis are ongoing and constant practices from the onset of the inquiry. These procedures reflect his philosophy that QCS researchers should remain open to straying from intended research designs, if those decisions are supported by reliable information and/or the discovery of compelling insights.
**Data collection.** A consistent characteristic of data collection in QCS is the use of multiple sources of information. The flexibility embedded in Stake’s (1995) methodology requires that researchers are skilled in “sensitivity and skepticism” (Stake, 1995, p. 50) and engage in careful reflection related to understanding what constitutes reliable data. Though Yin (2014) advocates for the inclusion of deep quantitative data collection in QCS studies, Stake relies primarily on methods of qualitative research, especially interviewing. This is not to say that Stake strictly rejects any inclusion of basic quantitative information, it simply reflects the constructivist-interpretivist stance that perceptions shape reality and knowledge. This data collection process, therefore, is one that allows for the continued refinement and understanding of the initial issues under study.

This research relied primarily on data collected from stop-out participants and individuals identified as on-leave contacts using a three-interaction interview plan. The first interaction described the study in detail, answered any participant questions, obtained informed consent (see Appendices C & G), and (in the case of stop-out participants) requested the completion of a short background and demographic questionnaire. Immediately following the completion of the initial interaction, the second interaction commenced with semi-structured, in-depth conversations adhering to interview guides (see Appendices D & H). Interview questioning was generally open-ended, with allowances for significant flexibility in conversation to allow participants to tell their stories in their own ways. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed using a transcription service, and stored in an electronic database. In order to piece together a more complete picture of each case, faculty and staff members identified by student participants as on-leave communicators were invited to participate in an interview of their own. Following the conclusion of the semi-structured interview, the researcher asked stop-out participants for
permission to invite faculty/staff/peer contacts to participate in this study. Stop-out participants had complete control over this process. Individual permission was required in order for the researcher to extend any invitations to participate. In order to limit the number of student peer participants, if a stop-out participant identified several student contacts, the researcher requested that the stop-out participant recommend a maximum of two students to invite to the study, based on the frequency and depth of their interactions. Limiting the number of peer follow-up interviews was necessary to bind this study and the scope of the collection of data. The final interaction took place after audio recordings were transcribed into written documents. This final step involved providing participants with the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and request modifications or clarifications.

As is the case for many QCS studies, interviews served as the foundational source of data for this study. In-depth interviewing, as described by Yin (2014), refers to a strategy that requests facts, but also participant opinions, and proposals of explanatory insights into the phenomenon of study. In-depth interviewing also allows for respondents to suggest other relevant individuals who might contribute to the study. In this way, stop-out student participants in this study were considered to be both interviewees and informants. Stake’s (1995) flexible method of QCS research allows for these improvisations related to data collection. Generally speaking, case study interviews provide insights into the issue or problem, while offering a heuristic potential that allows for participants to influence the direction of the inquiry. However, Yin warns that researchers take care in remembering that interviews are merely verbal reports that are subject to bias, memory gaps, and inaccuracies. Triangulation of data from varying sources is therefore an important strategy in checking bias and preserving data reliability.
QCS principles of developing broad pictures of the context surrounding the phenomenon of study requires the inclusion of different types and sources of data. For this study, organizational data, communication documents, and limited student demographics will supplement the collection of interview-based data. The researcher examined multiple sets of data provided by the Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Office of the Registrar. Specific data sets included general retention/attrition statistics and involved the creation of a data set establishing re-enrollment rates of students expected to return for given semesters. These data contributed expanded understanding of the context of cases and the setting of this case study. Institutional quantitative data sets are stable, precise, and can cover extended periods of time (Yin, 2014). These data are also typically not products of the research, thereby eliminating a level of influence and bias of the current researcher. Organizational data tend to be trustworthy sources of information, but, for QCS research investigating human behaviors, they offer little in the depth of analysis. Inferences drawn solely from quantitative data lack context, experiential factors, and descriptions of the perceptions of individuals included in those data sets. For that reason, these data were merely utilized to explain context and supplement inferences drawn from other sources. The inclusion of student demographics also carried the same strengths and shortcomings of organizational data. A limited number of identifying questions (see Appendix J) were asked of stop-out participants to determine if this study was limited by the sample’s demographic information. Finally, the researcher requested communication documents (that were expected to be primarily email or text messages) from stop-out participants for inclusion in the study. The researcher explained that these documents were to be used to shed light on content, tone, and delivery of on-leave messages and provide an opportunity to evaluate their impacts on institutional commitment and re-enrollment beyond participants’ verbal reports.
While it was expected that this information would paint a reliable picture of interactions, participants could find it difficult to retrieve them, or simply elect to withhold them (Yin, 2014). Participants able and willing to submit communications were asked to send screenshots or forward email messages to the researcher. These communications were immediately moved to the password-protected online database. In order to allow stop-out student participants to control the submission of communication documents, faculty, staff, and student peer participants were not asked to provide any communications for inclusion in this study.

**Data analysis.** The overarching purpose of data analysis for QCS is the compilation of different kinds of information in an effort to build a comprehensive representation of collected material. Merriam (1998) suggests simply that this is a sense-making process. Unlike Yin (2014), Stake’s (1995) method honors the issues that were expressed early in the research process, he does not require strict adherence to them or recommend revisiting issues to establish their correctness. There are no attempts at verification or falsification, but Stake does insist that data analysis involves the interpretation of how researchers’ early impressions may have been shifted by observations from the gathering of data. Stake leans on the process of triangulation to provide some cohesion and clarity to researcher interpretations of the data. He asserts that data triangulation allows researchers to utilize multiple perceptions and sources of information to clarify meaning and identify themes or ideas. In other words, the practice of triangulation attempts to find commonality between a number of perspectives, in the hopes that results provide opportunities for generalizability and/or replication. Baxter and Jack (2008) interpret triangulation as striving to converge data in order to understand the aggregation of cases within a study. Though Stake points to categorical aggregation and direct interpretation as the main
strategies for analyzing data (Yazan, 2015), he also reminds the reader that analyses should make sense for the unique characteristics and data sources of each individual case study.

For this case study, building a complex understanding of the research issues that were framed by Tinto’s (1975) model of student attrition was an ongoing and flexible exercise. Raw qualitative data (in the form of audio files) were translated to text through a transcription service. The researcher listened to each audio file while reviewing transcripts to ensure accuracy and develop preliminary ideas and potential themes. These early concepts were manually inserted into document margins. Texts were then uploaded into the MAXQDA 12 system – a qualitative research analysis software program. Using the tools in the MAXQDA system, transcripts were analyzed using coding techniques that break raw data into both case-specific themes as well as possible cross-case comparative ideas. Case studies that employ both of these coding strategies yield more accurate theoretical findings and establish stronger implications (Barratt, Choi, & Li, 2011; Baskarada, 2014). The following coding techniques and terms were based on inferences and guidance from Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). In order to extract basic topics from the data, descriptive coding was used as the initial method of assigning meaning to the narrative. It was also expected that during this process, it would be appropriate to honor participants’ exact words, and In Vivo strategies were therefore used in conjunction with the previously mentioned methods.

The second-cycle coding process was also performed using MAXQDA’s system. The software allows for first-cycle code analyses that can give researchers a general idea of possible categorizations. The researcher utilized these tools to extract potential groupings or relational connections for second-cycle pattern codes. The coding and re-coding processes provided a set of pattern codes for arranging first-cycle codes into meaningful clusters. These groupings were
intended to provide the building blocks for translating codes into theoretical inferences and possible cross-case commonalities. Arranging data into categories allowed for an analysis of the words and phrases that pointed to important factors affecting institutional commitment and re-enrollment behavior, as well as the impacts of individual interactions. A simple summary grid tool in MAXQDA arranged coded and categorized data into a structure that allowed the researcher to review like-coded data simultaneously. Employing this summary grid as a groundwork, themes and relationships were identified and recorded through researcher note-taking and narrative. Email communication documents were uploaded into the MAXQDA software and the coding process matched that of the raw interview data, including specific coding strategies and labels. These analyses were triangulated with the secondary sources of data to provide a rich interpretation of the phenomenon.

**Presentation of findings.** Like all steps in the QCS process, reporting findings depends on the specific approach and unique methodology presented by each study. Scholars have referred to QCS as demonstrating characteristics that resemble an artform (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Morse, 2008; Stake, 1995) and indeed, the process of translating analyzed data to meaningful findings requires creativity and reflexive understanding of the researcher’s work. They do however provide general guidance for this process - Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that researchers should focus on telling a story or stories. Similarly, Hyett, et al. (2014) characterize the reporting of QCS findings as providing the reader with a “sense of being there.” (p. 7). This can be accomplished a number of ways, but authors may be directed to the development of a chronological report, or (in the case of Yin-ian researchers) returning to address the original propositions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Although Yin (2014) identifies six methods for presenting findings (linear, comparative, chronological, theory building, suspense,
and unsequenced), QCS researchers should work to develop reports that appropriate a greater understanding of the specific context, conceptual framework, and phenomenon in question. In this vein, this research presented findings from the data and implications in the form of researcher assertions (Stake, 1995). These centered on the research question related to stop-out student interactions and utilized analyzed data to establish recommendations for the research site while seeking to make a limited number of broader inferences related to possible generalizability and implications for future research.

**Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research**

**Researcher bias.** Engaging in inquiry as a scholar-practitioner affords the researcher with the opportunity to explore a topic with which they have personal or professional experience and some level of expertise. While this can enhance the quality of work, it is also likely that these researchers struggle to impartially frame their investigations and draw objective conclusions from their findings. For that reason, researchers must take special care to seek out potential biases and consider how they might seek to detach themselves from these inherent influences.

At the time of this research, the researcher had over ten years of experience in student affairs in higher education in a number of roles at several liberal arts institutions. While the nature and responsibilities associated with each position varied, the emphasis of student support remained a constant. As a result of these experiences, the researcher had a strong bias towards the importance of the development of strong relationships and their impacts on student success.

In his position at Goucher College, the researcher was involved in the leave of absence and semester withdrawal processes. Students electing these interrupted enrollment options may
have met with the researcher to discuss the process and have their forms signed. These interactions were brief, focused on procedural questions, and rarely became care-related conversations. The researcher’s involvement in these processes created a number of preconceived positions related to the possible shortcomings of the institution’s support practices for stop-out students, in particular, the impacts of the absence of interactions while on leave. In order to accurately collect, analyze, and interpret the information provided by participants, the researcher actively sought out and delved into data that contended with his assumptions. Additionally, the researcher remained aware of identified biases and practiced bracketing of personal factors that could affect his view of the study (Fischer, 2009).

As in all qualitative inquiry, QCS researchers must maintain an honest assessment of their own influence on the collection of information. The chosen methodology allowed for ongoing and constant researcher reflection that provided context surrounding any conclusions drawn or recommendations made.

**Ethical considerations.** This research adhered strictly to standards of respect for the rights and privacy of all individuals participating in the study. The safety and welfare of participants was of paramount importance. All individuals contributing to this study were provided with information related to the procedures, purposes, protections, and benefits pertaining to this research in order to make an informed decision regarding their involvement (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). No potential risks were known to the researcher. Additionally, participants were notified that the experience was entirely voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time, with absolutely no penalty. The informed consent procedure included a description of methods intended to guarantee privacy and anonymity. All participants were assigned random pseudonyms to protect their identities. Following the collection of interview
data, all digital audio recordings, notes, communication documents, and interview transcripts were securely stored in a password-protected online database. Any hand-written notes or materials presented to the researcher by participants were stored in a locked filing cabinet. After the completion of transcription processes, all audio recordings were destroyed.

**Credibility.** In order to guarantee the reliability of the information collected during interviews, the researcher engaged in sustained communication with participants. The interview process included an initial, pre-interview introductory conversation that included descriptions of informed consent and the intended interview procedures. Next, the formal semi-structured questioning commenced and was recorded. After the conclusion of the discussion, the participant was reminded about the member-checking process. Interviewees were provided with copies of their transcripts via email, asked to review for accuracy, and had the opportunity to request clarifications for incorrectly-collected data. Data triangulation was utilized to ensure the credible composition of findings between multiple sources of data. The identification of commonalities and inconsistencies across sources provided opportunities to discover deeper meaning in the collective data (Patton, 2002).

Additionally, the researcher tracked the collection of information through an internal audit trail. Yin (2014) recommends this strategy for QCS research because it maintains a chain of evidence throughout the research process and enhances trustworthiness. The audit trail included field notes, memos, annotated transcripts, and other documentation that allows for the review of the relationships between the raw data and the interpreted findings presented by the researcher (Cutcliffe & Mckenna, 2004).

**Transferability.** Yin (2014) asserts that generalizability is not the goal of case study research. He does not however reject the possibility that QCS research can be transferable. While
the argument can be made that findings from case studies should only be applied to the specific context under review, results can still be relevant in other contexts, and/or provide insight into the phenomenon in similar sets of circumstances. Ultimately, the primary goal of this research was to understand the problem of practice within the context of the research site at the time of the collection of data. However, rich, narrative descriptions of the researcher’s understanding of the data should provide the reader with a sense of how the findings might be applied elsewhere (Shenton, 2004).

**Limitations.** The primary limitation associated with this study was the researcher’s position at the site institution. The researcher served as an Associate Dean of Students and held a relatively visible position within the college’s administration. Student participants may have had interactions with the researcher prior to their involvement in the study. The small size of the college increases the likelihood that students will have crossed paths with or have preconceived notions regarding the researcher. The researcher was also prepared for the possibility that secondary interviews with faculty or staff members could be affected by balances of power. Holding a supervisory position, the researcher worked very closely with student support staff who may have maintained communications with students while on leave, and therefore may have been included in the study. Though this was not ideal, the absence of policies or expectations related to engagement with on-leave students suggested that there would be no performance-based motivation to inaccurately convey experiences or actions.

The expected sample size of 4-12 drop-outs was relatively small, and potentially limited the level to which findings could be transferable to different contexts. It was however in line with QCS research. Additionally, it was expected that results would enhance the understanding of the phenomenon at the research site, as well as peer institutions of similar size and mission.
The sample population included students opting for an interruption in enrollment for a number of different reasons, for varying lengths of time, and with different re-enrollment processes. This lack of consistency increased the urgency to remain committed to seeking meaning on an individual case basis prior to attempting to draw collective conclusions. Because the research site did not have standard practices for engaging with stop-out students, it was possible that participants could report little to no interactions with the college community. Assigning meaning to these cases in relation to the research question was therefore be difficult.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative case study explored on-leave interactions of stop-out students at a small private college. Under constructivist philosophical assumptions, this research attempted to build understanding through subjective interpretation of information that was specific to the context. Data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviewing, and also included organizational data, student demographics, and communication documents. Following the collective case study approach allowed the researcher to initially focus on understanding each individual bounded case through the development of thick descriptions. The data analysis process provided the opportunity to identify commonalities and inconsistencies between the cases. These established the foundations for findings addressing the problem of stop-out student attrition at the research site, and a discussion on transferability of conclusions.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore how stop-out students’ interactions with their college communities while on leave. Following a qualitative case study framework, the researcher collected data from a number of sources, seeking to provide context related to the research site and understand the experiences of participants. Information collected from institutional documents and data, semi-structured interviews, and communication documents were utilized to inform the phenomenon under inquiry. Data analysis grounded in the triangulation of aggregated information gleaned from the various sources of information established shared themes and components that contextualize the problem of practice and explain experiences and behaviors.

The review of organizational documents and data, including the college’s mission and values outline the specific challenges and nature of the problem at the site institution, Goucher College. As the primary source of data, participant interviews provided the researcher with two main findings that illustrate the potential impacts of interactions with different constituencies within the campus community. The first, a sense of care, refers to the tone conveyed by the on-campus point of contact while the second, purpose and intent, indicate the manner in which the content of communications is perceived by stop-outs. Interview results also suggested that campus visits and indirect interactions through social media could impact institutional commitment and re-enrollment. Finally, a limited number of communication documents provided by stop-out participants served to triangulate and confirm results collected from interviews. These data explain the context surrounding the case while providing insight into how interactions with their college communities affect stop-out students’ institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors while on leave.
Organizational Documents and Data

QCS research assumes that exploring a case requires the development of greater understanding into the context surrounding a phenomenon. For that reason, a number of policy and procedure documents were analyzed to explain institutional processes related to the stop-out experience. Additionally, institutional data relevant to the problem under investigation were compiled, including the creation of a previously unexplored statistic at the site institution related to return rates of students taking a semester withdrawal or leave of absence.

Goucher College community ideals. On the Goucher webpage dedicated to outlining the college’s mission and vision (“Mission,” n.d.), the institution also defines college values in relation to its learning community. It states that the college holds that its educational goals are best achieved “in an environment that responds to students both as individuals and as members of multiple groups.” (“Mission,” n.d.). The statement goes on to say that small classes and close faculty interactions are crucial components contributing to the sense of community, and college mission. This focus on individual attention and relationship-building is an important challenge for understanding how stop-out students experience a connection with the institution while they are disengaged from campus.

Policies and Procedures.

Applying for withdrawal or leave of absence. Goucher College provides students considering a withdrawal or leave are provided with several resources establishing the process for taking time away from the institution. Students seeking information on these processes may easily be directed to the Registrar’s Office webpage on leaves and withdrawals (“Leave of Absence & Withdrawal,” n.d.). On this page, interested students are presented with an abundance
of information explaining the different ways in which a student might leave the college. The page is content-heavy, with several paragraphs of text and a many links to different policies that might affect a student taking a break from Goucher. Students are strongly recommended to meet with their advisors or other staff members in Academic Affairs to discuss the process, though this is not required.

At the end of the first paragraph, the Registrar provides a useful resource titled “Leaving the College? – A Student Checklist” (“Checklist for Students,” n.d.). This tool offers a roadmap for students, depending on the nature and type of their exit from the college. Students are referred to specific offices to ensure that they complete the steps required to complete their semester withdrawals or leaves of absence. While this resource may provide a student with clarity on the actions required for leaving Goucher, there is no matching resource for students seeking to return to the college. If the institution is interested in re-enrolling these students, it is odd that equal efforts have not been made to present simple steps to returning, in order to reduce students’ perceived barriers to reentry.

**Returning from withdrawal or leave of absence.** Students choosing to take a semester withdrawal or leave of absence are expected to return following their time away. The process for returning from a non-medical/compassionate withdrawal or leave appears relatively simple. The Office of the Registrar maintains an expected semester of return for each student, and those students are able to participate in class registration once notified by the Registrar (“Official Leave of Absence (LOA) Form,” n.d.). Students returning from a medical or compassionate semester withdrawal or leave of absence are required to complete additional steps to demonstrate that they are medically and emotionally ready to return to college (“Medical/Compassionate Withdrawal Policy,” 2017). Students who submit the required documentation and are cleared by
the Office of the Vice President and Dean of Students are required to meet with a Case Management staff member within the first two weeks of their return semester to discuss a plan for success. The requirement to meet with a staff member upon a student’s return may indeed be helpful in establishing a support plan. However, until a student initiates contact, there is no outreach plan from the college to assist students with the actions required to return to Goucher.

Transfer of credits. Some on-leave students elect to enroll in courses at other institutional of higher education (including community colleges) while they are away from Goucher. If seeking transfer credits, these students are required to submit applications through the Office of the Registrar (“Transfer of Credit Policy,” 2017). The Registrar reviews courses to determine comparability and applicability to degree programs at Goucher. Each Goucher student may transfer up to 60 credits from other colleges, including up to 12 credits from online courses. Students taking time away from the college concerned about falling behind academically may therefore find it completely feasible to remain on track by enrolling in in-person or online courses while they are on leave. With these options, goal-oriented students with a focus on graduation from Goucher may be more motivated to return to the college.

Financial aid. Students considering a semester withdrawal or leave of absence are referred to the Financial Aid office to discuss the implications of taking time away from Goucher (“Checklist for Students,” n.d.). Students in this position seeking additional information may find more specific information in the Financial Aid Office’s “Frequently Asked Questions” (n.d.). The resource answers the question “What If I Take a Leave of Absence?” with the following explanation:

Students who take a leave of absence during a period of enrollment are considered withdrawn. Goucher must calculate the amount of Federal Title IV aid the student earned.
Unearned Title IV funds must be returned to the Title IV programs. The grace period on a Federal student loan begins on the last day of academic activity. (“Frequently Asked Questions,” n.d.).

This response, though accurate, may not effectively provide students with greater clarity on the status of their aid if they were to temporarily leave college. If students are unable to contact Financial Aid prior to the approval of their leave of absence or withdrawal, they may find themselves in unsure territory when considering a return to the college.

**Institutional Data.** In order to establish a greater understanding of the contextual factors that influence (and are influenced by) the problem of stop-out attrition, the researcher compiled information from a number of sources at the college.

**Enrollment management.** Table 1 outlines recent enrollment figures and factors that affect tuition-based revenue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Goucher College Enrollment, Retention Rate, and Discount Rate.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohort</td>
<td>Undergraduate Enrollment (FT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2011</td>
<td>1,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>1,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>1,449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>1,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2015</td>
<td>1,478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>1,473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2017</td>
<td>1,455</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prior to each fiscal year, President Jose Bowen releases a document outlining Goucher’s strategic priorities for the coming year. In both the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 documents, the first-year enrollment and discount rate targets are listed as the first goals and primary objectives of the college (“Goucher Strategy and Goals for FY18,” 2017; “Goucher Vision, Strategy, and Tactics for FY17,” 2016). In fall 2016, both the enrollment and discount rate goals were unrealized; in fall 2017, the enrollment goal was unrealized, but the actual discount rate came in under the goal of 65%. Additionally, the 2017-2018 document established five-year institutional measurable objectives, starting with a goal of gradually increasing first-year cohorts to 500/year, while keeping the discount rate below 65%. The next five-year objective sought to stabilize first-year retention rate at above 82% (“Goucher Strategy,” 2017). These priorities clearly indicate that the college’s leadership views enrollment management as crucial for the institution’s short- and long-term financial needs.

The 440 students enrolling in the fall 2016 semester represent the largest class in the college’s history, though short of the 450 goal established by the college (“Goucher Vision,” 2016). The next year, an incoming cohort of 420 students also fell short of the 440 goal (“Goucher Strategy,” 2017). Despite these shortcomings, the size of these classes suggests that upward momentum in first-year enrollment is an achievable goal. Unfortunately, given that the average annual enrollment over the seven years reflected in Table 1 stands at 1,465, the recent uptick in first-year cohort size has not resulted in a larger overall student population (1,455 in
fall 2017). Retention rates must therefore be scrutinized to understand the college’s enrollment challenges.

Although the five-year retention rate sample in Table 1 appears to show a significant decline in first-year retention rate in fall 2013, an expanded data set shows a relatively stable rate, with no measurable trend. Since the fall 2002 cohort, the Goucher College first-year retention rate ranged from a low of 77% (fall 2013) to a high of 85% (fall 2012) with an average rate of 81%. In that time, first-year retention fell below 80% five times (2002, 2006, 2008, 2013, 2015) (Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2016). These statistics do not indicate that first-year retention is clearly trending downward, however, the most recent three-year sample (fall 2013-fall 2015) averages to 79%, two points lower than the 81% average since 2002, and three points lower than the five-year retention stabilization goal (“Goucher Strategy,” 2017). If the fall 2016 cohort exhibits another sub-80% retention rate, there could be cause for concern for the college.

In contrast to Goucher’s retention rate, its discount rate has exhibited a steep rise from 40.8% to 63.5% from the fall 2013 to fall 2017 cohorts. Omitting the anomalous fall 2011 cohort, the most dramatic jump in discount rate occurred in congruence with the enrollment of the largest class in college history in 2016 (56.4%-63.4%). It goes without saying that increased discount rates reduce the potential for increased revenue as a result of larger incoming classes. Rising discount rates prevent revenue growth despite increasing cohort sizes.

The data compiled in Table 1 indicates that the college may soon be severely challenged by an alarming increase in discount rates and inadequate corresponding first-year student retention rates. The ability to achieve goals related to retention is therefore a central factor in stabilizing enrollment, subsequent tuition revenue, and viability of the college. At a small
institution like Goucher, failure to retain even small populations of students can result in substantial negative impacts.

**Stop-out frequency and re-enrollment.** Understanding the weight of the impact of stop-out student attrition at Goucher College requires a firm grasp on the frequency with which students elect to leave the institution on a temporary basis. Because this information was previously not readily available, the researcher coordinated with the Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness to run a five-year report on stop-out behaviors (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Goucher College Five-Year Summary of Students on a Leave of Absence (LOA) or Semester Withdrawal (SWD)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Year</td>
<td>Semester</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Fall</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spring</td>
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<td>2014-2015</td>
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<td>2015-2016</td>
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<td>Spring</td>
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<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>Fall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semester Average</td>
<td>29</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Adapted from Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness (2018)

For three straight semesters, the total count of students on leave has stood slightly above the five-year average of 39. However, like the college’s retention rate, it is difficult to suggest
the presence of a measurable trend from these numbers. While it may be too early to assert that stop-out behaviors are significantly increasing at Goucher College, stop-outs do make up a sizeable portion of the enrolled student body. With the college’s average total enrollment at 1,465 during that five-year period, 2.7% of the total student population, or approximately one out of every 37 students was on leave at any given time.

The purpose of this study was to examine how on-leave interactions with their college communities impacts institutional commitment and subsequent re-enrollment of stop-out students. Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012), in his evolving interactionalist model of student departure, theorized that students fail to maintain integration with their colleges if they do not engage in frequent quality interactions with others in their communities. Operating under this assumption, stop-outs are extremely vulnerable to attrition while they are on leave. One might expect that stop-out students re-enroll at rates that are significantly below a college’s overall retention rate. In the case of Goucher, this is certainly true, though the gap between retention rate and stop-out re-enrollment rate is striking.

Over the five-year period explored in Table 2, 354 students chose to take a leave of absence or semester withdrawal from Goucher. Of those students, only 127 re-enrolled at the college, a mere 36% (Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2018). Furthermore, of the students who returned, 29 later withdrew from Goucher permanently (Goucher College Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2018). Between those stop-outs who never re-enrolled and the re-enrollers who subsequently left the college, only 98 of the original 354 students retain active status or have graduated (28%). Considering the assumption that stop-out students intend to return to the institution at the time of their exit, these numbers are particularly alarming.
In explaining the significance of the stop-out attrition problem at Goucher College, one needs look no further than this 28% persistence rate. The college’s financial sustainability goals rely heavily on tuition-based revenue and successful enrollment management, including retention of matriculated students. The strategic priorities outlined by the college in the last two years (“Goucher Strategy,” 2017; “Goucher Strategy,” 2016), established 80% as the target retention rate, with an aspiration to stabilize at 82% within the next five years. Though the college has fallen short of retention goals, the difference is slight, indicating that those objectives are achievable with nominal improvements. Taking into consideration the most recent first-time, first-year cohort (fall 2017) of 420, approximately every four students represents a full first-year retention percentage point.

It is important to note that first-year retention rates and stop-out frequency are not directly correlated – the stop-out experience is not exclusive to first-year students. However, cohort size and first-year retention goals do demonstrate that when it comes to enrollment management at small colleges, retaining each individual student can make a difference. At Goucher, only 98 of the 354 students choosing to leave on a temporary basis over the last five years have persisted (“Rates of Return,” 2018). It follows that the number of non-returning stop-outs averages 64 per academic year. If the college is falling short of first-year retention goals by approximately 4-12 students, actively pursuing increases to the stop-out re-enrollment rate could make significant strides in achieving enrollment and revenue goals.

Conclusion. This review of institutional documents data at the research site provides a greater understanding of the scope of the problem under investigation, as well as a firmer grasp of the context-specific issues at Goucher College. Documents outlining the priorities and goals of the college clearly identify student retention as a fundamental measure of the institution’s short-
and long-term success. Despite this commitment to improving student persistence, no apparent efforts have been made by the college to address stop-out student attrition. Students taking a leave of absence or semester withdrawal are provided with information related to the process of requesting leave and returning to college, but no support systems are in place to ensure those students receive any form of proactive assistance. Considering that the stop-out student re-enrollment rate of 36% stands at less than half of the college’s worst first-year retention rate, investigating interactions between stop-outs and their college communities provided valuable insight into addressing this damaging problem.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview process was developed in order to better understand how interactions affect stop-out students’ levels of institutional commitment and subsequent re-enrollment behaviors. The stop-out student sample was comprised of all full-time undergraduate Goucher College students who returned from a leave of absence or semester withdrawal for the fall 2017 academic term. Six of these students responded to recruitment emails and participated in recorded interviews with the researcher. Each of these participants was asked to identify other members of the college community with whom they had contact while they were away from school. Following the completion of interviews, the participants had the option to grant permission to the researcher to invite their peer, faculty, and staff points-of-contact to participate in the study as well. Of those individuals, six agreed to take part in the study – three peers, two faculty, and one staff member. These discussions revealed a number of consistencies between the experiences of stop-outs and their points-of-contact that shed light on the impacts of on-leave interactions.
Utilizing a qualitative data analysis tool, MAXQDA, interview transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify commonalities related to the stop-out experience described by participants. Transcripts were initially coded using descriptive and in vivo coding, to provide the researcher with prominent themes expressed by interviewees. This analysis was followed by a second-cycle of coding that grouped first-cycle surface-level information into concepts that delved deeper into understanding the kinds of interactions that carry the most meaning and influence for on-leave students.

**Stop-out participant questionnaire.** Prior to recorded interviews with stop-out student participants, the researcher requested that they complete a questionnaire providing basic demographic information and brief answers to questions related to their own stop-out experience. This information was collected to inform the researcher prior to the interview of the nature of each participant’s stop-out experience. Additionally, the collection of demographics of the participant pool provide the researcher with the opportunity to evaluate the level to which the sample was homogenous and address possible reliability and study limitations.

Of the six stop-out student participants, four identified as female, one as male, and one as non-binary. Five students identified as white or Caucasian, and one student identified as Hispanic/mixed. They were one senior, four juniors, and one sophomore, with a self-reported cumulative GPA range of 2.5-3.5 (one participant declined to provide GPA). Coincidentally, of the five participants providing their dates of birth, all were 21 years of age at the time of their interviews and were pursuing various fields of study at Goucher. Set against the 2016-2017 Common Data Set (2017), the sample is somewhat representative of the greater student population. As a whole, female Goucher students outnumber males by more than 2:1, and the majority (62%) of enrolled students identify as white (“Common Data Set,” 2017). Though it
must be stated that results are limited by the sameness of the sample to some extent, the purpose of case study research is to apply individual experiences to explain the bigger context. Therefore, the results as they relate to the site institution retain their reliability.

All stop-out participants were willing to provide information related to the factors contributing to their decisions to temporarily leave college. Five of the six cited health-related reasons, with three directly stating that their mental health needs influenced their decisions. Two participants referred to general reasons like “overall well-being” and “stress [and] figuring myself/my life out.” One participant attributed their leave to a desire to pursue an academic major that was not being offered at Goucher. Two participants elected to take leaves of absence, meaning that they completed a semester and chose not to immediately return. One took a mid-semester withdrawal and returned for the next semester. Three took mid-semester withdrawals and extended their time away by taking a subsequent leave of absence. Total time away from Goucher ranged from 5 months to 14-15 months. All of these factors resulted in students experiencing their time away from Goucher in very different ways, engaging in a number of activities, and interacting variably with the college community.

**Findings from interviews.** The analysis of coded interview transcripts provided both overarching and specific insights into the experiences of stop-out students. Data indicates that two characteristics of on-leave interactions are particularly meaningful in impacting stop-out students’ institutional commitment while they are away from school. Two groups of participants were interviewed, stop-out students and their points of contact. For the purpose of clarity, participants will be identified parenthetically as stop-outs (s-o) or contacts (c).

**Sense of care.** Participants consistently described the ways in which interactions with college community members made them feel like they cared about them. When stop-outs felt
cared about, interactions often evoked positive emotions that extended beyond the individual contact to the institution itself. Care was frequently associated with a simple interest in the stop-out’s well-being and a desire to stay in touch despite not being present on campus as an active student. Speaking of a professor (and research participant), Dr. Boyd (c), Brittany (s-o) simply said that her interactions made her “feel like somebody cared.” Speaking of Brittany, Dr. Boyd suggested that their relationship was strengthened by a mutual understanding that she had Brittany’s best interests in mind. She stated that she thought Brittany “could tell that I cared. Like I cared more than just the classwork… and so I think that, like we have a connection on that level, that I care about her as a person.” Jack (c) was the primary point of contact for his girlfriend, Skylar (s-o) while she was away from the college. He described his role in their relationship during this time as “a support system… given, you know, her life circumstances and just the difficulties that she experiences on a regular basis… I am a support system and you know, primarily and secondarily, I guess just a source of love and happiness for her.” Despite a challenging pre-leave Goucher experience, Skylar stated that continuing to stay in touch with Jack was helpful in overcoming her anxieties about re-enrolling. Ethan (s-o) seemed to recognize that he would not receive the same kind of individual attention at another school, expressing satisfaction that a staff member with whom he had been in contact was uniquely in a “position [that] exists at Goucher.” Raj (s-o) also discussed a perception they held about Goucher, saying “I do think a lot of people here are really empathetic. People who work here and people who go here, and I think my friends are definitely a reflection of that.” This translation of individual interactions to generating positive feelings and associations with the college is a key component of a meaningful interaction in the context of institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors.
Beyond reporting on their lived experiences, several participants suggested that finding ways to express that the community cares and values students on-leave could encourage them to re-enroll at Goucher. Debbie (s-o) suggested that more stop-outs might return if the college “put it in their minds that you do care and that you are interested in making their academic experience a good one.” Similarly, Ethan (s-o) put forth that contact from a faculty member could serve to be reassuring for students, and a reminder “how much Goucher cares.” Staff member Wade (c), despite working in a capacity that he considered to be very focused on process, demonstrated that his attitude towards on-leave students centered on care, stating that his communications are intended to “just [let] a student know that we’re still thinking about them. We haven’t forgotten them. Um, we want the student to know that we still care even though they’re not at the institution.”

Interviews clearly demonstrate that care is an important factor in determining how students respond to on-leave interactions, but it is certainly not a new concept to suggest that exhibiting concern for another person can strengthen a relationship. Similarly, though she appreciated her opportunities to interact with all of her points of contact, Debbie speculated, “if I did not enjoy any of the people that I had interacted with here, it would have made me feel extremely negatively in regards to returning.” For these reasons, interactions should not be considered to be positively correlated with re-enrollment in of themselves. Rather, changing levels of institutional commitment seem to depend on the content, tone, and perceived objective of individual interactions. It is therefore important to dig into more specific components of meaningful interactions between stop-out students and their campus communities

*Authenticity.* Reviewing interview transcripts, it became clear that expressions of care were perceived in a much more positive light if stop-outs felt that the interactions were authentic
and demonstrated that students were valued. Patricia (c), when asked what might encourage students to return to the college, suggested simply that “if you are able to pick at something that invokes, like that, that friendship feeling,” stop-outs might be more motivated to return.

Demonstrating care is a foundational display of authenticity, but according to these conversations, it takes more than care to come off as genuine and sincere. Expressions of enthusiasm seem to be related to students feeling that interactions are authentic. Ethan (s-o) discussed the impact of the response he received from peers when he hinted that he was thinking about returning to Goucher:

People were like really excited and like really sweet and they were like, oh my God, next year is going to be awesome. And so like having that response made it really good and then I like sent out like a mass Snapchat one to like everyone I knew at Goucher that was like “hey, like I think I’m coming back, does anyone know anyone who needs a roommate?” And so like everyone responded and was like, “oh my God.”

Ethan then stated that he felt that the enthusiasm about the prospect of his return reinforced how positively he felt about the sense of community at Goucher, and that he was able to find a roommate almost immediately. Brittany (s-o) had been in contact with a professor about the possibility of her transferring to another nearby institution. When she told that instructor that she had made the decision to return to Goucher, his enthusiastic response elicited an emotional response. Describing the interaction, she stated that “he was like, ‘I’m really happy you’re coming back here.’ And I was like, oh my God, thank you. I’m so happy that you’re happy to hear that.” It seems therefore that stop-outs are motivated to return to school when they believe that it would make other community members happy for them to return. The fact that their peers
and faculty value their presence on campus may reinforce positive associations with the college, and subsequently seek to return to the environment where they feel that they are wanted.

The notion of feeling that the community genuinely values a stop-out student seems to be connected to the level to which students felt that their contacts made their interactions a priority. Stop-outs reported that they felt positively about interactions when community members demonstrated that they were committed to their relationships. This commitment was shown through contact frequency, contact content, and immediacy of communications and responses. Because Skylar (s-o) was in a relationship with Jack (c), they both reported that they were in contact at least daily, and discussed her progress in a treatment program, as well as her anxieties related to the possibility of returning to Goucher. Skylar also reported that the ease and immediacy of communications with administrative offices like residential life made her feel “happy” about the prospect of returning. She stated that she “found people responded right away. And like it was really helpful… Like I felt like I could just come back and like it just wouldn’t be a big deal. Which I don’t think is necessarily true at other colleges.” Recognizing that other colleges and universities might not treat her with the same level of value, the timeliness and ease of interactions with administrative offices positively affected Skylar’s level of institutional commitment. Ethan shared a similar experience with college officials who eased some concerns he had about academic requirements. He said that he was having trouble finding the right person to talk to, but that when he did “they like sent [him] a list of everything, which was like really nice to get that kind of immediately.” Raj (s-o) stayed in touch with several friends via text, facetime, and Facebook messenger, and communicated every couple of days, including facetime sessions that lasted up to an hour. The length of those facetime calls indicates that their friends remained invested in their relationships with Raj was away from school. Asked about how those
interactions made Raj feel, they stated that in her “times of need,” those individuals “were really there for me.” Similarly, Debbie’s (s-o) leave experience involved significant time spent with friends enrolled at Goucher. She was not only in touch with her peer support network while on leave, she saw them in person. So much so, that one of her friends, Tara (c) realized that they became very much closer while Debbie was on a break from Goucher. Conversely, Ethan (s-o) interacted with his peers primarily through social networks like Snapchat. He derived his strong institutional commitment from having the opportunity to indirectly interact with the college community several times a day, simply by watching posts and stories on Snapchat. The platform also allowed him to garner immediate responses to his communications with Goucher students, offering constant reminders of feeling valued by members of the campus community. Other participants also reported utilizing social media to stay connected with their peers, this level of interaction will be reviewed at greater length in the section titled Indirect Interactions. As a staff member in the Office of Financial Aid, Wade (c) knew that his role was likely viewed as strictly procedural. Understanding however that Patty (s-o) was having difficulty grasping the steps she needed to take in order to make her return financially feasible, he recalled:

I wanted to make sure that I could touch base with her, follow up with emails, and make it easy for her. Because a lot of the forms are on our website, but it’s way easier if we just email them the forms… so I really wanted to take my time and explain a lot of things.

In her interview, Patty stated that these interactions and extra efforts made her feel “hopeful,” and were part of the reason she did re-enroll. She said that she was in danger of losing her academic scholarship, Wade’s office was “very kind” throughout the appeal process, and that “they always worked with me no matter what. So that was nice.” Again, Wade’s ability to make
Patty’s re-enrollment a priority resulted in her feeling as though the institution valued her as a student and person.

Despite a number of very positive interactions with faculty and staff, some stop-out participants directly suggested that communications from certain constituencies at the college could easily be taken as disingenuous. Raj (s-o) was asked if they ever heard from any administrative offices while they were away from school; they responded that they did hear from “the people who wanted my money.” The researcher asked Raj to describe how that interaction made them feel, they elaborated:

Like a number, like a number. Just like I, it just makes me feel like a cog in the machine, you know, like just like kind of a tiny drop in the ocean of like Goucher students… But, um, I don’t know. I don’t like feeling like I’m just here for like just because they want to contact me because I owe them money.

In this case, the nature and tone of the communication did not inspire a sense of care or authenticity by the individual reaching out, and made Raj feel severely undervalued by the institution. Similarly, Brittany (s-o) made it very clear that she was also skeptical about certain attempts to contact students on leave, warning the researcher about the possible harmful consequences of a perceived “hidden agenda,” when interacting with faculty or staff.

This idea of representatives from the college having ulterior motives in reaching out to students on leave reinforces the importance of ensuring stop-outs trust that interactions come from a place of genuine concern for their well-being and interests. Interview results suggest that stop-out students are savvy to the college’s need to retain students, and consequently do not want to feel as though they are wanted back solely for the purpose of boosting institutional statistics.
Students want to feel valued by individuals within the community for their own individuality, not for their ability to play a role in achieving institutional goals or outcomes.

*Pre-leave relationship.* Interview results show that the most meaningful factor in determining how interactions are received by stop-outs is the existence of a pre-leave relationship with the point of contact. If stop-outs had relationships grounded in friendship or care with points of contact, they were more likely to maintain positive social connections and associations with the institution. Dr. Boyd (c) knew Brittany (s-o) as a student in her class who appeared to be struggling academically and personally. According to Brittany, “My professor had just noticed I had been upset in class some days. Um, I met with her a bunch of times to over schoolwork and she could just tell that I wasn’t doing well.” After meeting several times, Dr. Boyd suggested that time away from school could be beneficial and counseled Brittany on how to navigate family issues related to taking a leave. Brittany did heed her professor’s advice, and their interactions while she was on leave made Brittany realize the value of returning to Goucher, rather than transferring to another college. Both Dr. Boyd and Brittany described their relationship in ways that suggested their relationship was mutually meaningful. Debbie (s-o) and Dr. Jenkins (c) on the other hand, discussed their interactions briefly, with little noticeable perceived value from either participant. When asked to describe how communication with Dr. Jenkins made her feel, Debbie simply called them “positive” and stated that she “always [has] positive interactions with professors.” She did not discuss feeling cared for or valued, suggesting that these interactions played little to no role in her decision to return. Dr. Jenkins was also very matter-of-fact about their communications, saying that their relationship was strictly process-based and noted that they “didn’t really know each other very well.” These two examples of stop-outs being in touch with faculty members demonstrates the importance of a pre-leave
relationship that includes a component of care before the student chose to step away from
Goucher. Brittany’s interactions with Dr. Boyd influenced her to think about the college in a way
that made it stand out above other educational options, while Debbie derived no reinforcement of
institutional commitment from her communication with Dr. Jenkins.

Ethan (s-o) provided further evidence of the importance of a pre-leave relationship in
describing how he felt about hearing from a staff member while away from Goucher. He recalled
one of friends had to go to the hospital for a medical emergency and the staff member reached
out to both the student and Ethan, to check on how each was doing. She explained her role to
Ethan and he said during his interview that “that was like really incredible to me, because I don’t
think any other college like has that.” The two also spoke just before Ethan left Goucher, she told
him “do what you need to do for yourself,” and he appreciated her level of genuine care. Despite
her role as a staff member, she did not attempt to encourage Ethan to return, but in expressing
authentic concern for his interests, she may have enhanced his attitude toward the institution.
When she did contact Ethan during his leave, he reported being excited to hear from her. This
enthusiastic response would not have been possible had he not developed a valuable relationship
with her before he took time off.

When asked to consider how the college could improve stop-out re-enrollment rates,
participants consistently suggested that having some familiarity with the individual reaching out
could affect how students respond. Debbie (s-o) asserted that “if you’ve had an interaction with
them, that’d probably be best.” Brittany (s-o) connected the importance of a care-based previous
relationship, saying that students want to know “that they’re cared for and stuff like that. So I
think that if it comes from a genuine place, like from a professor that you already have a
relationship with,” students would likely respond positively. She went on to say that other
community members, including faculty that she had not spoken to in years, or the researcher himself had reached out while she was away, she might respond angrily. She described how the reactions would be different:

If you, or [name redacted], who I don’t really have a relationship with, sent me an email, I would be like, ‘what are you, what are you doing sending me this email? Like, I don’t know you.” Whereas if one of my professors who I’ve had for three years in a row, two years in a row, emailed me, um, yea, that would feel, that’s a different dynamic for sure.

These statements from Brittany show that stop-out students are not interested in hearing from any community member, they want to hear from their community members - those individuals with whom they can trust to have their best interests in mind. Interactions with those people can evoke positive emotions, enthusiasm, and a stronger connection with the institution. Dr. Jenkins (c), despite having described her interactions with Debbie (s-o) as “process-based,” did suggest that a different pre-leave relationship may have changed the tone and intent of her communications:

If I had a student that maybe I developed a relationship with, I think on my own I would probably check in with that student because I’d probably know a bit more about why they decided to take a leave. But a student that I don’t have any relationship with, uh, I mean I’m probably not going to remember to do that. And to be honest, I don’t think it would make a big difference.

Here, Dr. Jenkins is suggesting that attempted contacts without the context of a previous relationship would not affect how stop-out students felt about the school, or their motivations to
return. They might feel inauthentic and (as described by Brittany) could have a detrimental impact on institutional commitment.

A previous relationship seems to be a crucial component of a stop-out interaction that positively affect a student’s desire to return to their original institution. Community members who are familiar with a stop-out student, their personalities, and their challenges can engage in meaningful interactions that focus on care. Raj’s previously summarized experiences receiving unwanted communications that made them feel undervalued as a person show the importance of a sense of authenticity. This appears to be most easily and seamlessly achieved if the point of contact interacting with a stop-out has genuinely demonstrated a caring disposition in pre-leave interactions. Simply put, stop-outs should want to hear from the community members reaching out to them.

**Purpose and intent.** While the most impactful tones of communications seem to be in line with expressions of care, the second superordinate theme of meaningful on-leave interactions relies on the question of why individuals are in contact. The purpose and perceived purpose of on-leave interactions can reinforce or positively shift attitudes and influence stop-out students’ congruence with the values and characteristics of an institution.

**Checking in.** Each of the 12 interview transcripts included in this study, between stop-outs and points of contact, contained passages that were coded as “check-in.” Several interviewees used the term verbatim, while others described outreach involving similar content and intent. For the purposes of this study, interactions termed “check-ins” can be understood as almost purposeless contacts. They lack specificity, other than to serve as a simple, non-intrusive reminder or continuation of a relationship or dialogue. Wade (c) summed up the nature of these communications by simply explaining them as “kind of a hey, [I] want to check in, make sure
everything’s ok.” Patricia (c) described a check-in as like “a really brief encounter with someone. Like if you ran into someone like on the street and it was just like, oh, hey, how you doing?” The idea of a check-in emerged both in stop-out participants recalling the nature of meaningful, positive interactions, and when all participants were prompted to submit ideas about communications that could encourage on-leave students to return to the institution.

Peer interactions discussed during interviews that were categorized as check-ins seem to follow similar patterns related to general relationship upkeep. These types of communications reflect authenticity and care in that there are no perceived alternative motivations for keeping in touch, and the enrolled students genuinely want to remain in contact with on-leave stop-outs. Communications were often best described as catching up with each other. Patty (s-o) simply stated that she could not “necessarily pinpoint” the content of her conversations with a friend but described them as “very casual”. She elaborated only by saying that “we did talk about just what she was doing at school and how she was doing.” Ethan (s-o) kept up with his Goucher friends in through various mediums but preferred to text his closer direct contacts to “catch each other up on each other’s lives” a couple of times each month he was on leave. Raj (s-o) described interactions that also demonstrated reciprocal relationships, and directly associated checking-in with care. They said “They were just checking in on me. Um, I was checking in on them. I did care, like obviously I still cared about how they were, it was… catching up mostly.”

Students participating in this research as points of contact often reported similar types of interactions with their stop-out counterparts. Jack (c), detailing his interactions with his girlfriend Skylar (s-o), stated that they involved “mostly regular just keeping up, you know, with what we were doing… mostly her just like talking about what she was going through.” Similarly, Debbie
(s-o) and Tara (c) were in touch frequently, with Tara sharing that their conversations “would just be like generic or maybe about like stuff we were going through.”

In addition to lacking any real intention other than maintaining a relationship, the peer check-ins experienced by participants in this study share certain qualities. These communications tended to be ongoing and relatively frequent – at least on a weekly basis, and several times a day in some cases. They were grounded in a simple interest in the lives and experiences of on-leave stop-outs and did not overtly focus on re-enrollment or factors related to institutional commitment. Check-ins were also described as reciprocal, with both parties discussing the goings-on in their respective lives. Since points of contact were all actively enrolled at Goucher College during these times, stop-outs received updates about how contacts were experiencing their lives at Goucher. With these connections, stop-outs were reminded about the college, while remaining somewhat invested in the social environment.

Of the two faculty members participating in this study as points of contact, one described an emotional interaction that follows the structure of a check-in. In recalling this interaction with Brittany (s-o), Dr. Boyd (c) stated

I think what probably made the most impact was when I asked her like what’s going on? Because I mean, she was like… I think she even said, now that I’m recalling it, she was like, no one’s asked me that… And I think at that moment, she realized like I got her more than just like you’re a student in my class level. So, um, I think she knew I supported her and wanted the best for her.

Confirming the impact of the interaction, Brittany credited her relationship with Dr. Boyd while she was on leave as more influential on her decision to return than keeping up with friends. She
shared that she felt that “friends are always supposed to be there for you, but to actually have a faculty member reach out to you is like really different.” Further, Brittany (s-o) simply said that her interactions made her “feel like somebody cared,” and that it was reassuring to have the opportunity to converse with Dr. Boyd while she was not enrolled as an active student. In addition to the value of feeling as though Brittany had a professor at Goucher who genuinely cared about her, describing the check-in as “different” suggests that Brittany felt that Goucher had something that other colleges might lack, and that motivated her to re-enroll. Though she reported that she and Dr. Boyd were not in communication frequently, she said that “the fact that the faculty reached out to me might have been… a factor that contributed to me feeling like welcomed here.” The other stop-out/faculty pair did not experience a particularly meaningful interaction, but their communications were associated with purposes that do not qualify as check-ins.

Ethan (s-o) was the only participant to discuss a check-in from a staff member, who was not available for participation in this study. This interaction occurred after Ethan made the decision to return to Goucher after enrolling at another institution, so it cannot have affected any re-enrollment decision. However, it appeared to have positively impacted his positive associations with the college and commitment to the school. He said:

she was checking in… and she messaged me as soon as I decided I was coming back. Um and she said like, ‘I just saw you on the list of students coming back,’ and I was like shocked and excited and that was really sweet. But it still was like very genuine and caring.

This example summarizes the potential value of the check-in. Ethan’s enthusiastic response to the message from the staff member shows that modest communication efforts could significantly
influence a stop-out student’s emotional connection with an institution and subsequent motivation to return.

All participants were asked to consider how stop-out students could be more motivated to return to Goucher while they are on leave. In general agreement, they acknowledged that communications along the lines of check-ins could improve re-enrollment rates. According to interview participants, these interactions should begin as brief, non-recurring communications that feel caring and genuine. Several stop-out participants recommended that simply expressing an interest in how on-leave students are doing could demonstrate that they are cared about. Ethan (s-o) suggested that receiving a message from a faculty member could be very “reassuring” of how much the college values the student. Debbie (s-o) felt that a “receptive” message could provide on-leave students with the opportunity to begin a dialogue with an individual at the college and ask any questions they might have about re-enrolling. Skylar (s-o) added that assistance with the process of returning from a semester withdrawal or leave of absence could break down perceived barriers.

Point of contact participants discussing interactions in line with check-ins also suggested that they could be effective in reminding stop-outs that they are wanted back on campus. Wade (c) and Patricia (c) both felt that a general check-in could be meaningful. Wade stated that asking a simple question making sure that “everything’s ok” could also be an effective way to reopen a dialogue between students and the college. He further theorized that a student worker could be responsible for this outreach, in order for stop-outs to hear from a peer rather than a college official. Dr. Boyd (c) focused her recommendations on finding ways to reassure stop-outs that Goucher is the right place for them, and that they can be successful. She suggested messaging along the lines of “you’re still that good student that you were… I believe in you that you can do
This sort of communication relies heavily on the existence of a pre-leave relationship and could be a powerful method for expressing care and building affinity.

With these suggestions in mind, flooding a stop-out’s inbox with constant communications might be unwise. Brittany (s-o) candidly put forth that “rapid fire, constant communication would be so annoying.” In agreement, Dr. Jenkins (c) suggested “the institution could like check in on people, but then it also seems like they might just need that time to themselves.” These statements are consistent with other participants characterizing ideal check-ins as “quick,” “little,” “brief,” and “small.” Brevity and singularity may therefore accompany a caring and genuine tone as characteristics of influential on-leave check-ins.

Interview results indicate that this concept of a check-in may be the most influential tool in garnering a positive response to communications. The nature of these interactions is inherently caring and authentic – they lack specific questions, are non-intrusive, and omit any mention of re-enrolling in the institution. The focus is rather simply on the stop-out student’s current state of being, providing the student with an opportunity to be reminded about the relationships that are still present on Goucher’s campus. If they derive any value out of those relationships, they may feel positively about these interactions, and increase their level of commitment to the institution. Check-ins are therefore purposeful in their absence of purpose.

Offering support and encouragement. While interviews indicate that communicating from a place of care is a foundation of meaningful stop-out interactions, this sense of concern can be represented in various ways beyond simply checking in. Community members might demonstrate an interest in actively taking part in a stop-out student’s system of support. A friend of Raj (s-o) assisted them in navigating significant challenges related to mental health. This enrolled student suggested that Raj speak with the college’s Office of Accessibility Services.
Additionally, because Raj had a negative experience with a therapist prior to their leave from Goucher, this friend assisted in the search for a new therapist and reminded Raj of some people to avoid because of their negative impacts on Raj’s wellness. Speaking of their friend, Raj recalled that “they just wanted me to come back and be successful here… So yea, they me a lot of good advice.” Patty (s-o) described an interaction with a friend involving a discussion on the possibility of transferring. Her friend assisted Patty coming up with a “pros and cons kind of thing,” which resulted in a determination that Goucher was the best place for her. These peer interactions consist of simple reminders about the attractive characteristics of Goucher and support systems available if they were to return to campus.

Similarly, interactions with faculty and staff with similar purpose showed to have a positive effect on students’ feelings toward the college. Dr. Boyd (c), aware of Brittany’s (s-o) personal struggles, said to her “I hope you’re working on you because that’s what you’re taking this time to do.” She went on to tell Brittany:

there’s just a clear line between like what I can control, and what I can’t control. It’s like, so I’ll, I’ll make your life easy in the realms that I can. But you’ve got to step up to the plate and really confront your stuff. And if that means hard conversations with your mom or other people, like do that, and work that.

Here, Dr. Boyd demonstrated that she was willing to take on some of the work associated with Brittany’s potential re-enrollment. This willingness also showed that Dr. Boyd hoped and expected Brittany to return to Goucher after her time away. As has been made clear in previous sections, Brittany greatly appreciated Dr. Boyd’s influence, and attributed partial credit to her professor for making it back to the college. Discussions of support also came up in Debbie’s (s-o) interview when discussing what may have made her return easier. She described outreach
similar to a check-in, but added that it could be helpful if someone asked “what can we do to make it comfortable for you when you return? Do you have any issues? Do you have anything that you want to speak about before even deciding if you want to come back?” Similarly, Jack (c) put forth that the college could emphasize individual supports for students considering re-enrollment. He recommended messaging similar to “this is your place… we can’t wait for you to be back… don’t like worry about coming back. Like we have X and Y departments that can help you.” These suggested communications seem to center on encouraging stop-outs to think about returning to campus and begin to consider what they might need to be successful. While this type of purpose does seem to go a step further than a general check-in, identifying strategies that present stop-outs with the opportunity to imagine coming back to Goucher could make the possibility feel more accessible.

As has been established, one way to demonstrate care may be an agenda-less check-in from a known community member. However, participants also report that active encouragement to return to the institution (when those interactions are expressed through authentic care) can be effective in keeping stop-outs connected to the institution. Speaking of her friend Ethan (s-o), Patricia (c) plainly said that she “totally encouraged him to come back.” Debbie (s-o) spoke of an overt example of return encouragement from her time on leave. She remained in contact with several friends on campus, and although they did not provide her with specific advice about coming back to the school, they made sure she was aware that they were looking forward to her return. Debbie shared that her return was “spoken about as if it was definite… it was more so just like expressions of happiness.” Her peers further stressed their desires by telling her that “they’d be really upset if [she] didn’t come back.” Debbie’s friend Tara (c) confirmed that her social network found ways to push her towards re-enrolling. She stated that she would “encourage it”
and expressed excitement about the prospect of living on campus in an apartment together. These interactions presented Debbie with an opportunity to imagine her life on campus after returning, the fun they could have together, and feeling welcomed back by a supportive social group. Interactions between Skylar (s-o) and Jack (c) appear to have involved more active and specific encouragement to return to the college. Skylar shared that Jack played an important role in her ability overcome social anxieties and incongruence related to negative experiences involving a group of students at Goucher. Jack stated that he thought that he “did convince” Skylar to return by addressing her anxieties head on. He suggested that during her time away and his time still on campus he observed that “people really did grow up a good amount. Um, and like the social interactions [were] just different.” He went on to add:

I did try to keep it very positive in terms of like returning. I told her like ‘you have nothing to worry about. Like obviously your grades are fine, you can come back, and like, you’ll have a social life’… I was like, ‘you’re just so nervous. Like once you’re here, like its’ not going to matter,’ and that pretty much turned out to be true.

Though Jack stated that it took “a lot of convincing,” Skylar stated during her interview that despite the fact that she initially “hated Goucher” when she left, her boyfriend “made [her] feel like [she] wanted to come back,” and that she is now “starting to” like the college after re-enrolling.

It is important to acknowledge that the examples of active encouragement found in this study share a commonality in that they occurred between individuals with strong pre-leave relationships. Each time encouragement was reported to be an effective motivator in returning to Goucher, drop-outs were either close friends or romantic partners with their on-campus counterparts. Based on the findings related to authenticity, positive outcomes following
communications expressing this purpose may be exclusive to more trusting relationships. Reminders about the support systems and structures present on campus and active encouragement to return to campus serve similar purposes. They remind students about the college and engage them in thinking about what their experiences could be like if they returned. They also serve to reassure students about their connection and belonging in the community. If stop-outs feel positively about the resources available to them, and feel wanted by individuals and peer groups, they may be more likely to remain engaged and eventually return to the college.

Helpfulness and flexibility. The communications from college community members with specific functions related to re-enrollment seem to have an impact on how stop-outs feel about their institution. Stop-out participants were in touch with faculty and staff members assisting with issues like class registration, academic progress, financial aid, and housing. Debbie (s-o) reached out to her advisor asking to discuss her academic plan and reported that she was given good guidance. She went on to say that “the fact that the advisor that I spoke to was really helpful... made me really appreciate Goucher as a whole.” Patty (s-o) described her interactions with the Office of Financial Aid as “pretty easy,” “straightforward,” and “pleasant,” despite being nervous about her aid status. As a staff member in the office, Wade (c) reported that he was aware that other students had felt that others in his department were too short with them. For that reason, he recounted “I wanted to make sure I was particularly thorough and I wasn’t passing her around too much.” Asked to discuss the impact his assistance had on Patty, Wade stated that if her issues weren’t resolved before she came back to Goucher, “it would have been a little bumpy for her… so I think her getting all that information out of the way might have made it a little bit easier for her to start in the fall.” Skylar (s-o) looked back on the process of leaving and returning to Goucher and said that she found that the “people who ran Goucher” made things
“really easy.” Her boyfriend, Jack (c) also remembered getting the impression that the process for returning was simple. He said that it involved “just communicating with them, getting the paperwork done, and then it was like done. It didn’t really seem that painful or like it’d be hard for her to come back.” Ethan (s-o) detailed his feeling overwhelmed and confused by the information available online but found his communications with actual people to be very helpful. His experience indicates that stop-outs may perceive significant barriers to returning, even if they desire to do so. In these cases, direct contact with staff or faculty could serve to ease the process of returning to the college and the associated hesitancies to re-enroll.

Interviews further suggest that perceived flexibility of college officials can make favorable impressions on stop-out students. Dr. Boyd (c) recalled conversations with Brittany (s-o) pertaining to concerns about registering for her class on time. Brittany had not yet completed the process of formally re-enrolling and was therefore unable to register at the time, but Dr. Boyd was very willing to say “you’ll have a seat… one thing you don’t need to worry about is like getting into the class.” Again, this gesture showed Brittany that Dr. Boyd wanted her in her class. The professor added that she suspected that her flexibility made Brittany feel that Goucher is “a community that would accept her and work with her.” Ethan (s-o) was also able to provide a specific instance where he was granted an exception from normal procedures. He said that the Office of the Registrar forwarded him to another individual who was willing to review his writing portfolio to expedite the re-enrollment process. That person told Ethan that they typically do not review that information during that time of the semester but said “I understand you’re coming back.” When Patty (s-o) was granted her appeal from the Office of Financial Aid, her descriptions suggest that she appreciated their flexibility so much that it was “part of the reason I came back.” Skylar (s-o), having concerns about the social environment at the college felt that it
would be in her best interests to live off campus. Despite Goucher’s residency requirement, she was granted an exception, and found an off-campus space to live upon her return. Skylar connected her communications with the Office of Residential Life to the ease of her return, saying that “interacting with Res Life… made me feel good about [returning] because they were really helpful.” The importance of flexibility might suggest that stop-outs who feel as though the institution is willing to make accommodations for them value their presence in the community. These gestures appear to reassure students that the college is the right place for them.

Perceived purpose and intent were consistently associated with the manner in which interactions were received by stop-outs. While care reflects the tone of communications, purpose and intent focuses on the content. Based on the responses of participants, lines of communication initiated by faculty or staff seem to be received most positively if they resemble check-ins. Conversely, if the on-leave stop-out initiates the dialogue, they often are doing so inquiring about a specific need. In these cases, helpfulness and perceived flexibility can make students feel wanted and valued by the college. If stop-outs feel as though faculty or staff are working with them or making exceptions to make their returns easier, they may be more motivated to continue with the re-enrollment process. While support and encourage are useful tools in all interactions, they appear to be most valuable coming from peers. Stop-out participants discussing encouragement from their friends on campus reported positive emotions towards the social environment and were more optimistic about returning to Goucher.

**Other community engagement.** Interview questions for stop-outs and points of contact were intended to encourage participants to consider interactions in the form of direct communications. However, through the course of completing the collection of data for this study,
additional factors came to light that could impact how stop-out students engage with their campus communities while they are on leave.

_**Campus visits.**_ Of the six stop-out participants, four found themselves back on Goucher’s campus for visits during their leaves from the school. Debbie (s-o) reported being on campus most frequently, a choice she made primarily because her family home was close by. She discussed spending a lot of time with her friends in social situations and described maintaining those relationships as relatively easy. Because of her proximity, she stated that it was not “constant work” to keep up with her social network at Goucher. Debbie’s friend Tara (c) reflected back on their relationship and through the course of the conversation with the interviewer, realized that their friendship became much stronger while Debbie was not actively enrolled in the college. She recalled that they would “hang out,” go to the dining hall, attend parties off campus, and that Debbie was 21 at that time (Tara was not), so she was able to go out to local bars. Her descriptions of their interactions during Debbie’s visits sound very much like the social experiences of an enrolled student, suggesting that Debbie remained deeply connected with the social environment of the college while she was on leave. Brittany (s-o) was also on campus periodically but did not report substantial engagement with college community members. Rather, she came to campus because her horse was boarded at the stables. She also attributed her obligations to her horse as a reason she ended up coming back to Goucher, saying, “my horse is here, I can’t just get up and move. That wasn’t feasible at all.” This sort of commitment to the institution is not necessarily covered by Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) framework, but does demonstrate that having a reason to be on campus while on leave might influence stop-outs’ re-enrollment decisions.
Ethan (s-o) despite being enrolled at another institution in another state visited Goucher twice and had different responses to each visit. He stated that he first visited on Halloween weekend for Goucher’s annual production of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. During this visit, he recalled, “I was really sad because I was like, this is so, like wonderful. I love Goucher. And like, I miss Goucher, and so like my thought process got started in October, king of like, oh my God, like I really love this place.” Ethan’s current roommate Patricia (c) shared that at the time of his visit in October, they were not “that close,” but she was compelled to make an effort to see him because “he’s a really good person and he’s like fun to be around.” She remembered that they tossed around with the ultimate frisbee team and then “sat and talked and chatted, and just [caught] up on each other’s lives.” While this visit served as an impactful reminder of Ethan’s congruence with the social environment, when he came back in the spring, he faced anxieties related to academic expectations. He said that he returned the week after spring break, during a time of the year when students tend to be very busy with their classwork. He observed:

Everyone was like kind of busy and doing their thing. Um, so I saw like how many people were in the [library] working and like how many readings they had to do and they’re all telling me about their assignments. And I was like, Oh I’m so glad I’m not here because like I remember I could not keep up with this. So like I love Goucher College but like I can’t do it and I’m glad I’m not here.”

Obviously, he eventually made it back to Goucher, but his experience during his second visit to campus reinforced his pre-leave incongruence with the academic environment and expectations. The perspectives shared during Ethan’s interview indicate that the desire to reintegrate into the social community overcome his hesitancies about the academic side of the college.
Skylar (s-o) visited campus only once, to see her boyfriend Jack (c) while she was dealing with high levels of social anxiety that were directly associated with some of her former peers enrolled at the college. She described the experience as initially feeling “really scary,” but during an hour when Jack was in class, she had the opportunity to walk around campus. She recalled “the campus here is really pretty and I love trees, so I was like, oh, this is really nice. And then I saw one or two people that I know and they were really friendly so it made me like want to come back more.” It seems that in Skylar’s case, having the chance to remind herself about aspects of the college she enjoyed, and having positive interactions with other students alleviated some of her concerns about her potential return.

Visiting campus is often the most immersive interaction that on-leave students can have with their campus communities. Though two stop-out participants expressed social and academic concerns about being back to campus, they were also reminded of the aspects of the college they valued or missed. Interview results suggest that the opportunity to be physically back on campus could serve to positively impact institutional commitment.

**Indirect interactions.** An alternative method for continued engagement with the college community came to light in conversations with student participants frequently utilizing social media platforms. Often, these interactions were not direct person-to-person communications but involved the posting and viewing of content on services like Facebook and Snapchat. Patty (s-o) discussed the impacts of opening social media services and having the chance to see what her former peers were doing. She that she saw “people having a good time here” and feeling like she was “missing out.” She went on to say that these indirect interactions made her reevaluate her feelings, she remembered thinking “that could be my life too, I could do that. I don’t have to like,
you know, be home.” Ethan’s (s-o) utilization of Snapchat was slightly more direct but allowed him to engage with many of his friends at Goucher. He stated that he

had a lot of people on like Snapchat, so like that’s a mode of communication that’s easy
to just kind of like go quick back and forth, to like not talk a lot but maintain a
relationship. So it was lots of that like someone on their Story posted something we’d like
reply to it and stuff like that.

When he was making the decision to return to Goucher, he posted on Snapchat asking if anyone needing a roommate, eventually determining that he would live with Patricia (c). She was also asked about their interactions on social media, and she discussed Ethan’s connections with herself and other members of the ultimate frisbee team. She said that the content was primarily “light” and “funny,” and that they typically shared “stuff about dogs… like memes and stuff. So it was nothing really [laughter].” Despite Patricia’s description of these interactions, it appears that Ethan derived significant value from feeling connected to the campus and engaging in enjoyable, silly exchanges.

These social media sites allow individuals to passively view posts and keep up with the lives of their peers and may provide stop-out students with a tool that maintains social engagement with a community while they are physically absent. Students can view photos and videos of events and occurrences that can serve to remind them of the people and experiences they may be missing.

**Family involvement.** Four of the six stop-out student participants reported some level of family involvement in their leave decisions and experiences. Two interviewees shared that their parents played a significant and direct role in the decision to take a break from Goucher. In Raj’s
(s-o) case, their parents were aware of mental health struggles that they described as a “severe breakdown.” They came to campus and took Raj home, forcing a semester withdrawal. Debbie’s (s-o) parents also encouraged a leave of absence for general wellness and academic performance issues. Both sets of parents also played a role in coordinating their students’ returns to Goucher. Raj’s family remained in touch with the Office of Financial Aid after Raj forwarded emails from staff on to their parents. Debbie’s parents were also in touch with Financial Aid, but also kept in contact with college administrators on the return process. Debbie expressed that her parents’ contact with the Dean of Students Office was helpful particularly because she wanted to separate from the procedural and academic aspects of the college during her leave. She also reflected that the communications were “super beneficial for [her parents] … the fact that someone was willing to reach out and converse with them… I think it’s just really nice for parents.” Given that her parents were responsible for paying for her college experience, Debbie felt that it was appropriate for them to be involved in the return process.

Skylar (s-o), referring to questions about her potential living situation if she were to return to campus, discussed her father’s interactions with the Office of Residential Life. She shared that her family believed it would be in her best interests to live off campus, which requires an exemption under the college’s residency requirement. After her father spoke with Res Life, she was granted the exemption and allowed to live off campus. She and Jack (c) said that the ease of this process was helpful in considering returning as a Goucher student, and that it made it easier to come back. Patty (s-o) was initially anxious about taking her leave, fearful that she would disappoint her parents. She found that her parents were conversely “very encouraging” and stated that they would “fully support” her decision.
Involving stop-out students’ families appears to be a positive intervention, depending on the nature of the leave and comfort level and self-advocacy skills of the student. In cases where stop-outs prefer to separate from certain aspects of college life, or when they lack the capacity to complete processes necessary to re-enroll, family members may be helpful partners. Wade (c) stated that students frequently lacked understanding of the intricacies of financial aid policies and procedures, and it was therefore helpful to discuss some of those matters directly with parents. Additionally, families are important components of stop-out students’ support systems. Their encouragement appears to be meaningful and they typically have the luxury of being physically present in the lives of stop-outs while they are away from school. Engaging with parents and other family members as partners with shared commitment to the student could therefore be a valuable practice for colleges seeking to address stop-out attrition.

**Familiarity, comfort, and progress.** A final consistent theme that emerged during the analysis of interview transcripts does not directly relate to specific interactions between stop-outs and their community. It does however suggest that stop-out students’ institutional commitment levels may be leveraged to increase re-enrollment. Participants were quick to acknowledge that their familiarity and relative comfort they associated with the Goucher environment were factors contributing their decisions to return. In addition to her horse being boarded on campus, Brittany (s-o) attributed her desire to return partially to “comfort zones,” saying that when students are “more tied down to a place… it makes it harder for [them] to leave.” She also credited her relationships with faculty and the physical setting on campus as familiar aspects of the college that made her want to return (despite being unsure about re-enrolling at the time of her leave). Skylar (s-o) also found comfort in the familiarity of the physical environment, saying “I already knew the area and like the campus is really pretty,” indicating that she was not keen to put
herself in a position where she needed to become comfortable with a new place (again despite her concerns about returning). Raj (s-o) reflected on their thought process and hypothesized that the presence of people they cared about made them more receptive to the idea of coming back. They stated that knowing that the same people would be on campus made them feel “hopeful” about knowing what to expect. They thought “I could have a new experience… a familiar experience, but a new one that’d be more successful.” As a friend of a stop-out on leave, Tara (c) determined that strong peer relationships are difficult to sever, “because you form these connections and you don’t really want to just like let them go.” These insights into the re-enrollment decision provide evidence that stop-out students take into account their tangible and intangible investments into a community when deciding whether or not to leave. Ethan (s-o) simply recounted, “I was considering like going to other schools… but then I was like, I can’t start over again.” Similarly, Brittany was averse to the prospect of going through the process of orientation at a new institution and the difficulties associated with possibly switching her field of study. With these ideas in mind, Jack (c) theorized that stop-outs on leave receiving a message reminding them of what they enjoyed about the college could persuade them to consider re-enrollment. He recommended saying that the college will still “be the way you left it.” This type of communication would have varying impacts depending on the nature of students’ exits, but the suggestion further demonstrates that students value environments in which they are accustomed.

Familiarity, comfort, and institution-specific progress give institutions of original enrollment an advantage on the alternative options being considered by on-leave stop-outs. Even those stop-out participants who reported having negative experiences before they decided to take a semester withdrawal or leave of absence discussed aspects or people present at Goucher that
kept them connected to the college. It follows that these factors reduce the perceived barriers to re-enrollment. Often, interactions with various members of the campus community served as reminders of the advantages of choosing to return to the institution.

**Communication Documents**

The final method of data collection was requesting that stop-out participants volunteer communication records of their on-leave interactions for inclusion in this case study. This process was limited by participants’ willingness to share texts, emails, and social media posts, and their ability to recover those communications given the time that had passed since they returned to Goucher. As such, only one stop-out participant, Ethan, forwarded messages to the researcher. These communications were comprised of eight email threads between Ethan and his faculty or administrative offices on campus. He was not able to provide any communications between he and his peers, since the majority of his interactions occurred on Snapchat. Communications were uploaded into the MAXQDA system and coded according to tone and purpose. Topics of conversation were consistent in that they centered on completing different processes required for Ethan to re-enroll.

As he reported in his interview, Ethan found that aspects of the re-enrollment process were confusing but was provided with active assistance from individuals within offices including the Registrar and Financial Aid. The emails clearly indicate that college community members were providing Ethan with timely, accurate advice, and were taking efforts to make his return as simple as possible. Faculty members talked him through possible courses that would make sense to take during the semester of his return, while the Registrar was willing to manually add him into sections of courses he could not access online. One faculty member helped Ethan coordinate with other administrative offices by sending an email to “help facilitate [the] conversation.” This
professor included a subject line in the message that put forth a sense of urgency: “returning student needing advising!” An email from a faculty member responsible for reviewing writing portfolios confirmed that Ethan was permitted to submit his materials two months after the deadline. The professor stated that she was “happy to accommodate” him.

Emails indicate that Ethan was very concerned about transferring credits back to Goucher, and the possibility that he would not be able to afford to return if he could not graduate on time. He wrote that he intended to enroll in community college courses in order to earn credits while on leave. For this process, he was in touch with the Registrar, who provided him with individualized feedback on the potential for transfer credits, as well as how to go about submitting documents under the policy. In order to complete his education in four years, Ethan developed an academic plan and shared it with his advisor. The advisor reviewed the plan and provided Ethan with detailed responses to each aspect of his plan and referred him to appropriate offices to determine if it was feasible. An email from the Office of Financial Aid indicates that Ethan spoke with a staff member over the phone, who confirmed that his merit scholarship award would be renewed upon his return to the college. Messages sent from Ethan to his various points of contact between the months of April 2017 and August 2017 indicate that he responded positively to the interactions. He expressed gratitude to several individuals, directly thanking them for their assistance or stating that he genuinely appreciated their correspondence.

The communications provided to the researcher for inclusion in this study were woefully limited but they did serve to confirm information collected from Ethan’s interview. In particular, they showed that interactions with these faculty and staff very much reflected intentions to be flexible and help Ethan return to Goucher. They further demonstrated that several individuals at the college put forth active efforts to ensure that Ethan’s return process was as seamless as
possible, despite several complicating factors. By working with him, they provided individualized support that was clearly received with appreciation.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this case study was to examine how stop-out students interact with their college communities while they are on leave. The context of the environment at Goucher College was explored through a review of institutional documentation and data, yielding insight into the problem of stop-out student attrition. Given that approximately one third of stop-out students successfully re-enrolled at Goucher following a semester withdrawal or leave of absence, there seems to be a clear opportunity to engage in efforts to better support these students and subsequently increase their persistence behaviors. The primary method for collecting information on this topic was semi-structured interviews with stop-out students who re-enrolled for the fall 2017 semester, and community members with whom they interacted while on leave. Analysis of interview data indicates that the purpose (or intent) of communications, coupled with perceptions of care are linked with the manner in which those interactions are received, as well as their impacts on institutional commitment and re-enrollment. Participants derived significant value from interactions when they were grounded in an authentic sense of concern for the stop-out, and when the source of communications was a previously known and trusted individual. Interactions focused on institutional processes appeared to be effective when the tone of communications highlighted a desire to be helpful and flexible. Social engagement was also enhanced when stop-outs had the opportunity to visit campus and/or interact with their peer networks through the use of social media platforms. The data collected during this process suggests that improved understanding of the stop-out experience, combined with increased efforts to engage with on-
leave students could increase their levels of institutional commitment and encourage them to re-enroll.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

This research sought to discover how on-leave stop-out students interact with their college communities at a small liberal arts institution, Goucher College. This work was framed by Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) interactionalist model of student departure that suggests that a lack of academic and social integration lead to low levels of institutional commitment, and subsequently, student attrition. Tinto’s theory is grounded in the notion that interactions with individuals in a college community determines the level to which a student is integrated in the social environment. A qualitative approach was developed to better understand how stop-out students’ interactions affect integration, despite not being actively enrolled in the college. Data was collected from a variety of sources including semi-structured, in-depth interviews that provided insight into the context of the problem at the site institution. Through qualitative analysis of data, superordinate themes of on-leave interactions were found that suggest how interactions may affect institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors of stop-out students. Additional experiences shared by stop-out students and their points of contact show the potential to draw meaningful conclusions related to the purpose of this study.

Findings indicate that stop-out interactions have an effect on a student’s social integration but have little impact on academic integration. This is not to say that academic integration does not impact institutional commitment and re-enrollment decisions, but rather that on-leave individual interactions have a direct effect on personal affiliation between stop-outs and other persons in the organization. For this reason, discussion of findings will center on social integration, and its effect on institutional commitment and re-enrollment. This chapter will first summarize an important framework for understanding findings, Schlossberg’s (1989) conceptualization of college student marginality and mattering. Discussion of findings will begin
with the implications of findings as they relate to specific themes and factors discussed in the previous section. Next, as is consistent with qualitative case study inquiry, the researcher will make recommendations that could serve to address the problem at the site institution. To conclude, specific recommendations for future research related to stop-out attrition will be proposed.

**Marginality and Mattering (Schlossberg, 1989)**

The interpretation of this study’s findings connects to Schlossberg’s (1989) construct of college students’ mattering and marginality. Her previous work studying transition led her to believe that individuals in transition are at high risk for feeling marginalized, and consequently like they do not matter. Research conducted by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) suggested that mattering serves as a motivator and determines behavior. Schlossberg applied this assumption to the experiences of college students and posited that educational environments that successfully communicate to students that they matter encourage students to become more engaged with the community. She concluded her 1989 study with the identification of five aspects of mattering (four by Rosenberg and McCullough, and one by Schlossberg) – attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence, and appreciation.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 2</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Aspects of Mattering</em></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
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<tr>
<td>Attention</td>
<td>The feeling that one commands the interest of notice of another person</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>The belief that others care about what students want, think, and do</td>
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<td>------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ego-Extension</td>
<td>The feeling that others are proud of accomplishments and saddened by failures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependence</td>
<td>The belief that others rely on behaviors/actions and that individuals rely on others’ behaviors/actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td>The belief that individuals’ efforts are valued</td>
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*Note: Adapted from (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989)*

Types of relationships and tones and content of interactions determine the aspects of mattering that may come across through interpersonal communications. The degree to which these aspects are perceived by individuals determines their sense of mattering. This is particularly important in the case of stop-out students, who undergo constant transitions between their arrival to college, exit, and return. Under Schlossberg’s work in human transition, these students are at high risk of feeling marginalized by their communities. Results of this study show that mattering may be a significant factor in students maintaining a sense of connection to their institution. Because participants in this study perceived different forms of value from certain on-leave interactions, this construct of mattering provides a lens through which to understand the information collected in this study.

**Themes from Findings**

Interviews with stop-out student and point of contact participants established two overarching findings that framed the investigation into meaningful on-leave interactions. A sense of care was found to be strongly related to positive emotions and stop-out responses that increased institutional commitment. The purpose or perceived intent of interactions affected the
manner in which stop-outs responded to communications, with specific strategies emerging as potentially positively related to institutional commitment and re-enrollment.

**Sense of care.** It is important to remember that stop-out students are not actively involved in the primary functions of the college while they are away from school. They do not have access to on-campus support resources and are not immersed in the academic or social environments. Interactions with individuals present at the college are therefore the only avenue for maintaining integration with the campus community. It might be very easy for stop-out students on leave to feel marginalized or even forgotten by their college environments. This being the case, stop-out participants in this study consistently reported that interactions that made them feel cared-for and/or valued by their points of contact positively influenced how they felt about the college, and potentially returning. Faculty and peer contacts who communicated a sense of care succeeded in evoking positive emotions and connections, both between individuals and between the stop-out and the institution. This finding is consistent with Drake (2011) who determined that faculty advising relationships were stronger if students perceived a sense of care from their advisors. While a sense of care is not synonymous with mattering, participants’ descriptions of feeling important draw similarities to Schlossberg’s (1989) finding that individuals demonstrating concern for a student makes them feel that they matter.

Tinto (1993) posited that social isolation prevented students from feeling a sense of belonging at a college. The lack of supportive, caring relationships minimizes opportunities for social integration, decreasing students’ perceived institutional fit, and increasing the likelihood that they will leave. In regards to peer interactions, care is somewhat inherent in the fact that students keep in touch while one is away. Insofar as faculty and staff, participants felt cared about simply by hearing from faculty or staff. Students experiencing transition, marginality, and
possibly self-doubt are reminded through the attentiveness of community members that they are cared about – they matter. Tinto (2012) recognized the value of faculty and staff social support, indicating that they improve students’ sense of belonging and membership at a college or university. He further theorized that the quality of day-to-day informal interactions is massively influential on how students experience social integration, suggesting that these unstructured exchanges serve “both as a gauge by which one measures one’s values and as a social mechanism which constrains the development of highly deviant values” (Tinto, 1993, p. 102). Building un-official, informal relationships has been shown to positively affect student success outcomes including retention (Lillis, 2011; Pompper, 2006; Tinto, 1975). Similarly, Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified attention as the “most elementary form of mattering” (p. 164) because simply having interest in a person combats marginality. This interest may be expressed through interactions that have no intended outcomes, other than to keep in contact and remain invested in the lives of stop-outs while they are away from the college. Applied to the findings of this study, mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) extends Tinto’s framework by providing an opportunity to delve into how students translate their interactional experiences into affinity with an institution.

In the classroom, if faculty-student interactions are interpreted as unsupportive and without a component of care, students are less engaged and less motivated (Barnett, 2011; Tinto, 2012). Interactions that lack formal structure and expectations were found by Cotton & Wilson (2006) to make students feel that they were valued and more connected to the community. Jaasma & Koper (2009) determined that effective informal communications relied on trust and perception and had positive effects on academic motivation. It can be argued that students appreciate these interactions because they are aware that they are not required. Although it is
encouraged at Goucher, faculty and staff are in no way required to engage with students outside of formal roles. It is therefore easy for students to feel that generally purposeless interactions are rooted in a sense of care and interest in the individual. In the case of stop-out students, check-ins and other forms of sustained engagement were shown to be particularly effective in sending the message that students are still cared about while they are away from the college. This implies that no matter the purpose of on-leave communications, institutional commitment is positively affected if students get the sense that the point of contact cares about them.

**Authenticity.** Feeling as though interactions were genuinely caring was found to be an important characteristic of beneficial on-leave interactions. Stop-out participants on leave did not want to feel as though the college community had ulterior motives for engaging in communications with them. Harrison (2009) investigated faculty advising relationships and found that advisor authenticity improved the advising experience. Stop-out participants in this study similarly shared that they expected community members to genuinely care for their interests, rather than reaching out to them for callous purposes of collecting tuition revenue or buttressing retention numbers. Authenticity is therefore grounded in a belief that interactions and relationships are motivated only by the value of the individual as a member of the campus community. Higgins (2015) found that authenticity is a foundational aspect of the development of a strong connection between faculty and students within the advising relationship. Further, she surmised that trust is built directly as a result of authentic interactions. The data collected in this study seems to confirm this assertion, with interview participants expressing that they felt cared about if they could rely on the upfront intentions of their on-campus counterparts. Two stop-outs participating in this research stated that a lack of perceived authenticity incited a profoundly negative reaction. For this reason, there appears to be very little middle ground in regards to the
tone of on-leave communications. Considering their sensitivities to the possibility of ulterior motives, it is crucial for these interactions to be framed in ways that minimize the likelihood that they will be interpreted as dishonest.

One possible avenue for achieving authenticity is provided by Schlossberg (1989) in the form of the concept of ego-extension. This aspect of mattering refers to the feeling that individuals experience positive or negative emotions depending on the actions and experiences of others. In other words, if stop-out students believe that their points of contact on campus are affected by their successes and failures, they are more likely to feel as though they matter. This is evident in the apprehensions of stop-out participants who were concerned that their decisions to leave college would disappoint their families. In these cases, their anxieties represented the negative form of ego-extension but demonstrated that they believed that they mattered to their parents. Participants in this study also reacted favorably when the on-campus individuals with whom they were in contact were excited about their possible return to the college. This was clear in participants’ reported interactions through social media, as well as descriptions of communications with faculty members. Ego-extension appears to be a powerful motivating factor in influencing behaviors – when community members are emotionally connected to the experiences of stop-outs, it inspires a strong sense of care. Similarly, peer points of contact expressed that they would be saddened if stop-outs failed to return, creating a dynamic that suggested to stop-outs that their friends’ happiness relied on their re-enrollment. These interactions support the application of dependence in Schlossberg’s mattering model. Communications that reflect this aspect reinforce the value of the social environment at the college and remind stop-outs that they are important to others at the institution.
**Pre-leave relationship.** Participants in this study were clear that they strongly preferred to interact with known individuals while they were away from the college. Communications from community members who meant something to stop-outs prior to their semester withdrawal or leave of absence appeared to have a more positive impact than interactions with unfamiliar individuals. This may be explained by the existence of relationships that had progressed to stages of mutual trust and value. Interestingly, two peer points of contact interviewed for this study reported that their relationships with their corresponding stop-out grew stronger while they were on leave. One pair of interviewees, a stop-out and a faculty member exhibited strong signs of mentorship. This type of relationship has been shown to improve student outcomes related to academic performance (Campbell et al., 2012) and persistence (Baier et al., 2016). While there is an absence of literature focusing specifically on mentorship and stop-out students, Fuentes et al. (2014) found evidence that early establishment of faculty relationships led to more beneficial faculty connections, eased the transition to college academics, and assisted with social integration.

These findings suggest that maintaining long-standing faculty relationships can lead to positive student success outcomes. In the context of this case study, hearing from individuals with whom stop-outs has some level of familiarity led to quality on-leave interactions and served to maintain emotional commitments to the college. Interview results suggest that a pre-leave relationship makes it easier for interactions to feel authentic. Stop-out participants reported receiving active assistance from faculty members during the process of leaving school – indicating that those individuals truly cared about what was best for the departing students. Interacting with those instructors reminded those students that there were community members at Goucher that were genuinely concerned with their interests as people. Under Schlossberg’s
(1989) model of mattering, these experiences demonstrate the value of perceiving a sense of importance. Having a prior instructor, mentor, or friend reach out and attempt to maintain a discourse while on leave sends the message that stop-outs matter to those people, and if they came back, that caring relationship would persist.

**Purpose and intent.** The tone of communications has been shown to affect how on-leave interactions influence connection and motivation to re-enroll in this case study. The content of messages and perceived purpose or intent also seems to play some role in determining stop-outs’ institutional commitment and return to campus. Data collected in this study shows that the reasons for engaging with students on leave impact the level to which those students feel that they genuinely matter to the college.

**Checking in.** Interactions that were described by participants as “check-ins” may be understood as communications that lack specific purpose, other than the continuation of a dialogue or relationship. They are brief, non-intrusive, casual, and require little effort, but they appear to mean very much to stop-outs receiving them. Every stop-out and each point of contact participating in this study referred either to their positive experiences with a form of a check-in or suggested that checking in could be useful in maintaining a positive connection with the college. These results support previous research in considering day-to-day informal interactions and significant contributors to social engagement and institutional commitment (Lillis, 2011; Pompper, 2006; Tinto, 1975, 2012). Interviews indicate that these interactions are favorably received whether they come from peers, faculty, or staff at the institution. They appear to carry far greater value if they come from individuals with whom stop-outs had a pre-leave relationship, but several participants indicated that they would appreciate hearing from others as well – as long as they felt caring and authentic. Tinto (2012) suggested that checking in is good practice
for colleges interested in retaining and graduating students. He said, “rather than wait for students to avail themselves of services, effective institutions generally monitor student performance and quickly reach out to them when indicators warrant action.” (p. 50). While Tinto was not referring specifically to students on leave, the findings of this study agree that proactive interventions with marginalized students can be effective in maintaining congruence with the community.

An important characteristic of a check-in is the ability to communicate in ways that avoid leaving an impression that the gesture is motivated by factors that are incongruent with care and value of the individual. Multiple stop-out participants discussed simply staying in touch with friends and talking about each other’s lives. Neither party went into these communications with intended outcomes, they were rooted in mutual interest in maintaining a relationship. For this reason, peer check-ins are most likely inherently authentic, and therefore contribute to social engagement and institutional commitment. This finding confirms Dixon Rayle and Chung (2007), who employed Schlossberg’s (1989) theory to find that general social support from college friends had a significant positive impact on students’ mattering to their college environments. While multiple participants in this study reported being in touch with as few as one friend on campus, those interactions were described as “checking in” and “keeping up,” and were associated with positive reminders about the benefits of life on campus. These communications consistently served to make stop-outs feel supported by a peer or peers and maintained some level of connection to the social environment at Goucher. For students who are physically absent from an environment, these interactions are critical in preserving engagement with the social system, which Tinto (1975) fundamentally attributed to institutional integration and commitment.
While faculty and staff check-ins were found to have a similar effect on stop-outs, it is much easier for them to be suspicious about communications from employees – participants seemed to be abundantly aware that retention and tuition revenue are important to college officials. A previous relationship is a major component of authenticity, but interview data suggests that stop-outs might be open to individual communications with previously unknown individuals. Several participants considering how the college could encourage stop-outs to re-enroll put forth that check-ins or reminders about the college and the return process could be engaging and reduce perceived barriers. Results indicate that if the college were to consider outreach strategies, they should be brief, include a component of care, and ask questions. Based on participants’ negative experiences with communications from administrative departments, it would be important to carefully select individuals responsible for on-leave outreach. Stop-outs would likely respond most positively to check-ins from unknown individuals if they served in student support roles, rather than administrative or logistic-based positions.

Checking-in was found to be the most frequently and consistently acknowledged type of communication that positively affected social engagement and connection to the college. Under Schlossberg’s (1989) mattering model, this can be explained by the importance of attention. Like check-ins in this study, attention refers simply to feeling that individuals in the community are interested in a person. For stop-out students feeling separated and possibly marginalized from the social environment, these reminders that they are not forgotten can be tremendously meaningful. Findings indicate that peer relationships that are supportive, ongoing, and lack ulterior motives are vital in maintaining a connection to the college. Further, interview data shows that this connection, even if it is with a single person, can drastically impact a stop-out’s decision to re-enroll. Multiple participants directly stated that they would not have been motivated to return to
Goucher if they had not kept up with on-campus friends, because they wanted to return to a familiar social environment. These findings demonstrate that checking in might adequately fulfill the need to intervene with the probably marginalized stop-out population in order to allow them to remain connected to and reminded of the college community.

**Offering support and encouragement.** All of the stop-outs interviewed in this study discussed some level of self-doubt, anxiety, and stress related to their leave experiences. Each participant displayed clear deficiencies in academic and/or social confidence. Making the decision to stop-out is a stressful transition and is often perceived as failures. Research has shown that students experiencing circumstances that they perceive as failures are often unable to manage this adversity and are vulnerable to attrition (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2014; Nordstrom et al., 2014). This being the case, stop-out students may benefit from supportive and encouraging interactions with campus community members to remind them of their capabilities and belonging at the college.

These interactions differ from check-ins in that they do have a specific purpose of providing guidance and/or opinions on potential stop-out decisions. In several cases, stop-out participants reported that their friends helped them coordinate self-care plans to manage mental health or social anxiety issues. In the case of faculty interactions, participants who felt as though they mattered to their professors reported positive emotional effects and increased motivation to return to the college. Interview results conversely showed that the absence of a mattering component (Schlossberg, 1989) in on-leave faculty interactions resulted in minimal influence on stop-outs’ feelings towards the institutional. This finding supports Higgins’ (2005) conclusion that supportive actions were a key factor in students valuing their relationships with their advisors. Supportive actions involve actual individualized efforts being taken to provide
guidance to students. For faculty and staff in contact with stop-outs on leave, these actions can involve planning, coaching, and other forms of advisement that remind students that they have partners back on campus. These interactions reflect three of Schlossberg’s aspects of mattering: attention, importance, and ego-extension, and again demonstrate the potential for applying this model to Tinto’s (1975) seminal student departure framework.

Interview results show that these types of communications are effective only if there is a pre-existing relationship. Insofar as peer interactions while on leave, maintaining communications with close friends or romantic partners on campus provided an avenue for unique support. Stop-out participants receiving active support from on-campus students reported feeling optimistic about returning and positively connected. Types of support varied, with simple affirmations of belonging resulting in effective reminders of institutional congruence. Coaching and guidance that emphasized the interests of the stop-out (even if the guidance involved considering non-returning options) positively affecting participants’ desire to reunite with individuals and the social environment at the college.

Active encouragement to return to Goucher was shown to be a touchy issue that depended on the nature of the relationship with the point of contact and the tone of communications. It has been established that stop-out participants in this study were wary that institutions might only want them back for reasons of improving retention rates and sustaining tuition revenue. For that reason, participants implied that college employees should not be too eager in broaching the re-enrollment question. Encouragement to return was found to be effective in instances when the point of contact was a close friend or romantic partner. Participants reporting being encouraged to re-enroll at Goucher, experienced the ego-extension aspect of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). These interactions showed them that their decisions
would positively or negatively affect the emotions and experiences of their peers at the college. Consequently, as Schlossberg suggests, they became more integrated into the social environment and as a result, as Tinto (1973, 1993, 2012) theorized, made the decision to persist at Goucher College.

**Helpfulness.** The process of returning to Goucher following a semester withdrawal or leave of absence is a relatively simple process. The review of institutional policies shows that students are simply expected to re-enroll at the beginning of their expected return semester. If the withdrawal/leave was related to medical issues, students are required to request that their healthcare provider complete a Request to Return Form (“Medical/Compassionate Withdrawal Policy,” 2017) that outlines progress, prognosis, and the provider’s opinion on readiness to return to the environment and responsibilities at the college. Some participants confirmed that they felt the procedures for returning to the college were simple and straightforward. Others however, reported experiencing complicated issues in regards to financial aid status, academics, and housing. The ease of the re-enrollment experience is therefore dependent on the individual. In cases where stop-outs do perceive barriers to reentering the college, the level to which they believe they are helped and/or accommodated can be an important factor in their eventual return. Again, interactions that demonstrated individualized attention and importance had a positive effect on participants’ sense of mattering.

In cases of procedural barriers stop-out and point of contact participants acknowledged that these issues could be complex and potentially frustrating for students considering re-enrollment. Staff and faculty were found to be most helpful when they actively assisted students and engaged with demonstrated concerted efforts to work collaboratively through process-based barriers. In the absence of individualized attention, stop-outs reported feeling dehumanized and
devalued by the college. This important distinction between types of interactions directly reflects
the theory of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) in that the willingness to actively assist students
makes them feel important and acknowledged. The communication documents submitted to the
researcher confirm that when community members are responsive and provide clear, digestible
information to stop-outs, those interactions positively influence institutional affinity and
motivation to return. Furthermore, the research linking financial support and retention have been
mixed but do indicate that students with less ability to pay display higher retention with
increased financial aid (Huang et al., 2010; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Tinto, 2012). Given that
financial issues are clear stressors for many stop-out students (Hoyt & Winn, 2004), these
findings indicate that the experience of having quality interactions with staff and faculty may
alleviate specific anxieties and contribute to building a positive view of the institution as a
whole.

On-leave interactions that are perceived as helpful remind students that they matter to the
campus community by demonstrating Schlossberg’s (1989) attention aspect of the construct.
Helpful interactions appear to share qualities of responsiveness and active assistance, where
stop-out students can receive timely information from individuals taking real efforts to address
the unclear. Given the variety of factors influencing the decision to re-enroll, it is important for
colleges to understand where barriers may lie and be prepared to help students navigate
confusing processes.

**Flexibility.** Engaging in efforts that actively assist stop-out students while on leave is
useful for students seeking information. Flexibility in processes can be understood as students
receiving accommodations or exceptions to college policies and procedures. Participants in this
study indicated that they were happy and satisfied when they felt as though they were receiving a
special waiver or skirting typical channels related to returning to campus. Flexibility was therefore shown to be a positive motivator for re-enrollment and likely increased students’ affinity with the college.

Prior to making the decision to re-enroll, participants reported feeling that their faculty and staff contacts were willing to bend on certain requirements or expectations. Interview results suggest that these impressions leave stop-outs feeling valued, understood, and wanted. In these cases, students shared that it was important that they were not only receiving assistance, they believed they were receiving special treatment. Under Schlossberg’s (1989) model of mattering, flexibility communicates a strong sense of importance to students, making them feel as though they are valued by the college community. In other words, if college officials are willing to make exceptions for stop-outs, they are sending the message that they truly want them to be enrolled. Confirming this aspect of mattering, findings in this study suggest that flexibility in processes and procedures made participants more motivated to re-enroll at the college.

Data indicate that Schlossberg’s (1989) final aspect of mattering, appreciation is indirectly related to helpfulness and flexibility. Appreciation refers to the feeling that one’s efforts are valued by their community. In the case of college students, it is relatively easy to understand how students’ contributions might be appreciated. Student leaders fulfill important roles in helping other students grow, while working to enhance the social and academic environments. Student-athletes are constantly acknowledged for their performances in sports. For stop-outs however, feeling appreciated by the college is less straightforward. Appreciation might therefore be experienced through the other aspects of mattering. When on-leave students receive attention, are made to feel important or depended on and experience ego-extension, they feel as though their presence on campus is appreciated. In this way, helpfulness and flexibility indirectly
communicate the message that students are appreciated, through expressions of attention and importance.

**Conclusion.** The overarching findings provided by data collected for this study demonstrate that a number of factors influence how on-leave interactions are received by stop-out students. While the content and purpose of beneficial communications varies, they are rooted in a sense of care and express (in some way or another) that the student matters to the point of contact and the greater campus community. Schlossberg’s (1989) model of college student mattering and marginality provides this data with a lens through which to understand why certain interactions yielded positive outcomes provided by Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) conceptualization of student departure. These findings indicate that mattering plays an important part in students building institutional commitment, and subsequently persisting with their original institution. While Tinto’s model considers how interactions affect integration within the college’s social system, it does not explicitly and concisely determine how that process happens – mattering might fill that gap.

**Other Community Engagement**

While the previous section focused on summarizing the qualities and impacts of one-on-one interactions, interview data suggests that stop-out students on leave engage with their college communities in other important ways. The nature of these interactions is somewhat unique, given that stop-outs are not physically present on campus, and typically living at home with their families. Campus visits, indirect communications, and family involvement were shown to be interactions other than direct contacts that had an effect on stop-outs’ institutional commitment and re-enrollment behaviors.
Campus visits. Stop-out students participating in this study described varying levels of interest and ability to visit campus while they were on leave. Some interviewees shared that they hoped to temporarily separate from the community or that it could be counterproductive to come to campus, given the circumstances that led to their exit. The four stop-out participants who did visit Goucher all reported that the experiences positively affected their motivation to return, though for various reasons. Some discussed benefiting from re-engaging with their social circles at the Goucher setting and participating in the same activities in which they were involved while enrolled. Frequency of visits varied from weekly to only once during a leave but reconnecting with close peers like friends and partners was associated with a desire to return to a place where stop-outs know they are cared for.

The experiences of these stop-outs suggest that visiting campus could increase institutional commitment of students on leave. They all discussed the value of seeing and engaging with community members in person. These encounters, under Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) reinforce social rewards and build affinity with the physical environment, thus increasing institutional commitment. In consideration of two-year colleges and commuter schools, Tinto (1993) addressed the value of spending more time on campus. Citing the importance of informal interactions and deep engagement with the social system, he stated that students spending minimal time on campus struggle to integrate and develop institutional congruence. Essentially, the process of engaging with a campus community is made much easier if students are physically present. Furthermore, in this study, re-engagement with smaller social circles had a meaningful impact on participants’ visit experiences. Tinto’s model suggests that institutional commitment can be indirectly enhanced by quality interactions in these smaller circles. He theorized that a commitment to a small social structure within the college environment could overcome a broader
lack of commitment to the institution as a whole. For this reason, participants in this study visiting campus and temporarily being a part of these groups proved to be influential on stopouts’ motivations to return to Goucher, supporting Tinto’s interactionalist emphasis on student persistence.

In addition to the people on campus, some participants stated that they were drawn back to the physical beauty they experienced as enrolled students. They expressed levels of comfort and happiness in the environment, including direct assertions that physical characteristics of campus played significant roles in return decisions. This satisfaction with the campus itself lends to the development of positive institutional congruence. Tinto (1975) put forth that congruence with a college is defined by a student’s belief that the institution has the characteristics in place to enable them to succeed. Looking specifically at how campus planning impacts student satisfaction, socialization, and retention, Hajrasouliha & Ewing (2016) found that campuses with attractive physical features like greenness and urbanism were positively associated with desired student outcomes. While these features are difficult to change or improve, these findings do demonstrate that students who connect with the physical campus environment are more likely to succeed in college. Beyond the social benefits of stop-out campus visits, students deriving positive emotions from the physical characteristics of campus are reminded of those appealing aesthetics when they arrive, thereby influencing their interest in returning to the college as enrolled students.

**Indirect interactions.** Most college students are daily users of at least one social media platform (Sandvig, 2016). With the prevalence and frequency of social media usage for this age group, apps like Facebook and Snapchat have become important components of students’ lives. Participants in this study recalled the value of viewing text, photo, and video posts from their
peers at Goucher, even if they did not directly interact with any of their friends through those mediums. Keeping abreast of the social aspects of the college through social media made stop-outs imagine how they could be enjoying their time on campus if they re-enrolled. Similarly, some participants in this study reported that social media allowed them to remain engaged with peer circles – particularly with humorous posts involving students. One participant shared that his continued attention to Snapchat allowed him to stay in the loop, likely maintaining feelings of membership within social groups while away. These interactions require very little time or effort but these findings show that they are effective in remaining passively connected to the social environment on campus.

Recent research has attempted to connect social media usage with college adjustment and persistence (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013; Hoogeveen, 2014), but findings indicate that social media usage in of itself does not significantly impact student success outcomes. Rather, they determined that intentional programming such as academic collaboration or mentorship over social media platforms can influenced perceived social support and subsequent persistence. Social media is also a commonly utilized method for attracting students to consider applying to a college. Recruitment through Facebook has proven to be an inexpensive and effective route for engaging with prospective students (Wazed & Ng, 2015). Sandvig (2016) surveyed admitted students at a single university and found that 56% reported that social media was helpful in choosing their institution. Additionally, 76.5% of participants connected to at least one Facebook group officially administered by the university. Results of this study have indicated that there are similarities between stop-out re-enrollment and prospective student college choice. Because interview participants suggested that social media played a clear and positive role in their
continued social integration and desire to return to the college, certain social media activity might significantly affect institutional commitment and subsequent re-enrollment.

**Family involvement.** During participant interviews, several participants discussed the effects of communications between college staff and parents. These interactions did not include the stop-out students themselves but did provide family members with the opportunity to complete steps required for re-enrollment or to pass important information on to their students. Family involvement in this study was limited to procedural interactions and did not necessarily affect social integration. It did however allow for students to feel as though individuals at the college were helpful and willing to be flexible, suggesting to stop-outs that they matter to the college. Tinto’s (2012) conceptualization of institutional congruence refers directly to the perceived match between student’s expectations and a college’s environment, specifically in regards to support systems. Results in this study indicate that family communications may serve to reduce the perceived burdens related to re-enrollment, thereby allowing students to feel that the college is living up to their expectations.

Stop-out students returning home while on leave typically find themselves interacting with their parents with much greater frequency than with their college communities. Current research on college students and their families indicates that parents significantly influence student behavior, motivation, and subsequent success (Kranstuber et al., 2012; Pizzolato & Hicklen, 2011; Yazedjian et al., 2007). Evidence linking parental shared agency with academic achievement and motivation (Chang et al., 2010; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Kriegbaum et al., 2016) shows that collaborative and supportive relationships improve factors that influence student persistence behaviors. In this study, both stop-out and point of contact participants expressed that families of stop-outs were encouraged by their interactions with staff members.
from various administrative offices. Parents seeking information about support services and processes were made to feel more comfortable with the potential re-enrollment of their students when they spoke directly with staff members over the phone. This effect was found to be particularly significant if staff members were perceived to be helpful and/or flexible. Considering Schlossberg’s (1989) model of mattering, staff attentiveness and support communicated that the on-leave student was still important to the college and would receive similar positive treatment if they were to return.

**Conclusion.** This study sought out to examine interactions between stop-out students and their college communities while they are on leave. The majority of these interactions were found to occur from a distance, through email and text message. Campus visits, social media usage, and family involvement emerged from interviews as additional factors influencing institutional commitment and the desire to re-enroll. With stop-out students leaving college for a variety of reasons and under a variety of circumstances, it is important to understand the different approaches that may provide colleges with the opportunity to show students that they matter. Results indicate that Schlossberg’s (1989) application of mattering to college students and their campus environments fills an important gap in Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) model of student departure. In his conceptual flow chart outlining the dropout process (Tinto, 1993, p. 95), he infers that student interactions lead into the development of social integration, which affects institutional commitment. In the case of students on leave, the gap between interactions and social integration may be explained by the level to which they feel as though they matter (See Figure 2).
After leaving a college, the tone and content of on-leave interactions determines if students feel mattered by their institutions, which determines their level of social integration. If they do believe that they are valued, this increased (or simply maintained) affirmation of institutional congruence inspires positive associations with the college and motivates them to return.

**Recommendations for Site Institution**

The review of institutional documents shows that Goucher College views retention as an important indicator of institutional success and an area for desired improvement. With an average of 39 students on leave at any given time and only a 36% re-enrollment rate for stop-outs, this population of students represents a significant hit to retention and graduation rates. Despite this clear problem, a review of policy and procedure documents revealed no institutional efforts to maintain a relationship or communications with stop-out students while they are away from campus. Under Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) model of student departure and persistence, interactions are the key to establishing and strengthening college students’ social integration and subsequent institutional commitment. It may therefore be inferred that seeking to provide stop-
out students with opportunities to interact with their campus communities while on leave could support institutional commitment and encourage re-enrollment.

**Institutional outreach strategy.** Findings from this research suggest that Schlossberg’s (1989) model of marginality and mattering explains how stop-out students translate their interactions into ongoing integration with the social environment, which determines emotional affinity with the college. Interview results demonstrated that on-leave interactions differ in their perceived value depending on their tone and content. A sense of authentic care was shown to be crucial in communicating to stop-out students that they matter to their individual points of contact, as well as the college as a whole. Communications defined previously as check-ins were consistently correlated with mattering, whether the point of contact was an on-campus peer, faculty member, or staff. These interactions may be understood as general inquiries related simply to how stop-outs are doing. They lack ulterior motive and were shown to validate the genuine tone of an interaction while making students feel cared about. Communications were also positively received by stop-outs if they offered support and encouragement or were helpful in navigating the steps required to return to the college. With this information, Goucher College, as the site of this case study, may consider the following recommendations to address the problem of stop-out attrition.

**Identify appropriate point of contact.** A positive pre-leave relationship was found to be an important factor in determining the level to which on-leave interactions felt caring and authentic. Stop-out participants suggested that they would not want to hear from previously unknown individuals at the college. They felt that this would feel disingenuous and that the community members were reaching out simply to use them for revenue or enrollment numbers. They did however report that they would be receptive to remaining in contact with familiar
faculty or staff. Ideally, this person would have shown an interest in the student as a person prior to their decision to take a leave. While the college could develop a procedure that requires faculty advisors to reach out to students on leave, it is possible that students leaving the college did not experience a warm and supportive relationship with those individuals. More simply, because students are required to meet with a specific staff member prior to taking a semester withdrawal or leave of absence (“Leave of Absence & Withdrawal,” n.d.), that individual could inquire about a preferred point of contact to be responsible for carrying out the on-leave outreach plan. This would ensure that the stop-out would be happy to hear from the person and benefit from perceiving a sense of genuine care.

**Establish communication guidelines.** This study’s findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of interactions depends on tone and purpose. Points of contact should therefore be provided with somewhat standardized guidelines for interacting with students on leave. Of the types and purposes of communications reviewed in this research, the check-in was most frequently utilized by point of contact participants, and universally associated with a positive response from stop-outs. Contacts should therefore be provided with outreach procedures that explain how to check in with a student. These communications should be brief, singular, non-intrusive, and omit the topic of potential re-enrollment. Check-ins are inherently caring, authentic, and reflect aspects of Schlossberg’s (1989) mattering. Following an initial check-in, if students are responsive, points of contact should offer general support and encouragement, while gently reinforcing that seeing the stop-out back on campus matters to them. Because family involvement was found to be useful and appreciated in some cases, points of contact might ask if parents or other family members might want to be in touch with them or other individuals at the college. Finally, if stop-outs indicate that they have questions or concerns about the process or
prospect of re-enrolling, they should be prepared to refer them directly to individuals (not offices) who can provide them with direct and individualized support.

**Provide training to college officials.** One stop-out participant referenced feeling significantly undervalued when hearing from a staff member in the financial aid/billing office. They stated that the interaction made them feel “like a number” and like “a cog in the machine.” A point of contact participant in this study working in that office (but not participating as a point of contact for that student) discussed knowing that students had felt ill-treated by officemates in the past. Having a negative experience with a staff member underpins stop-out students already feeling marginalized by their campus communities and counters Schlossberg’s (1989) aspects of mattering. Staff members and faculty advisors responsible for functions of the college that might come into play for stop-out students must be made to understand the importance of students feeling valued by their institution. A student on leave who makes the effort to initiate steps towards a return should feel that college officials are helpful, flexible, understanding, and caring. They should come away from the interaction feeling as though the person with whom they spoke genuinely wants them to return to Goucher.

**Encourage campus visits.** Stop-out students under Schlossberg’s (1989) mattering model are at high risk for marginality. Under his framework, periods of transition cause people to feel marginalized by a community. Stop-out students prior to, during, and after their leaves are in continuing states of frequent transition, forcing them to repeatedly undergo the process towards feeling mattered. Stop-out students in this study who visited campus while they were on leave reported varied and significant positive impacts on their institutional commitment and desire to return to the college. This finding suggests that reminding students on leave that they are welcome on campus anytime, might serve to prompt them to feel mattered by their college
community. Research has shown that summer bridge programs and special events hosted by admissions offices positively affect readiness for college and retention (Bir & Myrick, 2015; Cabrera et al., 2013; Goenner et al., 2013; Lopez, 2016). Holding a special event for stop-out students, or simply inviting them back for existing events on campus would not only serve to fulfill aspects of mattering but would get students to be physically present and deeply interactive with the social system.

**Establish social media strategy.** Interview data suggests that participants believed that the college could not control the level to which they engage with their peers. However, stop-out participants recalling their social media usage reported that remaining engaged with on-campus peers elicited positive emotional reactions and affinities with the college. One participant suggested that a peer support network for students on leave could produce a social norming effect, making the experience feel less marginalizing. A social media platform could provide the college with a low-cost opportunity to encourage stop-out students to engage online, share information about processes, and (hopefully) build enthusiasm for eventual returns to the college. Alternatively, points of contact might refer to existing social media groups or posts to encourage stop-outs to access those pages and be reminded of positive aspects of campus life.

**Conclusion.** The aggregated findings from the study demonstrate that stop-out student attrition is a significant hindrance on Goucher College’s institutional goals and priorities but that minimal efforts might be taken to begin to address the problem. The development of a strategic initiative that establishes a set of recommended procedures for interacting with stop-outs would ensure that at minimum, students on leave do not feel forgotten by their college communities. Utilizing check-ins to reopen dialogues might reestablish fading connections and reaffirm students’ commitment to the institution. While this study provided insight into the experiences of
Goucher students who completed the re-enrollment process, the body of knowledge on stop-outs would benefit from continued and expanded inquiry.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This qualitative case study investigated how stop-out students interact with their college communities while on leave. Findings begin to explain the impacts of interactions on institutional commitment and re-enrollment but are limited by the lack of recent research in this area, and the scope of this study. Future research into the stop-out experience would provide increased and generalizable understanding of the problem of stop-out student attrition.

**Focus on mattering (Schlossberg, 1989).** Schlossberg’s marginality and mattering provided findings from this study with a previously missing piece that explained how interactions affect social integration and subsequent institutional commitment. The inclusion of this model illuminated meaning from the aggregated data but future studies might construct research plans around this theoretical framework to dig deeper into the problem through interview questioning and instrumentation. Dixon Rayle & Chung (2007) used the Interpersonal and General Mattering Assessment (IGMA) to measure mattering experiences in first-year college students. The utilization of evaluative tools designed to assess mattering could yield supplementary data that further illuminates the correlation between mattering and student persistence factors in stop-out students.

**Non-returning stop-outs.** While this study focused on the experiences of re-enrolled stop-out students at a college, it is limited by the lack of inclusion of students who did not return. The experiences of non-returning students are potentially vital in understanding the stop-out experience. This study emphasized the communicative factors which played a role in determining institutional commitment and re-enrollment of returning students but the devolution
of institutional commitment of non-returning stop-outs is equally significant. Future studies might seek out these students and inquire as to how interactions (or a lack thereof) affected their affinity with the college and desire to return.

**Evaluate recommended interventions.** The previous section outlined recommendations for the site institution in seeking to improve stop-out student persistence. These recommendations are based on the findings of this study, as well as the frameworks of Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) and Schlossberg (1989), but would be instituted as untested initiatives. Future research might focus on evaluating these pilot interventions to confirm mattering’s correlation with integration and commitment, while continuing to expand the scope of knowledge on stop-out students’ experiences while away from college.

**Admissions recruitment and stop-out interventions.** A secondary finding of this study was supported by data but largely theoretical. Aggregated suggested the possibility that the re-enrollment decision of stop-out students might be similar to college choice decisions of prospective students. Research that compares admissions recruitment strategies with interventions and interactions with on-leave stop-out students could confirm or disprove this proposal. If validated, researchers would benefit from a large body of research on college recruitment strategies and might draw from that knowledge to establish effective stop-out student intervention programs.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how on-leave stop-out students interact with their college communities at a single small college. Interviews with re-enrolled stop-outs and their on-leave points of contact were triangulated with institutional documents and data and communication documents to explain how interactions affect institutional commitment and re-
enrollment behaviors. Findings indicated that on-leave interactions had variable impacts on those outcomes, depending on the tone and purpose of communications. Schlossberg’s (1989) marginality and mattering framework provided a model through which to understand how stop-out interactions affect social integration. Findings suggest that students perceiving one or more of Schlossberg’s five aspects of mattering built or maintained affinity with individuals at the college and/or the institution as a whole. This conclusion enhances Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) seminal framework on student departure and persistence by explaining the internal experiential process of how interactions eventually determine institutional commitment and re-enrollment. This study contributes increased understanding of the under-researched population of college stop-out students. Recommendations for the site institution were based on inferences from the data and could be utilized to establish policies, procedures, or programming that begin to address the significant problem of stop-out student attrition.
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Appendix A

Recruitment Email – Stop-out Participant
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Andrew Wu requests your participation

Dear [student name],

My name is Andrew Wu, and I am the Associate Dean of Students here at Goucher College. I am also a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University, and am conducting a study for my doctoral thesis.

I am researching how students who take a temporary break from college interact with their campus communities while they are away from school. I hope to understand how those students engage with faculty, staff, and peers and connect those experiences to institutional commitment and re-enrollment.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will interview you about your experiences and request communication documents for inclusion in this research (submission of these documents is entirely voluntary). The total time commitment is expected to be less than two hours: 30 minutes to one hour of interview time, additional time to retrieve and submit communications, and sufficient time to review and suggest edits to the transcript of the interview.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please email me at wu.a@husky.neu.edu and include the information below. I will provide you with additional information about the study and am available to answer any questions you might have.

Name:
Email:
Phone Number:
Preferred days and times to meet:

Thank you very much for considering taking part in this study,

Andrew Wu
Recruitment Email – Stop-out Participant Response
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Research Study with Andrew Wu

Dear [student name],

Thank you very much for your interest in my research! As you know, I am working on my doctoral thesis for the Doctor of Education degree program at Northeastern University under the guidance of Dr. Kimberly Nolan.

I am researching how college students who take a temporary break from college interact with their campus communities while they are away from school. I hope to learn more about how engagement with faculty, staff, and student peers affects those students’ institutional commitment levels and re-enrollment behaviors. I will be using the results of this research to make recommendations to improve college services and support systems for students while they are away on leave.

I am recruiting participants who have taken a mid-semester withdrawal, leave of absence, or official withdrawal from Goucher College who have re-enrolled for the Fall 2017 semester.

As a reminder, if you choose to participate in this study, I will interview you about your experiences and request communication documents for inclusion in this research (submission of these documents is entirely voluntary). I will also request your permission to contact individuals with whom you interacted while you were on leave. Your interview will take approximately 30 minutes to one hour and be audio recorded. The interview recording will be transcribed into a written document and sent to you for your review. You may choose to meet in person or send me an email to review your interview transcript and make clarifications or adjustments. The total time commitment is expected to be less than two hours: 30 minutes to one hour of interview time, additional time to retrieve and submit communications, and sufficient time to review and suggest edits to the transcript of the interview.

Based on your availability, I am proposing ___________ as the date and time for our first meeting. Please let me know if you have a particular place where you would like to meet (keeping in mind that we will need a quiet place to record our conversation).

Again, thank you for your time and participation in this study. Please reply to this email or call me at 410-337-6151 if you have any questions.

Gratefully,
Andrew Wu
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form – Stop-out Participants
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Title: Stop-out students’ on-leave experiences: How interactions affect institutional commitment and re-enrollment

Principle Investigator (PI): Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Northeastern University
Co-Investigator: Andrew Wu, Northeastern University

Purpose: You are being invited to participate in a research study. This study will investigate how stop-out students interact with their campus communities while away from college. You have been asked to participate in this study because you took a voluntary mid-semester withdrawal, leave of absence, or official withdrawal from Goucher College, and have re-enrolled for the Fall 2017 semester. This study will involve three points of contact with the researcher (Andrew Wu). The first point of contact will be an initial conversation to discuss your participation in this study (15-20 minutes). The second point of contact (occurring immediately following our initial conversation) will be a semi-structured, in-depth interview with the researcher (30-60 minutes). Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into a written document. The third point of contact will be a follow up conversation with the researcher to review the written interview transcript. You can choose to hold this meeting in person (less than 30 minutes) or via email.

The purpose of this study is to examine how stop-out students interact with their campus communities while on leave, with the goal of addressing the provision of ongoing support for students electing to temporarily interrupt their enrollment in college.

Procedure: If you decide to participate in this research, I will ask to meet in person to complete our first two points of contact – the initial conversation and the in-depth interview. For this meeting, you may select a location that is convenient and comfortable for you (understanding that the location should be a quiet, private place). Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into written documents. You will also be asked to provide communication documents from your time away from school, to the level that you are comfortable and able to retrieve them. These documents will also be analyzed. Faculty, staff, and peers that you identify as individuals with whom you had contact while on leave may be asked to participate in this study. You will be asked for permission to contact each of these individuals. All materials will be stored securely in a password-protected digital database or locked file cabinet. Your name will be omitted, and you may select a pseudonym during our first point of contact.

Risks: The primary risk associated with this study is possibility of discomfort with discussing your experiences, communications, or relationships with college community members. I will fully respect your boundaries during this process and you should feel free to skip questions that you do not wish to answer. I will be prepared to provide you with information related to campus and community resources for additional support.
Benefits: There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, this research is intended to utilize information gathered to improve the efficacy of institutional policies and practices to better support students. The findings from this study will be shared with college administrators with the intention of collaboratively addressing student attrition.

Confidentiality: Your participation in this study will be confidential and anonymous. Only the researcher will be made aware of any identifiable information. If you decide to take part, you will select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the research process in order to protect your identity. Any reports, presentations, or discussions associated with this study (i.e. the researcher’s doctoral thesis, journal articles, conference presentations) will utilize this pseudonym and will not include any of your personally identifiable information. Information related to your age, gender identity, and race/ethnicity will be analyzed and included to help to understand and interpret findings. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into written documents. Transcripts will be coded by the researcher to identify patterns and themes within your interview and across interviews with other participants. Digital files will be secured in a password-protected online database. Any physical documents related to this research will be stored in a locked file cabinet. The researcher will be the only individual with access to digital and physical documents and files. All of these data will be stored 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 may decline to answer any questions during any of our interactions. The researcher will request that you provide communication documents. These submissions are also completely voluntary.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
You will be responsible for the cost of traveling to the interview site, if your chosen site requires travel. You will be able to select an interview location that is convenient and comfortable.

Contact Person: Please contact Andrew Wu at 410-337-6151 or via email at wu.a@husky.neu.edu, or Dr. Kimberly Nolan who is overseeing my research at k.nolan@husky.neu.edu if you have additional questions about this study. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, telephone: 617-373-4588; email: irb@neu.edu.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of the person agreeing to participate Date

______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above Date

Andrew Wu, Student Researcher Date
Appendix D

**Interview Guide – Stop-out Participants**

*Northeastern University College of Professional Studies*

*Doctor of Education Program*

1. Can you talk about why you decided to take a break from college?
   a. Did anyone else influence your decision?
   b. How sure were you that you would return to Goucher?
   c. Do you remember how you felt about Goucher when you made the decision to take a break? Did your feelings about Goucher change after you decided to take a break?

2. Did you stay in contact with any faculty or staff members during your time away from Goucher?
   a. How frequently were you in contact?
   b. Can you talk me through what you discussed?
      i. Did you discuss returning to Goucher? Can you talk about what you discussed?
      ii. What kind of advice did they give you?
   c. How did you feel about those interactions?

3. Did you stay in contact with any other students during your time away from Goucher?
   a. How frequently were you in contact?
   b. Can you talk me through what you discussed?
      i. Did you discuss returning to Goucher?
      ii. Did they give you any advice?
   c. How did you feel about those interactions?

4. How did those interactions make you feel about Goucher?

5. How do you think those interactions impacted your decision to return to Goucher?

6. What do you think could help students return to Goucher after taking a break?

7. Are you comfortable with me contacting the faculty, staff, and peers you mentioned earlier to discuss your communications while you were away from Goucher? If they agree to participate, I will provide them with your name for context.

8. Are you comfortable with providing me with communication documents from your time away from Goucher, so they may be analyzed and included in this study?

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1 Follow-up questions will be asked as prompts only if those questions have not yet been answered during the course of the conversation.
Appendix E

Recruitment Email – Faculty/Staff/Peer Participant
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Research Study with Andrew Wu

Dear [name],

My name is Andrew Wu, and I am the Associate Dean of Students here at Goucher College. I am also a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University, and am conducting a study for my doctoral thesis.

I am researching how students who take a temporary break from college interact with their campus communities while they are away from school. I hope to understand how those students engage with faculty, staff, and peers and connect those experiences to institutional commitment and re-enrollment.

You have been named by a student participant in this study as an individual with whom they had contact while they were away from Goucher. If you are willing to participate in this study, I will provide you with the name of the student who identified you as a point of contact, and interview you about your experiences. The total time commitment is expected to be less than 90 minutes: 30 minutes to one hour of interview time, additional time to retrieve and submit communications, and sufficient time to review and suggest edits to the transcript of the interview.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please email me at wu.a@husky.neu.edu and include the information below. I will provide you with additional information about the study and am available to answer any questions you might have.

Name:
Email:
Phone Number:
Preferred days and times to meet:

Thank you very much for considering taking part in this study,

Andrew Wu
Appendix F

Recruitment Email – Faculty/Staff/Peer Participant Response
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Research Study with Andrew Wu

Dear [name],

Thank you very much for your interest in my research! As you know, I am working on my doctoral thesis for the Doctor of Education degree program at Northeastern University under the guidance of Dr. Kimberly Nolan.

I am researching how college students who take a temporary break from college interact with their campus communities while they are away from school. I hope to learn more about how engagement with faculty, staff, and student peers affects those students’ institutional commitment levels and re-enrollment behaviors. I will be using the results of this research to make recommendations to improve college services and support systems for students while they are away on leave.

You have been named by a student participating in this study as an individual with whom they interacted while away from Goucher.

As a reminder, if you choose to participate in this study, I will provide you with the name of the student who identified you as a point of contact, and interview you about your experiences. Your interview will take approximately 30 minutes and be audio recorded. The interview recording will be transcribed into a written document and sent to you for your review. You may choose to meet in person or send me an email to review your interview transcript and make clarifications or adjustments. The total time commitment is expected to be less than 90 minutes: 30 minutes of interview time, additional time to retrieve and submit communications, and sufficient time to review and suggest edits to the transcript of the interview.

Based on your availability, I am proposing __________ as the date and time for our first meeting. Please let me know if you have a particular place where you would like to meet (keeping in mind that we will need a quiet place to record our conversation).

Again, thank you for your time and participation in this study. Please reply to this email or call me at 410-337-6151 if you have any questions.

Gratefully,
Andrew Wu
Appendix G

Informed Consent Form – Faculty/Staff/Peer Participants
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

**Title:** Stop-out students’ on-leave experiences: How interactions affect institutional commitment and re-enrollment

**Principle Investigator (PI):** Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Northeastern University

**Co-Investigator:** Andrew Wu, Northeastern University

**Purpose:** You are being invited to participate in a research study. This study will investigate how stop-out students interact with their campus communities while away from college. You have been asked to participate in this study because you were identified by a student participant as an individual with whom they had contact while taking an interrupted enrollment. This study will involve three points of contact with the researcher (Andrew Wu). The first point of contact will be an initial conversation to discuss your participation in this study (15-20 minutes). The second point of contact (occurring immediately following our initial conversation) will be a semi-structured, in-depth interview with the researcher (30 minutes). Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into a written document. The third point of contact will be a follow up conversation with the researcher to review the written interview transcript. You can choose to hold this meeting in person (less than 30 minutes) or via email.

The purpose of this study is to examine how stop-out students interact with their campus communities while on leave, with the goal of addressing the provision of ongoing support for students electing to temporarily interrupt their enrollment in college.

**Procedure:** If you decide to participate in this research, I will ask to meet in person to complete our first two points of contact – the initial conversation and the in-depth interview. For this meeting, you may select a location that is convenient and comfortable for you (understanding that the location should be a quiet, private place). Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into written documents. All materials will be stored securely in a password-protected digital database or locked file cabinet. Your name will be omitted, and you may select a pseudonym during our first point of contact.

**Risks:** The primary risk associated with this study is possibility of discomfort with discussing your experiences, communications, or relationships with college community members. I will fully respect your boundaries during this process and you should feel free to skip questions that you do not wish to answer. I will be prepared to provide you with information related to campus and community resources for additional support.

**Benefits:** There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, this research is intended to utilize information gathered to improve the efficacy of institutional policies and practices to better support students. The findings from this study will be shared with college administrators with the intention of collaboratively addressing student attrition.
Confidentiality: Your participation in this study will be confidential and anonymous. Only the researcher will be made aware of any identifiable information. If you decide to take part, you will select a pseudonym that will be used throughout the research process in order to protect your identity. Any reports, presentations, or discussions associated with this study (i.e. the researcher’s doctoral thesis, journal articles, conference presentations) will utilize this pseudonym and will not include any of your personally identifiable information. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed into written documents. Transcripts will be coded by the researcher to identify patterns and themes within your interview and across interviews with other participants. Digital files will be secured in a password-protected online database. Any physical documents related to this research will be stored in a locked file cabinet. The researcher will be the only individual with access to digital and physical documents and files. All of these data will be stored 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 may decline to answer any questions during any of our interactions.

Will it cost me anything to participate? You will be responsible for the cost of traveling to the interview site, if your chosen site requires travel. You will be able to select an interview location that is convenient and comfortable.

Contact Person: Please contact Andrew Wu at 410-337-6151 or via email at wu.a@husky.neu.edu, or Dr. Kimberly Nolan who is overseeing my research at k.nolan@husky.neu.edu if you have additional questions about this study. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, telephone: 617-373-4588; email: irb@neu.edu.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of the person agreeing to participate  Date

Printed name of person above  Date

Andrew Wu, Student Researcher  Date
Appendix H

Interview Guide – Faculty/Staff/Peer Participants
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

1. Can you talk about your relationship with _______________?
   a. How long have you known the student?
   b. What was the nature of your relationship?
   c. How did you view your role in the relationship?

2. To the best of your memory, can you talk about your interactions with __________ while they were away from Goucher?
   a. Through what medium(s) did you communicate?
   b. How frequently were you in contact?
   c. Did you discuss the student returning to Goucher? Can you talk about what you discussed?
   d. What kind of advice did you give?

3. If anything, what did you hope would come out of these interactions?

4. How do you think your interactions impacted the student’s feelings towards Goucher?

5. How do you think your interactions impacted the student’s re-enrollment?

6. What do you think could help students return to Goucher after taking a break?

______________________________

2 Follow-up questions will be asked as prompts only if those questions have not yet been answered during the course of the conversation
Appendix I

Stop-out Participant Questionnaire
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Date:

Full name: _______________________________________________________

Pseudonym: _______________________________________________________

Date of birth: _______________  Class year: _______________

Major: ____________________  Current GPA: _______________

How would you describe your racial identity?

What is your current gender identity?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

For this study, stop-out students are defined as college students who take a mid-semester withdrawal, leave of absence, or official withdrawal from the college and later re-enroll at their original institution. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a stop-out student returning in the Fall 2017 semester.

What was the nature of your stop-out?

☐ Mid-semester withdrawal

☐ Leave of absence

☐ Official withdrawal from the college

How long (months) were you away from college before the start of the Fall 2017 semester?

What were the primary reasons for your decision to temporarily leave college?