

WHY SOCIALLY AT-RISK STUDENTS PERSIST:
FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH RETAINED STUDENTS

by

LARRY CLIFFORD CHRISTENSON

(Under the Direction of Sheila Slaughter)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore why first-year students at Georgia College identified by MAP-Works as socially at-risk left after their first semester, but more importantly, why, those interviewed for this dissertation were retained.

Data was gathered from 22 student interviews, observations of student groups, and review of longitudinal information gathered by Georgia College Office of Institutional Research. Primary findings revealed that a single connection made with a faculty, staff, or peer made a significant difference in the retention of the students. The data suggested that identifying socially at-risk students and assisting them in making these important connections within the first weeks of their first year may greatly assist in their retention.

INDEX WORDS: college students; higher education; colleges & universities; college campuses; college integration; freshman persistence; first-year persistence; academic advising; freshmen introductory courses; first year experiences; residential learning communities; student mentoring programs; social support services; orientation programs; support groups; student attrition; persistence; student services; student retention; student attrition; student departure

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B.S., Minnesota State University-Moorhead, 1989

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011

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December 2011

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to J. Douglas Toma (1963 – 2011). After my initial enquiry to this Ed.D. program, Doug made personal contact with me and encouraged me to enroll; in his words, “This will not be one of those Student Affairs hug-fests if that is what you are looking for”.

As the findings of this dissertation suggest, this personal connection is exactly the primary predictor of student retention. Doug was the reason I pushed through the difficult times over the period of the course work and the following research. Early in this program Doug was diagnosed with an aggressive form of melanoma cancer which eventually took his life just seven months before he was able to witness the first cohort walk across the graduation stage on what would have been his 48th birthday... December 16, 2011.

Doug and I shared a birthday in common, well almost; my birthday is December 17. While I may have been 364 days older than Doug, I can only hope to aspire to inspire others and make the impact on Higher Education and changing lives that he did in his all-to-short life.

Doug closed all his communications with, “All the best,” – Well Doug, this one is for you... all the best! While the collection of visa stamps in your passport may have ended, as a teacher your impact on others’ lives on.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my loving wife (Pannarasee KWAN Christenson, M.D.), thank you! Your understanding and patience during my weekends away at class, the weekends between reading, studying, and in the last few months, writing, are appreciated more than you will ever know.

To Tum (Tum Alai de Siam), our pug dog, “mommy’s” loss was your gain. You slept on my lap as I read and laid at my feet as I wrote. We have so much to learn from dogs; support without judgment.

To my mother (Beverly Gulbrandson) and my father (Ross Christenson), thank you for instilling in me a strong work ethic. While the both of you were in your early-teens when I entered the world, you provided for me, Linda, and Steve a loving family. While we may not have been financially rich, we never went without. I feel fortunate to have been born into a family that has supported me and offered so many life lessons.

To my family in Chumphon, Thailand, the opportunity you provided me changed my life and perspective forever. I was only 18 years old when I lived with you as an exchange student over 30 years ago, but not a day passes that does not reflect the opportunities that experience had on my life.

To one of my earliest teaching role models, Vi Risch, thank you! You emulate the findings of this research; one caring person is all it takes to allow a

student to be successful and retained. Who knows where I would be in life if it were not for you entering my life. I am forever grateful for educators like you.

To Sheila Slaughter, my major advisor, who opened her life to me and allowed me to overcome my intimidation of her. Sheila provided me with the right amount of support and guidance to keep me motivated and on track to complete this dissertation; while I never told her, I was not sure that I could do it. To Libby Morris and Erik Ness for their serving on my committee; thank you for acting interested in a topic that may not be interesting to all. I am indebted to all the other professors and guest lectures who shared their expertise over the course of this program.

To our cohort, you are all experts and stars in your own fields. I have learned far more from you than from the curriculum. Conversations both in and out of class, as well as our overseas travels, could not have offered a better graduate experience.

To B. Edward Hale and Justin Flachbarth at the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research, thank you for sharing your data and answering all my silly questions on short notice. My research has allowed me to gain a new appreciation for the work you do everyday.

To my readers/editors, thank you for making me look better than this dissertation presents. Dr. D. Bruce Harshbarger, Dr. Paul Jahr, A. Kay Anderson, and Cindy McClanahan volunteered to review the following pages; I can assure you if you note errors in spelling, grammar, or APA style, they are mine. I appreciate all you have offered.

To my staff at Georgia College University Housing, thank you for covering for me! I have missed opening and closing the residence halls and was not as quick

to respond to issues while away at class. While I may be able to argue that our students and staff received better service from you in my absence, thank you for all you have done to fill in on all the extras.

Last, but not least, thank you to Elizabeth Hughes, Ph.D. Your coordination and communication went well beyond your position description at the University of Georgia Institute of Higher Education. We all miss Doug Toma, but we know none misses him more than you. After the announcement of his cancer and after his death you kept us all together. The 100 percent graduation of our original cohort of 16 is amazing and nothing less than a testament to your efforts!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem

The first academic year can be a stressful and important period of transition for students entering a university. Students must develop new support systems which replace the ones they had developed with family and friends at home over many years. When they fail to find friendships on campus with peers or college faculty, they quickly become alienated and are much more likely to leave school. Study-after-study have been completed to tell us why students leave college. This research is not intended to find why students leave a university, but more importantly why they stay. Specifically, my interest is to see if universities can have an impact on the proportion of their students who self-identity they are feeling socially detached, not making friends, and not finding ways to become active in some sort of campus activity outside of the academic classroom.

Freshman class attrition rates are typically greater than for any other academic year and are commonly as high as 20-30% (Braxton, 2000; Mallinckrodt & Sedlacek, 1987). Reisberg (1998) reported only 52.8% of students entering higher education in the fall of 1991 graduated within five years. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported, “Among students who entered four-year colleges in 1996, 55.4% had earned bachelor’s degrees six years later. For the cohort of students who started college in 2001, the figure

was 57.3% (Glenn, 2010).” For the last year available in 2009, the six-year graduation rate at Georgia College was 48.5%.

Tinto (1993) confirmed that more students leave college before their graduation than stay. At Georgia College, the first-year attrition rate has averaged 16.28% over the past five years - well below the national average. For the academic year of this study, 2010-2011, Georgia College lost 17% (204 students) off first to second year students.

Some would argue that the number of students leaving a university serves as a barometer of the social health of the school. Tinto (1987) suggests that faculty-student interaction and the student’s integration into the school are central to student attrition. According to Tinto, a sense or feeling of “belonging” is vital for student retention.

MAP-Works is a student retention software committed to improve student academic success, development, and involvement; more details are provided in chapter four. According to Georgia College 2010 MAP-Works data collected in the fifth week of the first semester, about 6% of the 1,200 first year students have not made a strong social connection, 93.2% feel moderately to extremely that they are meeting people that share common interests, 95.5% feel moderately to extremely that they are meeting people like them, and 94% feel moderately to extremely that they are fitting in. Over 85% feel moderately to extremely that they are making friends with others in their building, are adjusting to on-campus housing, are able to sleep in their room, and feel their roommate respects their sleep time and property.

Most students come to college prepared to be academically successful. They are admitted based upon high school grades, SATs, ACTs and other measured tests of their academic ability. While some admission officers will consider the student’s high school

involvement in sports, clubs or volunteer participation, these are not always the best measure for predicting student fit or ability to succeed at their new college. Though some would think grades and finances are the most common cause of a student to leave college, Astin (1984) and Tinto (1985) have documented that it is most often homesickness, loss of established relationships, and inability to establish new relationships which lead to feelings of isolation and causes the largest number of students to leave college. Tinto (1993, 1997) suggests that student attrition correlates with the student's involvement with the campus after admission more so than student entrance characteristics. During the 2010 academic year, 204 (17.0%) first-year students left Georgia College. Based upon MAP-Works social factor data alone, it is likely the 70+ students who left, from the 1,200 first-year students, did so because they did not feel they fit into the campus and had not made social connections.

Retention of college students from the first to second year is important to the university. Many layers of administration and staff are put in place to guide and assist student success in order to increase both retention and graduation rates. Student Affairs and Enrollment Management operations are heavily staffed to assist with student engagement and success outside the classroom. Despite these efforts, decade after decade, a concerning number of students leave college for various reasons at the end of each semester.

Georgia College has student activities, intramurals, career services, counseling, athletics, multiple diversity support centers, residential life, health services, disabled student services, financial aid, academic advising, and tutoring services to support our students. Colleges can offer all these services and more; however, if the student is not

aware of or does not utilize these services, feels he or she is not being supported, or feels like he or she does not belong, the student will likely feel alone and isolated and be at higher risk of leaving the university.

Why is this important?

Recruitment of the ‘right fit’ student to an institution is a time consuming and expensive process. When universities’ first-year classes are admitted, the universities’ expectations are that some students will not succeed and will drop out. The number of students in an admitted class is intentionally enlarged to make up the difference for the expected attrition rate, or is compensated with transfers. Few schools take the time or have the in-house expertise to build an effective predictive model for recruitment or pay for an outsourced model which often has questionable results.

It is important to identify the common risk factors for these students so we can develop effective and efficient targeted intervention programs. If universities were able to identify and provide early interventions for those students most at risk of leaving the university, more attention could be provided to allow the entering class as a whole to be more successful. Theoretically, overall retention should increase and it is likely that GPAs and student satisfaction would increase as well.

When a single student leaves the university before he or she complete a degree, it costs the university tens-of-thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition, fees, auxiliary purchases, and future alumni contributions. According to 2003-2008 IPEDS, college students who failed to return to campus for a second year accounted for \$6.2 billion in state appropriations. According to the same data source, Georgia was number 9 in the

nation for overall expenditures on higher education funds lost to students dropping out before the second year of college at \$237 million. Each student not retained is a loss to the college, state and federal government.

By identifying strategic methods to help students adjust to campus life, Georgia College could increase the likelihood that its students may become fully committed to the goal of achieving a university degree and even more importantly strengthen their commitments to Georgia College. These positive outcomes can likely be influenced by programs and faculty in more formal structures, but may also be influenced by informal structures through their own peer social groups. Utilizing MAP-Works data, this research addresses the cohort of the 6% of Georgia College first year students who were identified as most likely to leave for social reasons, yet remained enrolled at the end of their first year.

Nearly all retention/attrition literature offers insight to why students leave a college. MAP-Works allowed me to identify the 70 Georgia College students who demonstrated the highest levels of social risk indicators. By the end of their first academic semesters, only 31 of these 70 students were enrolled; the other 39 (56%) had left the university after just one semester. This study focuses on the 22 of the remaining 31 students who were each still enrolled the end of their first year and remained at Georgia College, utilizing interviews to attempt to identify the social factors contributing to their retention.

Georgia College Focus

In her last State of the University address during spring 2011 (full text in Appendix D), former Georgia College President Dorothy Leland made it clear that the academic and social engagement of Georgia College students was her first strategic priority. What Dr. Leland understood was that the interactions out of the classroom were as, or even more important to returning Georgia College students.

Dr. Leland understood that the retention of students came through the “academic, social, and personal support that we provide students.” She stated, “Top-tier private and public liberal arts colleges have long known how to ‘pull out all the stops’ when students are failing academically or socially or otherwise are at risk for drop-out or transfer.... for many, it is a personal adjustment issue — homesickness or an inability to make new friends loom large... very few of our students leave us because they are failing academically... our challenge now is to put into place the support and intervention strategies that will impact student success as measured by persistence and degree completion”.

What will this research accomplish?

The sense of “belonging” that President Leland championed in her address is important. As this study will show, students’ sense of feeling a part of the university, becoming involved and making some sort of connection fills their needs for belonging and most often promotes student retention.

One of the students interviewed for this research said, “I feel like if you’re not involved in anything like what are you here for? You don’t really matter, people don’t

know you. That's just what I feel like. I think everyone should get involved. If you are not, you are either bored or could get into bad things. You want to try something different you've never tried before. I've seen that happen."

Prior to beginning this research, I reviewed the literature on campus culture. Students gain knowledge in the classroom, but they gain life-changing experiences out of the classroom (Blimling, 2010). One specific line in the literature that spoke to this statement was, "[culture is] ...initially inaccessible to newcomers and outsiders, but once [values, beliefs, customs] are learned, a person has demonstrated his or her desire for membership in an organization (Toma, 2005)." It is this desire to be "connected" that aids student retention for the 6% who don't feel they belong.

Blimling (2010) speaks about group interaction in the following way, "The actions of the group, at the exclusion of others, promotes trust, confidence, mutual dependence, and community, further solidifying the group" (p. 85). Whether the 'group' is a set of roommates, a club, an organization, a recreational sport, an office on campus the student works in, or maybe most importantly a single friendship a student makes, it may be the deciding factor in causing the student to stay in college to complete his or her degree.

While students go to college and pay significant amounts of money to exchange ideas and learn from their professors in the classroom, college is a period of exploration, maturation and relationship building. Relationship building is at the heart of a college experience.

Significance and Organization of the Study

Again, this study is to focus on the reasons students stay at a university as opposed to why they leave a university. It may seem that the simple answer is the opposite of the reasons a student leaves a university, but this is not always the case.

By utilizing a relatively new assessment tool discussed in chapter three called MAP-Works, first-year students at the highest risk of leaving Georgia College were identified. More than half of the socially at-risk students identified left the university after their first semesters. Thirty-one of the remaining students in this category were selected to be interviewed the week before their spring finals. I was able to successfully make contact with 22 of these 31 students. Many of the comments from these interviews will be shared in chapter four.

Due to the pace of this doctoral program, time did not allow for me to observe student groups on campus over a longer period of time. However, as a participant observer with over 20 years of college housing experience and as well as four years on the campus of Georgia College I have made many observations on student interaction.

With the agreement of my major professor, I decided to select the most visible and active student groups on campus and attend each of their end-of-the-year banquets. By doing so I was able to draw comparisons between the most involved students on campus with the identified socially at risk students I had interviewed.

The missing component of this study was the ability to interview students who had left Georgia College at the end of their first semester or at the end of the first academic year. While exploring ways to make contact with these students, I learned that the Office of Institutional Research at Georgia College had created a study of students

who had left the university in the first year and had several years of data available. While it would have been ideal to have had 2010 data available, the information was still being gathered at the time of my research. The collected university data has been consistent from year-to-year so it is unlikely that the 2010 data would have proven to have been substantially different. This data proved invaluable to my research to examine assumptions as to why students leave Georgia College. This information linked directly back the results of MAP-Works on student success and retention.

Georgia College History

Established in 1889, Georgia College has had four distinct missions. In 1889, it began as a two-year school offering teacher training and business skills. In 1961 it became a regional women's college, in 1967, a coeducational regional comprehensive college/university; and on 1996 it was designated Georgia's public liberal arts university. In addition to its four distinct missions, within its 120-year history the school has had seven names: Georgia Normal & Industrial College (1889); Georgia State College for Women (1922); The Woman's College of Georgia (1961); Georgia College at Milledgeville (1967); Georgia College (1971); Georgia College & State University (1996); and not a formal name change, but a branding reference in 2010 to Georgia College "Georgia's public liberal arts university."

The Typical Georgia College Student

The best way to introduce the typical first-year student at Georgia College is to share data collected each fall by Mike Augustine, Senior Director of Advising and

Retention. For the past several years Mike has presented a very popular program at orientation for first-year students outlining what he calls “First Monday; Trivial Trivia”. Through the process of admissions and his role in advising, he annually keeps track of trends within the entering class.

Since this study is of students entering Georgia College in the fall of 2010, the following data is provided to allow a better understanding of the typical Georgia College student. I share this not as scientific data, but to provide the reader an opportunity to sense the flavor of Georgia College.

In the style of TV-Top Ten lists presented in inverted order, the top first names of the students who entered Georgia College were:

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 5. Joseph (9) | 5. Mary/Megan+ (13) |
| 4. William (10) | 4. Sara(h) (14) |
| 3. Ryan (11) | 3. Rachel / Lauren (15) |
| 2. Matthew (13) | 2. Emily+ (18) |
| 1. Michael (16) | 1. C/Katherine/-ryn (23) |

The top family names were:

4. Carter / Brown
3. Jones / Morris
2. Miller
1. Smith

With his trivia Mike adds a lot of fun, suggesting the ‘coolest female names’ were Brittany Bomba and Rachel Furbee, with the ‘coolest male names’ being Zachary Monaco and Colton Montgomery. The longest name admitted for fall 2010 was Laura VanTuyll-VanSerooskerken. Among the first year class were four sets of twins.

A large portion of the admitted class comes from the northeast/northern suburbs of Atlanta and primary graduating high schools are:

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| 10. McIntosh HS | 5. Alpharetta HS |
| 9. Lassiter HS | 4. Roswell HS |
| 8. Ola HS | 3. Milton HS |
| 7. Oconee County HS / Whitewater HS | 2. Northview HS |
| 6. Brookwood HS / S. Forsyth HS /
Collins Hill HS | 1. Chattahoochee HS |

Of our first-year class of 1,200, the largest numbers of these students came to

Georgia College from:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 10. Kennesaw (21) | 5. Cumming (33) |
| 9. Peachtree City (23) | 4. Lawrenceville (47) |
| 8. Fayetteville (24) | 3. Roswell (55) |
| 7. Suwanee (25) | 2. Marietta (78) |
| 6. Atlanta/McDonough (27) | 1. Alpharetta (108) |

So, combining all the above factors the typical first year student at Georgia

College in the fall of 2010 would have been:

“Katherine Smith”
 Alpharetta, GA
 Chattahoochee HS
 Undeclared
 1156 SAT / 3.42 Academic GPA
 Applied November 3rd, 2009
 @yahoo.com
 Zodiac: Cancer

The typical Georgia College student is from Georgia (95.8%), white (82.2%), female (60.3%), upper-middle class, from the Atlanta metropolitan area (66.5%), and entering with the HOPE Scholarship (88.1%). Most students are raised in families with highly-educated parents. Students reported that 85.8% of their mothers and 84.9% of their fathers had at least some college education. Surprisingly, 18.1% of the mothers and 23.7% of fathers had completed a graduate or professional degree. This is a large difference compared to the 2000 census for Georgia, where only 8.3% of individuals 25 years and older had an advanced degree. From the MAP-Works data, 68.1% of our

entering first-year students plan to obtain a master's degree or higher whereas 20.1% plan to obtain only their bachelor's degree.

Summary

Assuming that students enter a college with similar academic abilities, institutional commitments, and ample finances, examining the 6% of Georgia College freshmen who are having difficulty becoming more integrated into the social fabric of the campus this study becomes important. A sense of feeling of belonging or connecting to the campus influences their levels of persistence. Social integration is especially important for these students.

In the following chapters, the reader will follow the literature, the methods, and the results of this research and find suggestions that may allow universities such as Georgia College to retain more of their students on their campuses. Ultimately, it is my desire to offer at-risk students educational and career opportunities for them for the rest of their lives. This research suggests that certain simple ideas might assist many students to remain enrolled and complete their degrees.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Student attrition has been an issue of concern in higher education for decades (Heist, 1968; Tinto, 1975). The literature on college student retention is broad and dense. Thousands of studies have been completed attempting to identify the Holy Grail which will reduce college student attrition. Lucrative consulting businesses and data survey services have been created and marketed to colleges seeking the answer that may have an impact on their retention demographic variables. It would not be an understatement to say that student retention has become a big business for researchers, educators, and entrepreneurs alike (Tinto, 2006). Most attempted solutions have produced inconclusive or even contradictory results.

For many years colleges blamed the victim, or blamed the student, for their inability to be retained, not the institution. The difficulty with retention is there is no silver bullet; factors vary from one school to the next. Despite the incredible volume of literature on retention, enormous numbers of students still drop out of college before they achieve their educational objectives (Jones, 1986).

As I reviewed the literature related to my research question, I quickly realized I needed to scale down and focus on the core literature. One could easily become overwhelmed in the endless sea of information available on what colleges have used to

predict potential success in students when recruiting and the measures put in place to retain them once on campus.

While my research focuses on the social factors of retention, there are many areas of retention issues as outlined below which each could consume volumes of literature.

As Kuh (2001-2002) states:

Just as no single experience has a profound impact on student development, the introduction of individual programs or policies will not by themselves change a campus culture and students' perceptions of whether the institution is supportive and affirming. Only a web of interlocking initiatives can over time shape an institutional culture that promotes student success (pp. 30-31).

Based on a review of resources, StateUniversity.com offered the most comprehensive and concise list of retention factors:

Background Variables. These include parental support, parents' education, parents' income, educational goals, precollege academic success (high class rank, grade point average, standardized test scores), college preparatory curriculum, and friends attending college. For minority students, background variables include extended family support, church and community support, and previous positive interracial/intercultural contact, and for nontraditional students they include spouse support and employer support.

Organizational Factors. These include financial aid, orientation programs, rules and regulations, memberships in campus organizations, involvement in decision-making, housing policies, counseling, the bursars' office, ease of registration, and staff attitudes toward students. For minority students, organizational factors include role models in staff and faculty, a supportive environment, at least 20 percent minority enrollment, and not viewing rules as oppressive. For nontraditional students, parking, child care, campus safety, availability of services after hours, evening/weekend scheduling, and cost per credit hour are factors.

Academic Factors. These include courses offered, positive faculty interaction (both in class and out of class), advising, general skills programs (e.g., basic skills, study skills, math, and English tutoring/help centers), campus resources (e.g., computer, library, athletic, college union), absenteeism, certainty of major, and academic integration. Factors affecting minority students include warm classroom climate and faculty role models, and those affecting nontraditional students include the expectation for individual faculty member attention.

Social Factors. Among the social factors affecting retention are close friends on campus, peer culture, social involvement (e.g., service learning, Greek organizations), informal contact with faculty, identification with a group on campus, and social integration. For minority students, social factors also include a positive intercultural/interracial environment and at least 20 percent minority enrollment.

Environmental Factors. These include continued parental support, little opportunity to transfer, financial resources, significant other elsewhere, family responsibilities, getting married, and a job off campus more than twenty hours per week. Factors affecting minority students also include the availability of grants.

Attitudes, intentions, and Psychological Processes. These include self-efficacy as a student, sense of self-development and self-confidence, internal locus of control, strategies of approach, motivation to study, need for achievement, satisfaction, practical value of one's education, stress, alienation, loyalty, sense of fitting it, and intention to stay enrolled. For minority students, self-validation is also a factor.

Source: <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1863/College-Student-Retention.html>

Many authors add perspective to the literature available on college student retention, however Alexander Astin and Vincent Tinto were at the forefront of contributing creditable material for broad application. To add perspective to this research, perhaps Tinto (2000) said it best:

Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing student retention. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. Some institutions even hire consultants who promise a proven formula for successful retention. But for all that effort, most institutions do not take student retention seriously. They treat student retention, like so many other issues, as one more item to add to the list of issues to be addressed by the institution. They adopt what Parker calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies. Need to address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a course, such as a Freshman Seminar, to help new students persist. The result is that efforts to enhance student retention are increasingly segmented into disconnected parts that are located at the margins of institutional academic life. Therefore while it is true that retention programs abound on our campuses, most institutions have not taken student retention seriously. They have done little to change the overall character of college, little to alter student educational experiences, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. As a result, most efforts to enhance student retention, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they should or could. (p. 5)

Tinto (1993) confirmed that 40% of the students who begin college in America will not earn a degree. As I will discuss in chapter four, the national attrition rate of first-year students at all types of institutions is 23.9% and in Georgia is 24.5%. According to 2009 IPEDS data, national attrition rates of first-year students at 4-year institutions are: public – 23.1%, private – 25.6%, and private for profit – 49.5%. Reasons for departure vary from adjustment difficulties to feelings of isolation (Cutrona, 1982; Tinto, 1988).

The first year, more specifically the first six weeks, are a critical time for college freshmen. It is during this period of time when students are trying to figure out if they belong in college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Nearly a quarter of the students who do not graduate from college are lost at the end of the first year (IPEDS, 2009). “Several studies and a wide array of anecdotal evidence from counselors and student advisers alike argue that the forces that shape departure during the first year of college, especially during the first six weeks of the first semester, are qualitatively different from those that mold departure in the latter years of college” (Tinto, 1988). Gardner (1986) focused on the first few weeks of college, a period when many students make the decision to drop out. It is during this period where students feel increased personal independence and form the habits and relationships they will carry through their college experience. Gardner (2001) pointed out “as enrollment soared, so did the number of students dropping out between the first and second years of college.”

The question then becomes, how do colleges quickly identify these students at the highest risk of being added to the dropout statistics? At Georgia College, and at a growing number of colleges around the country, one tool utilized in this effort is MAP-Works. Further details on MAP-Works are outlined in chapters three and four. In brief,

MAP-Works is a survey tool taken by students in the fifth week of their first semester which provides both the student and key support staff on campus immediate feedback on their risk levels in multiple indicators of student success. Identifying at-risk students allows the campus community to intervene as quickly as possible.

In “Stages of Student Departure: Reflections on the Longitudinal Character of Student Leaving,” Tinto (1988) used the framework of “culture and acceptance” as a possible explanation for student attrition. The concept was defined in 1909 by French ethnographer/anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep during his study of the rites of membership in tribal societies in his book *The Rites of Passage*. From the perspective of Tinto, first-year college students are focused on the movement from membership in one group to membership in another and their acceptance in their newly identified group. National retention rates suggest the movement from established relationships with family and high school to those in the student’s new home at college is often a difficult transition. Dennis, Phinney, and Chauteco (2005) write about the importance of assisting students “to identify with a social support network of peers to provide them with a safe base throughout their college career.”

As opposed to most college student retention studies that focus on why students leave, my research is to identify students who identified as socially uninvolved and were ranked at the highest risk, yet were retained. It is my premise that student retention is sociological; the search for similarities which distinguishes who stays from who leaves. My curiosity is if we can identify why students stay in college we may have a better opportunity to confront some of the major reasons college students depart prematurely before earning their bachelor’s degree.

A Quick History of College Student Retention Research

In the first national retention study in the United States, McNeely (1937) surveyed 25 universities. Using data collected from 16,000 students from the entering classes of 1931 and 1932, McNeely identified a graduation rate of 38 percent. McNeely described premature student departures as mortality, thus his study titled College Student Mortality, focused on retention factors including time to degree based on the impact of the size of the college. He also focused on when students would likely leave college and found that attrition was most prevalent in the first years.

It would be 25 year later until Summerskill (1962) reviewed 35 retention studies completed between 1920 and 1960. Summerskill found a median graduation rate of 38 percent. It was his premise that personality attributes of students were the main reasons for persistence. It was Summerskill who popularized the term dropout for students who left college prior to completion.

Using multi-institutional data Kamens (1971) was able to demonstrate that colleges of greater size, complexity, and prestige had lower attrition rates. He further suggested that the college a student attended could play an important role in later achievement.

Spady (1971) looked closely at the role that the social structure, including family background, played in the retention process. He specifically examined student characteristics and campus environment. Drawing upon Durkheim's model of suicide (1951) Spady suggested a connection between suicide and student departure. Spady said, "the focus of the study concerned the effect of the social integration and related sociological influences on college attrition" (Spady, 1971, p.40). His sociological model,

which included five variables - academic potential, normative congruence, grade performance, intellectual development, and friendship support, was one of the foundations of the work continued by Tinto (1975) in his student integration model.

Overview of Relevant College Student Retention Research

Tinto (1975) developed the most widely accepted model of student persistence, the Student Integration Model. “The model suggests that social integration of students increases their institutional commitment, ultimately reducing the likelihood of student attrition. This model has been subject to rigorous empirical testing, as evidenced by more than 400 citations and more than 170 dissertations.” (Braxton, 2000)

Bean’s Student Attrition Model (1980, 1985) was different from Tinto's model in that it included environmental variables, factors outside of the college, and a student's intentions. Bean used an industrial workplace turnover model and used it to explain college student attrition; if students perceived the college as unresponsive or incompetent the student would not likely be retained. The intention of a student has been found to be a factor of one of the best predictors of student retention. Tinto (1993) later included both of Bean’s factors of fit and commitment into his model.

A concise outline of retention research on college students was offered in a 2004 document published by American College Testing (ACT); “Retention programs that focus on improving academic performance are based on models such as Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure (1975, 1993) and Bean’s Student Attrition Model (1980, 1985). Tinto and Bean link college retention to both past and present academic performance (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993). Tinto, Bean, and

others (Cabrera et al., 1992; Cabrera et al., 1993) hypothesize that college performance influences a student's decision to leave or stay in school" (American College Testing, 2004, p. 11)

Astin's research suggests that higher levels of student involvement, the "quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience", are positively related to graduation and academic achievement (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Upcraft (1995) expanded on retention theory slightly when he stated, "the greater the quantity and quality of involvement, the more likely the student will succeed in college" (p. 18). Research by Tinto (1987, 1993) suggests that persistence is related to student's commitment to the educational process and their social and academic integration into the academic environment.

Tinto's later model (1993) like his earlier ones, offers another explanation for student departure: failure to negotiate the rites of passage. Tinto (1993) indicated that students would "remain enrolled if they separated themselves from their family and high school friends, engaged in processes by which they identified with and took on the values of other students and faculty, and committed themselves to pursuing those values and behaviors."

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) offered a summary of the literature on student retention and other associated outcomes from college. Braxton (2000) pushed prior research forward by looking at explanations of retention behavior "based on economic factors, psychological processes, campus climate, student learning, campus cultures, ethnic differences, college choice, social reproduction, and power."

More recently, Braxton et al., (2004) completed a deeper examination of Astin's (1993) theory of involvement and persistence by proposing that students' psychosocial engagement directly influences the degree to which they are socially integrated into college life. It is the focus “on the energy students invest in social interactions” which I wanted to look at more closely in my research.

Researchers of college student retention, attrition, engagement, and persistence have written extensively (Braxton, 2000; Gardner, 2001; Kuh, 1991, 2005; Noel & Levitz, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), however all have in one way or another built upon the earlier primary foundations laid by Tinto, Astin, and Bean.

A Look at College Student Retention

Heist (1968) suggested a half century ago, some of the most creative, highly able students leave before earning a degree. According to Kuh et al. (2008) there are a number of reasons college students leave prematurely: change of major, lack of money, family demands, and poor psycho-social fit, among others (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987; Bean, 1990; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Pascarella, 1980; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

College student persistence is a complex phenomenon. Most students who drop out of college are not in academic jeopardy (Jones, 1986). According to Anderson and McGuire (2003), “the majority of students who fail to graduate from college are not dismissed. More students leave college because of disillusionment, discouragement, and reduced motivation than because of lack of ability” (p. 99). Tinto (1993) confirmed that more students leave college before graduation than stay.

Tinto (1985) suggests, “withdrawals may involve many of the brightest and more creative students on campus, individuals whose grade point averages often exceed those of the average persister ...such departures are primarily a result of the individual’s intentions and commitments and the nature of personal experiences in the academic and social communities of the college” (p. 32). According to Tinto (1993, 1997) student attrition correlates to their involvement with the campus after admission more so than student entrance characteristics. Students who leave college prematurely are less engaged than their counterparts who persist (Hughes & Pace, 2003).

Study after study has left no doubt that the most concerning time of college dropout is during the first year (Levitz, Noel, & Ritcher, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989). The “first-to-second-year attrition rate is perhaps the most important determinant of an institution’s graduation rate” (Levitz et al., 1999, p. 36). Because of this I was interested in finding indicators which may provide an early alert to help identify freshmen who are more likely to leave the university and developing answers to how we might retain them.

Levitz et al. (1999) suggest “very few institutions today have unlimited resources for helping students get a good start in college. Therefore, an institution that is able to direct resources of time, energy, and money toward students who are most likely to be prone to drop out who most need and want help, and who are willing to be helped has truly leveraged its resources” (p. 41). From the same document, Levitz further suggested, “Institutions can control their dropout rates to a great extent based on the energy and effort that is put into getting students started right on the path into and through the first year of college” (p. 36).

With the knowledge that students are frequently leaving colleges for non-academic reasons, it is critical to understand the factors in students' departure "including integration into the community, motivation, and incongruence of student expectations. Without such an understanding, appropriate intervention programs and policies cannot be effectively developed and implemented" (Lotkowski et al., 2004).

Based on research, the one thing we can say with certainty is students' inability to connect to the academic and social cultures of a college often leads to poor academic achievement and almost certain dropout (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1993; Tinto 1987, 1993). In Tinto's model (1987), a student who does not achieve some level of academic or social integration is likely to leave school. According to Tinto, college students are trying to answer the questions: Do I fit in? Am I developing? Am I validated? Astin (1985) underscored that when students become active in the collegiate experience they learn and develop.

Fitting in and feeling validated, or the sense of connection, usually comes from being involved in the social network of the campus. Kuh (2005) found that "38% of all first-year students never went to an organizational meeting of any kind and only half as many students who expected to work on a campus committee (78%) actually did (40%)" (p. 96).

Six-Year Graduation Rates

The Chronicle of Higher Education published an analysis of recent changes in the six-year graduation rates at nearly 1,400 American colleges. At most institutions, the rate rose at least modestly between 2003 and 2008. But at 35% of the colleges within the data

set, the rate declined, in some cases steeply. In other words, “despite all the attention thrown at graduation rates during the last 15 years, many colleges’ numbers remain stagnant or worse” (Glenn, 2010).

The federal government has been tracking six-year graduation rates since 1997 by means of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, known as IPEDS. Since the Student Right-to-Know Act was passed by Congress in 1990, all colleges are required to report the number of students “completing their program within 150 percent of the normal time to completion.” For four-year colleges, that means the proportion of students who earn bachelor’s degrees within six years.

Colleges and universities are being held accountable for retention and graduation rates. State legislators in several states are reviewing retention and graduation rates and looking at them as indicators of performance for higher education institutions.

“According to a study by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), 32 states use graduation or retention rates as one of several indicators of performance for higher education institutions. Policy makers at the federal level are considering policy options associated with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that includes linking institutional eligibility for federal student financial aid programs to institutional graduation rates” (Titus, 2004).

Current Retention Methods

Improved advising is the approach most often utilized to increase retention at colleges. Sources from Kemerer, Baldridge, and Green (1982) to ACT (2010) confirmed that more than 80% of the four-year schools surveyed pursued strategies to reduce

attrition in the following areas: advising (increasing or improving, interventions, financial aid, career counseling), internships, curricular changes, remedial or enhancement programs (tutoring, writing lab, library orientation), orientation (student, parent/family), programs for honor students, college-sponsored social activities, and residence hall programs. According to ACT (2010), the retention practices with the lowest incidence rates at public four-year colleges were: vocational aptitude assessment, reading center/lab, freshman interest groups (FIGS), extended freshman orientation with credit, values assessment, community member mentoring, degree guarantee program, and freshman seminar/university 101 (non-credit).

Four-year schools reported to ACT that the practices with the highest means of retention at four-year colleges were: an academic advising center, advising interventions with selected student populations, comprehensive learning assistance center/lab, supplemental instruction, programs for first-generation students, required on-campus housing for freshmen, reading center/lab, tutoring, summer bridge program, extended freshman orientation with credit, programs for honor students, and integration of advising with first-year transition programs (ACT, 2010). Based on ACT (2010) research results, practices making the greatest contribution to retention at four year colleges were: freshman seminar/university 101 with credit, supplemental instruction, tutoring, living/learning communities (residential), advising interventions with selected student populations, mandated placement of students in courses based on test scores, academic advising center, summer orientation, and early warning systems.

The common theme among the reported effective programs is more faculty-student or student-student contact in one-on-one or small group settings (Barefoot, 2000).

“Students need to feel they matter and are appreciated. College personnel must realize that students need support from peers, faculty, staff, and family if they are to succeed” (Upcraft, 1995). Students who feel they belong at an institution are more likely to be successful (Thompson, Orr, Thompson, & Grover, 2007).

Community and Social Interaction

NASPA, the leading voice for the student affairs professionals, and the Student Union and Programming Benchmark study indicate that student participation in campus activities – such as intramurals, student government association, Greek organizations, athletics, academic honors, and many other student clubs and organizations - contribute to a student’s overall engagement. According to the study, students agree that they become more knowledgeable about the campus community due to attending events and activities.

An integral component of the Tinto’s model (1975), social integration, has remained unexplained in terms of its constitution and its sources and influences (Braxton, et al., 1997). The construct of sense of community has been adapted to student persistence research and has been identified as a source of social integration (Berger, 1997).

Levitz and Noel (1989) indicated that sense of community had a significant positive influence on intent to return. Research has widely provided evidence that a sense of community proved to be a positive predictor of student persistence (Jacobs, 2008). Beil and Shope (1990) identified several subgroups that influence sense of community of the overall campus community. Consistent with previous research,

membership in fraternities and sororities, living in on-campus residence halls, and participation in ethnicity centered groups were shown to influence sense of community and intent to return.

Once again, I cite Tinto (2000) to focus the work of others:

...involvement is a condition for student learning and retention. Educational theorists such as Alexander Astin, Ernest Boyer, George Kuh, and I have long pointed to the importance of academic and social integration or what is more commonly referred to as involvement or engagement to student retention. The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate. A wide range of studies in a variety of settings and for a range of students have confirmed that the more frequently students engage with faculty, staff, and their peers, the more likely, other things being equally, that they will persist and graduate. Simply put, involvement matters, especially during the first year of college when student membership in the communities of the campus is so tenuous (p. 7).

Research shows that faculty-student and student-student interactions are vital to improving student retention (Barefoot, 2000; Negda, et. al, 1998; Terenzini, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Students who excel at academic content but fail to become socially involved and develop support groups are more likely to drop out of college.

The Gap in the Literature

The conclusion drawn from a review of the literature on retention is that little agreement exists concerning policies and activities that can effectively reduce attrition on college campuses. Generally, the culture of student engagement or the overall character of a college has not been thoroughly studied. Co-curricular, or extracurricular activities, organized through the university as a form of engagement are largely unexplored.

Due to the dearth of literature specific to my research interests, I focused on the connections between intentions on student extra/co-curricular involvement within in the first month of enrollment and predictions on retention as a result.

Jones (1984) referred to retention efforts at most colleges as “hocus-pocus without a focus”. I believe this best summarizes the findings of this literature review. Jones underscored this is the primary reason that retention activities of a purely academic nature (advising, remedial programs, academic placement) have been relatively unsuccessful in reducing student attrition when used in isolation.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

Case Selection

Stake (2010) said, “Something is not right... research usually starts with a practitioner realizing things could be better and setting out to look carefully in the mirror” (p. 158). That is where this research began for me. It was my observation that by the end of the first semester of the first academic year Georgia College was losing too many of its first-year students. I set out on this research with the mindset that I wanted to understand why students were leaving. I was not too far into my research when I realized it was necessary to change my question. The question was not why we were losing students; plenty of information was already available on that. The question instead was 180 degrees to why do students stay?

Further, the question was not why do students stay, but why did a specific group of students who were in the same mindset as the students who left stay? Until recently there has been no broad assessment tool to measure an entering student’s intention of social involvement, thus no known studies have occurred in this unique area.

Increasingly over the last decade, students and their parents have come to identify Georgia College as their first school of choice. However, while the quality of students had increased each year, the official six-year graduation rate for the fall 2003 cohort

remained alarming low at 48.59%. Nationally, for the cohort of students who started college in 2001, the figure was 57.3% (Glenn, 2010).

MAP-Works

Nearly 20 years ago Ball State University began developing a tool to introduce students to academic life: Making Achievement Possible (MAP). After many years of improvements the tool was purchased by Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI).

Since 1994 EBI has assisted with studies at more than 1,500 colleges and universities in the United States and has surveyed more than 20 million people. EBI offers more than 50 national benchmarking studies in over a dozen areas of higher education. They have partnered with several higher education professional student affairs organizations such as ACUHO-I (housing), ACUI (student unions), AFA (fraternities and sororities) and academic areas such as business, engineering, education and nursing to name a few. MAP-Works is a highly developed assessment tool which assists universities with the issues of attrition and persistence. The collaboration of EBI/MAP-Works, with its large amount of resources, was able to improve upon the 20 years of development at Ball State University, and has been available commercially through EBI for five years.

When I arrived at Georgia College four years ago, it became clear we were ready for a retention tool like MAP-Works. In its second year of national release, Georgia College became the first Georgia school to participate in MAP-Works along with a handful of other schools in the nation.

In 2008, Georgia College identified a sample of 564 first-year students to participate in the MAP-Works survey, and a nonparticipating control group of 613 first-year students. After a review of the results by our Office of Institutional Research, it was determined that there was a positive statistical significance between the test group and the control group. Students who participated and used results of MAP-Works were more likely to be retained and had an average term GPA .21 points higher than students who did not use the results of this process. Georgia College concluded MAP-Works produced desirable outcomes for the fall 2008 freshman cohort.

For the past three years Georgia College has offered the MAP-Works transition survey to all first-year students. With the help of several departments across campus and the assistance of student staff in housing we have achieved a remarkable 96% response rate. It was important to Georgia College to get the highest response rates possible so the data collected was credible. MAP-Works allowed the members of the college to have extensive retention data on nearly all first-year students.

As a product, MAP-Works is committed to promoting the improvement of student retention, academic success, student development, and involvement. By surveying students at the fifth week of their first semester, participating students are able to obtain important feedback that informs them about key campus professionals such as advisors, housing staff, and other campus resources. Once the student completes the survey, specifically identified staff and faculty members are able to look at individual results, identify and contact high-risk students, log interactions, and promptly communicate intervention plans with the student and other campus professionals who are connected with the student.

When the idea of focusing my research on student involvement/engagement and retention at Georgia College surfaced, I immediately thought of some of the data that is collected in the MAP-Works survey. Merriam (2009) suggests when looking for a research study one area to consider is an area you are curious about or at work that puzzles you. “The first place to look is your daily life – your work, family, friends, and community. What are you are you curious about? What is or has happened at work that puzzles you? Why are things the way they are? ...what is interesting to you that you do not quite understand?” (pp. 55-56). As a student affairs professional, it is important for me to empower my staff in assisting their students to be as successful as possible. It is my sense that utilizing MAP-Works data can allow this to happen.

As a tool, MAP-Works allows the user to select groups of students who are high risk/low risk. By selecting student results from specific questions within MAP-Works, I was able to identify those at the highest risk of leaving Georgia College based on their lack of social connectivity. This search confirmed that more than 50% of the students identified by MAP-Works as not being socially connected were not enrolled for the second semester. The students interviewed in this research were the subset of this group who remained enrolled at the end of their second semester.

The primary focus of my research was to identify why the specific students stayed. In order to do this I needed to drill the data down to students who were involved/non-involved in out of the classroom extracurricular activities and to look at how these activities played out with regard to student retention.

The MAP-Works transition survey uses student development and learning theories to process student profile and student experience data that accurately identifies

at-risk students in a number of areas. Within student development some of the relevant areas of the survey for this research were:

- Student Interest Inventory
- Sense of Belonging
- Plans for College Involvement
- On Campus Living (social aspects)
- High School Involvement

The Study

This research is not to focus on the students MAP-Works predicted at greatest risk of leaving Georgia College due to social integration factors. Rather, it focuses on why students who were predicted to leave were eventually retained.

Merriam (2009), Stake (2010) and Yin (2009) all highlight the importance of studying a phenomenon in its real-life context from those involved. Therefore the qualitative case study is the most appropriate design method for this research.

I employed a mixed-methods approach. I reviewed retention data from the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research, interviewed students, and observed several highly active student groups on campus. Stake (2010) states, “The primary reason for mixing methods, of course, is to improve the quality of evidence” (p. 125).

I will provide details regarding who my participants were, how I collected the data, and the methods I used to analyze the data. I will also outline how I accounted for trustworthiness of the research design, validity, reliability, and the role of the researcher with a subjectivity statement.

Case Study Design

I selected a qualitative research design so that I could gain deeper and more detailed understanding of the selected students at Georgia College. While both quantitative and qualitative research, for the most part, follow the same processes in defining the problem, qualitative research offers a more flexible and emergent design. More so than quantitative research, qualitative research provides deep and rich understanding of the subject of focus.

I selected the case study design because Merriam (2009) described it as, “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit”, and continues, “if the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case” (p. 41).

Merriam (2009) goes on to say:

One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be, that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for the observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case (p. 41).

Yin (2009) defines the case study research process as, “...an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18).

Because the area of research selected is close to my more than 20 years as a student affairs professional, as Merriam (2009) points out, “[I can] bring to the case study their [my] own experiences and understanding, which lead[s] to generalizations when

new data for the case are added to old data” (p. 45), or as Yin (2009) calls it the “how” and “why”.

Merriam (2009) defines qualitative researchers as, “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and the meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Because, “the main machine in all research is a human researcher... humans are the researchers. Humans are being studied. Humans are the interpreters, among them the readers of our reports.” (Stake 2010, p. 36). A qualitative researcher is concerned with understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspective and not the researcher.

Qualitative research strategy helps the researcher build abstractions, concepts, hypotheses and possible theories; not just testing existing theories. The researcher gathers intuitive understanding from field experiences. The interest is in the process more than in the outcomes (Merriam, 2009).

Interview Site

Georgia College has been identified at “Georgia’s public liberal arts university” since 1996. It serves more than 5,000 undergraduate students on its historic Milledgeville campus. In addition, another 1,000 graduate students are served primarily through its Macon and Warner Robins campuses.

Georgia College has been charged with four distinct missions over its history. At its founding in 1889, it was a two-year teacher training and business skills college, in 1961 it became a regional women’s college, in 1967 a coeducational regional comprehensive college/university. Finally, in 1996, it was named Georgia’s public liberal

arts university. During the fall 2011 semester Georgia College enrolls 5,185 full-time undergraduate students taught by 316 full-time instructional faculty members. The College of Arts & Sciences enrolls the majority of the undergraduate majors; followed by Business, Health Sciences and Education. While the primary focus of Georgia College is undergraduate teaching, 387 full-time and 635 part-time graduate students are enrolled, primarily at the Macon Center.

I have served as the Executive Director of University Housing since the summer of 2007. Prior to my arrival, Georgia College made an unprecedented decision to demolish or abandon most of its nine-hundred on-campus residential bed spaces and issued \$120 million in bonds to rebuild nearly 2,300 bed spaces. This was a strategic investment to replace old “dorms” with modern day spaces providing attractive room sizes, private bathrooms, and other amenities. The new construction has impressed students and parents alike and catapulted Georgia College to one of the top choice universities in Georgia. To the best of my knowledge, no other university in the United States had ever done anything like this at that time, nor has attempted it since.

This is important, because it provides a sense of the commitment Georgia College has made to its out-of-classroom facilities. In my first four years at Georgia College, I have also reorganized the department. The department has added an Associate Director of Student Development, Associate Director of Operations, three masters’ level Area Coordinators, and well as added additional masters’ level professional Hall Directors (Community Directors). All this was done to fit the overall liberal arts mission of Georgia College, which is to provide a close and intimate experience for our students.

Over the last two years we also adopted a new language for our department. Our Resident Assistants (RA) became Community Advisors (CA); our Hall Directors (HD) and Complex Directors became Community Directors (CD); and our former Assistant Director of Residential Life became the Associate Director of Student Development. We were able to nearly double the salary of the Associate Director which allowed us to recruit a high-caliber doctoral-level professional.

The primary reason for making all these changes was to focus on providing our residential students more personalized attention from highly-trained professionals. The language change allowed those within the department and across the campus to understand that the primary focus of the department is to create community.

The Participants

I began with an intensive look at MAP-Works from a number of perspectives. I first looked at what MAP-Works refers to as ‘red alerts’: those students most likely to be at highest risk of leaving Georgia College. MAP-Works provides success markers in the following areas: academic, socio-emotional, performance and expectations, behaviors and activities, and financial means. Tinto (1987, 1993) suggests that most students leave college based on a lack of connection and involvement with an institution. Therefore I began by taking a closer look at sub-markers within the MAP-Works marker of socio-emotional: social integration, commitment to the institution, satisfaction with the institution, on-campus living (social aspects), homesickness/distressed, peer connections, institutional choice, living environment, and roommates. The second area of sub-markers I reviewed were within MAP-Works areas of behavior and activities and

included: campus involvement, advanced academic behaviors, class attendance, time management, basic academic behaviors, number of study hours per week, number of work hours per week, self-discipline, and interference with coursework.

The areas where I found the most red-alerts were within social integration, campus involvement, peer connections, and on-campus living (social aspects). Through a review of these indicators I was able to identify 70 students who were red-alerts.

Based on my acquired professional knowledge of students, I suspected student retention may be tied to their ability to connect with each other. I started examining those areas which MAP-Works defines as ‘social’. It was within these areas I noted higher percentages of students not returning after the first semester than those that were retained.

“Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Further, I used a purposeful unique sample. A ‘unique sample’ as defined by Merriam (2009) is “Based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 78).

Specifically my focus was on the MAP-Works questions “To what degree do you plan to”:

1. Attend student functions (i.e. sporting events, plays, art exhibits, etc.)?
2. Participate in student organizations?
3. Volunteer your time to a cause/issue?
4. Hold a position in a college/university student organization?

Based on the review of fall 2010 MAP-Works data of red-alerts, these four questions seem to predict the highest level of student attrition. After the first academic semester, there were only 31 of these 70 students enrolled. The other 39 (56%) had left the university after just one semester. Based on these responses, I purposefully identified 31 students actively enrolled at the end of their second semester who answered three of the four questions in the negative. I was able to secure interviews with 22 of the remaining 31 students focusing on social factors as to why they remained at Georgia College and were still enrolled the end of the first year.

Interview Questions

Stake (2010) referred to interviews as the road to multiple realities. Students served as my main source of data, providing insight as to why they were retained until the end of their first academic year while others left during or after the end of the first semester. The interviews yielded rich and descriptive data providing feelings and personal perspectives on the ways students viewed their experience at Georgia College. The following semi-structured questions were created to explore students' sense of belonging at the end of their first year.

- Overall, to what degree are you fitting in at Georgia College?
- Overall, to what degree are you satisfied with your social life at Georgia College?
- Overall, to what degree do you feel you belong at Georgia College?
- Please list the clubs and organizations you chose to become involved in at Georgia College.
- Why did you choose to become involved?

If they did not join any clubs or organizations, they then were asked the following two questions*:

- *Why did you choose not to join clubs or organizations at Georgia College?
- *How did you spend your time outside the classroom instead?
- Why do you feel it is important to be involved in clubs and organizations?
- From whom did you receive the most encouragement to become involved?
- To what extent did living in the residence halls play a part in your getting involved?
- What impact did your roommate/suitemate have in you getting involved?
- Did you initially join any groups you later chose not to remain involved with? Why?
- Is there a group you desired to become involved with and did not? Why?
- If you did not join _____ what would your life at Georgia College be like?
- Has _____ helped you make friends that allowed you to be more academically successful?
- Did you volunteer at the GIVE Center? To which cause/issue?
- Assuming you plan to return to Georgia College next year, which groups do you plan to remain active in or join?
- To what degree do you hang out with other residents on campus?
- To what degree are you committed to graduating from Georgia College?
- Overall, to what degree would you choose Georgia College if you had to do it over again?

Data Collection

Data collection for this study consisted of three parts: 1) student interviews, 2) observation of end of the year banquets of the more active student organizations at Georgia College, and 3) review of survey data provided by the Office of Institutional Research regarding non-returning first-year students.

The interviews served to gain insight on the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings of students who stayed regarding their first-year experience at Georgia College. The person-to-person interview allows one individual to obtain information from another and to better understand their perspective (Merriam, 2009).

As stated in the above participants section, I began processing data to identify first-year students who answered the above four MAP-Works questions in the negative. Based on the responses, I purposefully identified 31 students enrolled at the end of their second semester who answered three of the four questions in the negative.

Of the 31 students who met my criteria, through the use of emails and follow up phone calls I was able to schedule 22 of the students for interviews. Because these students were already identified as those who chose not to participate in campus activities and it was the week before finals, I enticed them to follow through by offering \$10 cash to participate in the brief interview. It was clear the money served as a motivator; I received prompt replies to schedule, and all 22 showed up on time.

I conducted all the interviews the week before finals, April 25-29, 2011. After the first dozen students I had reached saturation. However, since the other students were already scheduled, I followed through with all 22. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 209, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 80) “recommend sampling until a point of saturation or

redundancy is reached. In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units. Thus redundancy is the primary criterion.”

Without intention, my population included students of both genders, multiple races and ethnicities, and from nearly every residence hall on campus.

Each student interview took place in the University Housing conference room. This room was selected because of its comfort, neutral setting for the students, and its easy access. One student had a sports practice, so I met her for the interview at the West Campus Center.

Before each interview, I reviewed the IRB Informed Consent Form with each student (Appendix B), we both signed two copies, and I retained one while providing the other to the student. I requested the permission from each of the subjects to digitally record our conversation for transcript analysis. All participants consented. I also informed the subjects that if at any point they felt uncomfortable with the interview or the questions being asked they had the opportunity to stop the interview. All of the interviews were completed and often valuable information was exchanged after the structured questions had been finished. At the end of each interview I informed the student I would be sending them a complete copy of the questions they had been asked. I requested by email that if they had further thoughts regarding our conversation they were welcome to email them to me or contact me for a further discussion. While none of the participants sent me further thoughts, six of the 22 responded and thanked me of the opportunity to be a part of the study and taking the time to hear their perspective.

In addition to the recordings, I took field notes during each of the interviews and made further observation notes immediately after each session. These notes were valuable in helping me to better remember the individual while listening to the digital recording. To allow for anonymity, all participants were identified with a number. Originally I secured the number / participant coding on my personal computer. Upon completion of the dissertation, the document will be deleted and a single printed key for the coding will be kept at my home.

I used a semi-structured interview format, using guided questions allowing for flexibility for clarification. I personally transcribed each of the 22 interviews. These interviews served as the core data source for this study.

In addition to the interviews, I attended and observed eight end-of-the-year banquets. The groups selected to be observed were the more active and visible groups at Georgia College. Observing these groups allowed me to contrast the very active students with those I interviewed who were less engaged. The comparison of these two polar groups allowed analyses of the importance of social activity.

Merriam (2009) described observations as taking place in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs and offers a firsthand encounter and explains:

Being alive renders us natural observers of our everyday world and our behavior in it. What we learn helps us make sense of our world and guides our future actions. Most of this observation is routine – largely unconscious and unsystematic. It is part of living, part of our commonsense interaction with the world. But, just as casually conversing with someone differs from interviewing, so too does this routine observation differ from research observation. Observation is a research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific research question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances in producing trustworthy results (pp. 117-118).

When using observation as a research method, it is important to pay intense attention to things others would not. I made descriptive field notes of each of the banquets I attended. By paying close attention, I recorded the setting, the meals, the layout of the rooms, symbolic items or gestures, the groups that sat together, the dress, the facial expressions of participants engaged in conversations, language of the speakers, and the interactions at the completion of the event. I attempted to make as rigorous observations and notes as possible. In preparing to report my observational finding for chapter four, I re-listened to the digital recording of each event a second time.

As a participant observer, I was able to gain access and was able to see things from a perspective using my knowledge of the campus and the group. I was able to record actions and responses an outsider or untrained observer likely would have missed. I attempted to be objective and detached. Merriam (2009) says, "Observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or situation can be observed first hand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the topic under study" (p. 119).

If time allowed, I would have preferred to observe the student groups over a period of time. Due to the limited time of this study, as a participant observer I had to gather a good deal of information quickly. The setting, order of events, the messages being communicated, and the interactions of the participants became a repetitive format. After three or four banquets, saturation was met on most of the areas being observed.

After the interviews and banquets were completed and documented, I had planned to seek interviews with students who had not returned for a second semester or second year. In the process of gaining access to contact information for these students, I learned

of a multi-year retention study was available from the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research. I made contact with the director and he was able to provide me with raw data as well as reports and executive summaries of the findings of the completed research. Because the fall 2010 data was in the process of being collected, I decided to use prior years data so that the 2010 students in the study were not being contacted by several Georgia College personnel gathering very similar data.

Reviewing the data provided from the previous cohorts, there was congruence from year to year. Given the similar responses from participants of on-line surveys and phone interviews conducted by staff in the Office of Institutional Research of first-year students who had not returned to Georgia College, it is unlikely once the data collected for fall 2010 was analyzed it would show significant variance. This data is provided in chapter four and indicates that the non-returning students most frequently left college because they felt they had not made a personal social connection while at Georgia College.

I found plenty of congruence in the Institutional Research data with my interviews and banquet observations. All three helped to triangulate emergent findings.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews, banquet observations, and Institutional Research documents were reviewed one would think I would have been nearly finished. Far from it! The process of data analysis and drafting the findings was much like putting together a large jigsaw puzzle without the picture on the cover and not being certain if you had all the

pieces. Data analysis proved to be a frustrating and very time consuming process to say the least.

Merriam (2009) puts it this way, “The process of data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic. But this is not to say that the analysis is finished when all the data have been collected. Quite the opposite. Analysis becomes more intensive as the study progresses and once all the data are in” (p. 169).

After interviewing, transcribing, listening to recordings, and reviewing hundreds of pages of interviews I felt like I was buried in the data. I read each of the interviews in their entirety more than three times and wrote notes in the margins as patterns started to appear. The key to finding the overriding patterns and themes came when I used a cut and paste method in Microsoft Word, capturing and posting responses to the same questions into a singular document. It was like focusing a set of binoculars, the image at a distance became focused and clear.

Stake (2010), Yin (2009), and Merriam (2009) all refer to the term “coding” as a form of shorthand so that the researcher can easily retrieve specifics within the data. For coding purposes I used abbreviations with a key/chart, letters and colored pens to make sense of the massive amounts of data within the transcripts.

For each interview and observation I kept date, time, and location records to allow me easy recall on sequencing of events. Not too far into the interviews I began grouping students with common experiences and looked to identify a group for several that seemed to be isolated cases.

I kept data in hand written field notes, Microsoft Word transcriptions, and digital recordings, as well as hard copies that were printed out and filed. Multiple copies of

electronic and digital documents were kept on my computer, a flash drive, as well as on DropBox.com as backups.

Merriam (2009) suggests:

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and the what the researcher has seen and read- it the process of making meaning. Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation. These meanings or understandings or insights constitute the findings of the study (pp. 175-176).

Via this process I was able to identify a number of themes. It was not until I met with my major professor that she was able to assist me in putting these themes into overriding categories. I admired her ability with a keen eye and years of experience to quickly pin point and put into focus themes that which I had been struggling to organize. Merriam (2009) provided a good example of how organizing categories is much like the organization of the items in a grocery store; produce, meat, bakery, dairy, and so on.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p.177), “[data] should reveal information relevant to the study and stimulate the reader to think beyond a particular bit of information about something that can stand by itself.” This is the process of breaking down and building back up information that has been discussed prior to this. The building of categories is very inductive. At some point in the interview process it becomes more deductive; at the point of saturation categories remain solid (Merriam, 2009).

Trustworthiness of the Data

“All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 2009, p. 209). This is at the heart of trustworthiness in qualitative research. The traditional research language of validity and reliability come from quantitative research. This does not mean the rigor of qualitative research is any less than quantitative, as long as the researcher carries out their study in an ethical manner. “Regardless of the type of research, validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to a study’s conceptualization and the way in which the data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented” (Merriam, 2009, p. 210).

Firestone (1987) states: “The qualitative study must convince the reader that procedures have been followed faithfully because very little concrete description of what anyone does is provided. The qualitative study provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion ‘make sense’ (as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 210).”

Qualitative researchers “reject ideals such as perfection and objectivity-as well as fully discovering some truth and reality” (Toma, 2005, p. 405). I remember professor Doug Toma telling us in class that each of us must adopt our own rigor for our research; describe in great detail our time in the field, provide extensive description, and closeness to the research participants. I will outline these details in the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

Like internal validity, credibility is defined according to how well the research findings match reality. The study's credibility depends on how well the researcher interprets the participants' described reality through data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009).

After I finished transcribing each of the interviews, the document of the participant's interview was sent to them by email. Each was provided the opportunity to review the results of the interview and offer corrections or clarification on anything I may have misunderstood. This form of direct member check helped to insure that I was able to capture the intended meaning from each of the participants. Seventeen of the 22 participants responded and confirmed that I had indeed captured the essence of what they had shared in the interview. The other five did not respond to my email. These member checks also served to balance my own assumptions and biases. As previously stated, common themes emerged and overlapped, confirming that the data collected had reached a point of saturation.

For this study I used interviews, observation, and data analysis. These three elements are employed in triangulation. Triangulation remains the principal strategy to ensure for validity and reliability (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). Further, the findings appear to be supported by national data via the MAP-Works survey which suggest reliability.

When I was confident in the organization of my data I set up a meeting with my supervisor, Dr. Bruce Harshbarger, Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students for the past 14 years at Georgia College. I could think of no one who better knows the Georgia College student to test the triangulation and categories as sort of a

peer examination. With a couple of clarifications, it was his assessment the findings I shared ‘pretty much summed up’ the current student climate at Georgia College.

Transferability

Transferability means to what extent could my case and the findings be applied to other situations. Transferability is a term synonymously used with generalization and external validity when referring to qualitative design.

In this study, the question would be to what extent are the findings of this research transferable to other students at other universities who might be socially at high risk of not returning. Much like the difference between art and science, because we are working with humans, the data I collected and the findings that resulted would likely be ‘similar’, but very likely not the ‘same’.

My responsibility, as the researcher, is to provide enough descriptive detail to the study to make transferability possible. It is up to the reader of this study to decide if the fit to their situation or setting would be similar enough to attempt to achieve similar results.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that, “the best way to ensure the possibility of transferability is to create ‘thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and... the study (as cited by Merriam, 2009, p.227).”

The interviews conducted, observations made and IR data reviewed all firmed up the research. What really added credibility to this case is the extremely large data sets of

dozens of other universities using MAP-Works. The data of the vast pools of schools all showing similar results confirms quantitative validity to this qualitative study.

Through use of triangulation as I did using three methods of data collection, by use of member checking as I did with those interviewed and with the VP of Student Affairs, by seeking out the data sources to the point of saturation, and by providing detailed description on what I had done and leaving a firm audit trail, based on qualitative research methods literature, I allowed for transferability in this case.

Dependability

Dependability is the ability to accommodate changes in the environment of the study; in qualitative research this is often referred to as 'reliability'. This occurs, as Toma (2005) describes, when the understanding of the researcher becomes more refined over the course of data collection. Minor alterations may occur to refine the questions to gather more detailed information as the researcher gains more knowledge of the case being studied. While this did not occur in my study, an example might have been if one of my questions was consistently misunderstood by the participants. I may have selected to alter the question slightly, or change the order of the question, to get to point where the participants could more easily respond.

Unlike the question within transferability 'could this be applied', dependability is more concerned with whether the results could be duplicated. Quantitative studies, unlike qualitative studies, are often too interpretive and contextual to be predictable from one case or researcher to the next. As such, the question in qualitative studies are more

about the results being consistent with the data collected and do they “make sense” (Merriam, 2009).

The key then according to Merriam (2009) and Yin (2010) is to make sure there is a clear “audit trail” outlining how data was collected and procedures that were followed to arrive at your findings. Merriam (2009) outlines it as, “Just as an auditor authenticates the accounts of a business, independent readers can authenticate the findings of a study by following the trail of the researcher (p. 222).”

In my findings, specifically the interview sections, I used extensive quotes from the participants to allow the reader to feel the tone and see the context of the responses. The data shared via the Office of Institutional Research provided statistical supports and backed up the interview findings.

It was my decision to add to the dependability in this case by not stopping at the point of saturation, which would have been at between 10-12 students, and continue to try to reach as many of the 31 students as I could. The students I spoke to after the first dozen continued to support my initial findings with small details that rounded out the case.

Confirmability

The process that allows the data to be confirmed by someone other than the researcher that adds to the rigor of qualitative research is what is referred to as “confirmability”. In quantitative research, confirmability would be similar to objectivity. This would suggest that the findings would be an accurate reflection of the students I interviewed and not based on my personal perspective or biases.

I intentionally selected specific questions from MAP-Works to remove my perspectives, biases, and possible attitude toward retention. Member checks of the individuals interviewed, a peer examination by the Vice President of Student Affairs, and an audit trail framing the study in the way I described add to confirmability. This included stating in advance what my perspective, values, and biases might be that could influence the study. Through peer review, by sharing my results with knowledgeable administrative professionals at Georgia College, I identified minor rival perspectives on my findings that challenged my thinking. I remember professor Doug Toma telling us many times in class that our results would be fruitless if there is bias in the way we approached and concluded the study.

This entire study is based on the rigor of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and trustworthiness. My design of data review, interviews and observation lend to the authenticity and appropriateness to answer the research question I proposed for this study.

Subjectivity and Role of the Researcher

There is a delicate balance between researcher bias and subjectivity. As the researcher I need to be aware of how my assumptions, perspective, experiences, values, and biases might influence this study. In qualitative research, the researcher is recognized as the primary instrument in the data collection and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). This becomes both a benefit and a shortcoming of qualitative research. Likewise, my personal experience of over 20 years of working with students and personal observations could yield a valuable data rich opportunity or prove to be a hindrance. I

must be keenly aware of the potential influence this might have on the findings. Thus, it is important for me to outline these in relation to the selection of this topic and the participants who were interviewed and observed.

Stake (2010) said, “We need to help the reader see the biases we are trying to deal with” (p. 166). As the Executive Director of University Housing at Georgia College for the past four years I have attended many meetings discussing retention of our students. Because there is a first-year live on requirement at Georgia College, and the discussion among some to consider a second-year live on requirement, the topic of this study interested me.

This subject was not my first idea for research; in fact it was my fifth. When other subjects and designs were considered, each had flaws and setbacks. Facing a tight timeline on the completion of this dissertation, it occurred to me that I had nearly everything available I needed for this study. As often happens, the design was tweaked slightly to meet the timeline as well as the needs of others. However this did not change the overall focus: why do some students stay when others leave?

While I have no direct vested professional interest, finding some of the “answers” certainly would allow me to add an extra component to the campus dialog. While others have been focused on the academic components of why students leave, it was my suspicion that the answer might exist outside the classroom. I am by nature a skeptic, always a bit cautious of taking what others share as “fact”.

When I gained access to the data from the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research after I had completed the student interviews and observations, it was a true “ah-ha” moment. It was the third bit of information, a true triangulation, which suggested

that what I had been hearing and observing was being reinforced with data collected from an outside source. Few Georgia College students were leaving due to academic concerns or finances. In large part, students left because they had not ‘connected’ with the institution or made an initial friendship which created a sense of belonging. The data from the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research categorized this as students having “personal” reasons for leaving the institution.

As a former live-in professional hall director and later working in several area of administration with a primary focus on first-year students for over 20 years, I certainly have watched the changes in the entering first-year class over time. I have first-hand knowledge of the concerns and issues students bring with them to campus as well as a normal progression of development as they grow into their first-year and beyond at a college campus.

My entire professional life has been in academia. Georgia College is the fifth school at which I have worked, preceded by St. Cloud State University (MN), University of Minnesota – Morris (MN), Kent State University (OH), Western Michigan University (MI), and as a student staff member for five years at Moorhead State University (MN).

I have professional interests in this topic not just to see students succeed, but also as the person in charge of a \$13,000,000 operational budget. Every lost student contract impacts the financial bottom line of the department I oversee. Engaged and happy students are most often retained and renewed contracts result in filled beds. This study also allows me to be better informed when I sit at the campus decision making table with other administrators. Universities are about ‘education’ which most academics see as occurring ‘in the classroom’. However, as much of the research shows, it is not academic

reasons that prompt most students to leave Georgia College. This research allows me to enter the discussion as a scholar-practitioner.

As Executive Director of University Housing, there is a perceived position of power which could have had an impact on the student interviews. I realize some of the participants of the interviews may have felt obligated to speak with me. At the start of each of the interviews I attempted to alleviate concerns and put the students at ease by telling them I wanted to hear what they had to say. I told each participant, “Speak to me in the language you are comfortable without fear that I may judge you. If something sucks, tell me it sucks. Please, feel free to speak openly, I want to hear from you.” I was speaking to students I had no prior contact with and likely would not see again. I told them that they could stop the interview process at any point if they were uncomfortable. None of them did.

I openly share that I am not a ‘numbers’ person, so quantitative research did not interest me. In my career, I am a person who talks with other people to find out what it is they need or how I can help them better enjoy their experience in the residence halls. I am a problem solver and decision maker. It is my job to keep issues off the desk of my Vice President and hopefully not receive negative attention from the President. I rely on proactive interactions with students and parents to keep them as satisfied customers. Therefore qualitative research is a natural fit for me to gain a deeper understanding of the problems of those I serve.

Summed up best by Stake (2010), “Becoming a researcher, especially for a person doing qualitative research is partly a matter of learning how to deal with bias. All researchers have biases, all people have biases, all reports have biases, and most

researchers work hard to recognize and constrain hurtful biases. They discipline themselves, they set up traps to catch their biases; and the best researchers help clients and readers to be alert to those biases, too” (p. 164).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

“... like it’s my group of friends, but it’s like honestly family. It’s the people I eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with. The people that I play intermurals with and like study with. Go to the library with. It’s like that’s my group of friends; the closest ones.”

In this chapter I will provide research findings of student retention as related to student engagement. The findings are based on students’ self-identified intent to be socially engaged upon entry to Georgia College. Through student interviews, observation of student groups, and review of data provided by the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research as well as MAP-Works, it became clear that there is a firm connection between student retention at Georgia College and student engagement in out-of-the-classroom opportunities.

From the outset, this research was not conducted in order to understand why students leave a university, but more importantly to understand why they stay. Specifically, my interest was in students with early social indicators that suggested they were at highest risk of not being retained; fewer than 50% of these self-identified non-socially engaged students at the highest risk of leaving survived their entire first academic year. After a thorough review of many of the survey questions on MAP-Works, I noted a pattern in areas of ‘social engagement’. I was able to identify those students who planned to be socially engaged and those students who said they had no

intention of involvement in organized clubs and organizations outside the academic classroom.

Specific questions within the MAP-Works first-year student survey administered during the fifth week of the first semester were selected to identify potentially at-risk students who self-identified that they did not intend to be involved on campus. The questions from the survey which supplied this information were, “to what degree do you plan to”:

1. Attend student functions (i.e. sporting events, plays, art exhibits, etc.)?
2. Participate in student organizations?
3. Volunteer your time to a cause/issue?
4. Hold a position in a college/university student organization?

Over 50% of the students who answered these four questions in the negative did not return to Georgia College for the spring semester. I invited those who were retained until the end of the first academic year to be interviewed for this study.

According to national MAP-Works results from several years of longitudinal data, the most at risk students are those who choose not to participate in the survey. Their absence suggests that they do not participate or complete requested assignments. For fall 2010, 12 students did not complete the MAP-Works survey. Of those 12 non-responding students, none returned for spring 2011. This seems to be the national average; nearly all students who do not respond are likely to not be retained or be at the highest risk of leaving the college.

The success markers within MAP-Works are: academic, socio-emotional, behavior and activities, performance and expectations, and financial. Within academic

markers, the areas factors measured are academic integration, course difficulties, academic self-efficacy, communication skills, analytical skills, commitment to earning a degree, and chosen major. Within socio-emotional markers, the factors measured are social integration, commitment to the institution, satisfaction with the institution, peer connections, social aspects of on-campus living, institutional choice, and homesickness. Under behavior and activities, the factors measured are campus involvement, academic behaviors, number of study hours per week, time management, number of work hours per week, class attendance, and self-discipline. The last two areas that least predict retention are performance and expectations and financial issues. The areas measured in the area of performance and expectations are entrance test scores, parents'/guardians' educational level, and number of high schools attended. Financial issues are indicated by the ability to pay monthly living expenses and ability to pay the next term's tuition/fees.

Using the above criteria in a dashboard environment MAP-Works assigns a student a code of green, yellow or red. Students receiving primarily green indicators are doing well and need little additional guidance to be successful. Students receiving red indicators in the individual areas above or an overall red indicator are in serious need of help in order to be retained for the second academic year.

Most red indicators are due to students' experiences with socio-emotional areas, primarily social integration, peer connections, the social aspects of on-campus living, homesickness, and lack of campus involvement. Other major contributors to red indicators are commitment to, and the satisfaction with, the institution. These are often students who wanted to attend another university but attend Georgia College or students who are attending Georgia College but are planning to transfer to another institution.

Georgia College annually admits a first-year class of slightly over 1,200 students. The Georgia College MAP-Works data reflects fall 2010-to-spring 2011 persistence in the table below:

MAP-Works Risk Indicator	Average GPA	Returned	Did Not Return
Green	3.19	698 (98.6%)	10 (1.4%)
Yellow	2.99	282 (93.1%)	21 (6.9%)
Red	2.64	140 (81.9%)	31 (18.1%)
Red-2*	2.72	6 (33.3%)	12 (66.7%)
TOTAL:	3.05	1,126 (93.8%)	74 (6.2%)

*NOTE: Based on a MAP-Works algorithm a Red-2, is a category of student who is at the highest risk of leaving the university. This is based on two or more areas of measurement with Red indicators at multiple points of contact over time.

13.7% of the first-year Georgia College students remained at risk for both fall and spring semesters (red = 14.3% for fall and 13.1% for spring). The persistence rate of Georgia College students from fall to spring was 93.8% (1,126) with an average of a 3.05 GPA. Eighty students (6.7%) had a GPA of less than a 2.0 after fall 2010 term. There were 74 students (6.2%) who left the university after the fall semester and a total of 204 students did not return for fall 2011 (17%). The above data represents all students at risk, not just those students socially-at-risk which is the focus of this study.

According to the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research, the overall year-to-year attrition rates of first year Georgia College students for the past five years were: 2006 – 18.21%, 2007 – 15.78%, 2008 – 15.89%, 2009 – 14.51% and 2010 – 17.00%. The five-year mean first year attrition rate of 16.28% for first to second year students is well below the national average. The national attrition rate of first-year students at all types of institutions is 23.9% and in Georgia is 24.5%. According to 2009

IPEDS data, national attrition rates of first years students at 4-year institutions are: public – 23.1% private – 25.6%, and private for profit – 49.5%.

It is interesting to note that from the 1,200 surveyed students, 1,157 (96.4%) completed the MAP-Works survey. Of the students who accessed at least one MAP-Works student report during the academic year, the average GPA was 3.16. Of the students who did not access any of the available student reports, the average GPA was 2.95; there was a 0.21 difference in GPA of those that utilized the MAP-Works tool. Upon their completion of the MAP-Works survey, students are immediately provided with reports that indicate areas of the campus that can serve as resources. The report may suggest visiting the Student Success Center for assistance with test taking or writing skills, they visit their adviser, or the report may lead them to the website providing resources on clubs and organizations they might join and contact information for becoming involved. Once again, the 0.21 difference in GPA is statistically significant and an indication that students who take an active role and fully participate in the opportunities provided to them can do better and are more likely to be retained.

Before I review the results of the interviews, I will help the reader to understand why students leave Georgia College. Then I will share the results of the interviews I conducted and the common themes identified that indicate why students stay at Georgia College. I will conclude this chapter with observations of our most highly engaged students at Georgia College.

Chapter Outline

This chapter is organized in three sections. In section ‘A’ we will take a look at those first-year students who left Georgia College within their first year. In section ‘B’, I will review the themes and patterns which emerged from the interviews with students who were at high risk for attrition due to their indication via MAP-Works that they did not plan to become socially involved on campus, but were still enrolled at Georgia College at the end of the first academic year. And in section ‘C’, I will review observations of the most socially involved students at Georgia College.

Section A

Those who left and those who stayed; same or different?

The Georgia College Office of Institutional Research has been conducting a study of full-time, first semester freshmen cohorts of students who leave the university and do not return for a second academic year. The participants in this study are 102 of the 1,379 students who left Georgia College after one or two semesters between 2005 and 2009. These students were contacted either by email or direct phone calls. At the time of this research, the data collection for the freshmen of the 2010 cohort was not complete.

Participants were asked to indicate the primary and secondary factors (academic, campus life, financial, and personal) in making their decision to not return to Georgia College. Thirty-nine (38.2%) indicated the most important factor in making their decision was ‘personal.’ Thirty-seven (36.3%) indicated ‘academics’ was most important. Eleven (10.8%) of the former Georgia College students indicated ‘financial’ was most important and ten (9.8%) said ‘campus life’ was the deciding factor.

Clearly ‘personal’ and ‘academic’ concerns are the two most important reasons Georgia College students report leaving the university. When academic reasons such as the inability to enroll in their major or a decision to pursue a major not offered at Georgia College are removed, then ‘personal’ concerns become the primary reason students were not being retained. These two factors, ‘personal’ and ‘academic’ are chosen four times more often by former students than ‘financial’ and ‘campus life’ as reasons for not returning to Georgia College.

When secondary factors were identified, ‘personal’ again was selected by most former students (17 representing 16.7%), followed by ‘campus life’ (16 representing 15.7%), ‘academic’ (13 representing 12.7%) and ‘financial’ (3 representing 2.9%); fifty-three (52%) of the former students failed to indicate a second factor for making the decision not to return.

Students surveyed were asked to indicate the specific personal problems/difficulties they experienced while attending Georgia College which lead to their decision not to continue study. The table below outlines the problem areas, ranked from most selected to least selected.

Problem/Difficulty	N	%
Problem adjusting to being away from home	14	13.7
Felt had few friends or peers	11	10.8
Problems feeling isolated	10	9.8
Problem with living arrangement	10	9.8
Problem with roommate	9	8.8
Distance from home was difficult	8	7.8

Experienced lack of motivation	7	6.9
Problem adjusting to being away from significant other	5	4.9
Problem with emotional health	4	3.9
Involved with too many off-campus activities	4	3.9
Change in family situation	4	3.9
Problem with physical health	3	2.9
Experienced racial tension	2	2.0
Experienced sexual harassment	2	2.0

Of the 37 students (36.3%) responding that ‘academics’ was the most important factor in their decision for not returning to Georgia College, over fifty percent stated that they were very satisfied (26.5%), satisfied (23.5%), or neutral (23.5%) with their academic major. Very few students were dissatisfied (17.6%) or very dissatisfied (8.8%) with their academic major. Thus, it was not dissatisfaction with an academic major that caused the majority of students to leave.

While ‘campus life’ came in as a distant third factor, because it is closely related to this study and the ‘personal’ reasons listed above, it is important to see what students indicated about campus life. Students were asked about specific aspects of campus life which led to their not returning to Georgia College. Of those that responded, 17.6% felt the ‘location’ of Georgia College a problem and 9.8% felt the ‘size’ of Georgia College was a problem. Several students indicated that Georgia College was not what they had expected (7.8%), while 6.9% felt faculty attitudes were negative, and another 6.9% felt Georgia College had no school spirit. The following reasons show up in my research; the

students did not have many friends (5.9%) and felt they did not fit in (5.9%). All other concerns received less than a 4% response.

A substantial number of students who did not return for a second year reported that Georgia College was not their institution of first choice (37.3%) and that it had always been their intention to transfer (31.4%). When the student is not vested in the university, it is obvious their likelihood of leaving increases.

When asked if they were currently attending another University System of Georgia (USG) school, twenty-five (24.5%) indicated they were at University of Georgia and eleven (10.8%) were at Georgia State University. Other than Macon State University with five students (4.9%), all other schools listed in the USG had two or less students from Georgia College.

It is interesting to note that the majority of former students (72.5%) indicated they would positively and enthusiastically recommend Georgia College to others.

Much of the data received from Dr. Ed Hale, Director of the Office of Institutional Research at Georgia College, suggested while many students came to love Georgia College, they were challenged by its location in a small town. This is consistent with what I heard via the interviews I held with students. While they enjoyed the small and intimate classes, residence halls and socializing in the dining hall, they wished that there were more community resources and night time entertainment.

As the above study suggests, most students are pleased with their academic experience at Georgia College. Those that may have not been fully academically prepared realized very early that the college was not the right fit for them.

There are two cohorts at Georgia College which tend to be the most competitive - education and nursing. While it is most often at the end of the second year that students will realize they are not likely to be granted admission to these two cohorts, some students realize that they need to find another major based on grades and the potential loss of the HOPE scholarship, transfer to another university or simply discontinue their education.

In summary, based on longitudinal data for the Office of Institutional Research, Georgia College students leave primarily for personal reasons; feelings of homesickness and isolation. Following personal reasons were concerns of the location of Milledgeville and the small size of Georgia College.

Section B

The interviews of retained at risk students.

One hundred and thirty-three first-year students in the fall 2010 freshmen cohort (6.6%) at Georgia College were identified by MAP-Works as being at high risk socially. Primary areas of social high risk include social integration, peer connections, campus involvement, social aspects of on-campus living, institutional choice and homesickness. The focus of my research question is if students became engaged in clubs and organizations on campus, were they less likely to leave the institution because they found a 'sense of belonging.'

I focused on four specific MAP-Works questions specific to involvement:

Q67 – To what degree do you intend to attend student functions (i.e. sporting events, plays, art exhibits, etc.)?

Q68 – To what degree do you intend to participate in a student organization?

Q69 – To what degree do you intend to volunteer your time to a cause/issue?

Q70 – To what degree do you intend to hold a leadership position in a university student organization?

Thirty-one enrolled first-year students near the end of their second semester were identified as meeting the criteria, high risk as indicated by responses to these questions, for the purposes of this study. Though these students are only 1.55% of the overall population, they constituted 23.3% of the identified social high risk students who were retained through the entire academic first year. Each was contacted and asked to meet for a short individual interview regarding their level of campus involvement at Georgia College. I was successful at getting 22 of the 31 to spend time with me to discuss the interview questions.

The research protocol consisted of 20 questions. The findings of these interviews, which seem to draw this research together as threads of common themes, will be shared in this section. While the complete interview protocol can be seen in Appendix C, the following are some of the questions which were asked of each participants.

- Overall, to what degree are you fitting in at Georgia College?
- Why did you choose to become involved?
- To what extent did living in the residence halls play in your getting involved?
- What impact did your roommate/suitemate have in you getting involved?
- Overall, to what degree would you choose Georgia College if you had to do it over again?

During transcription, I attempted to capture the tone and cadence of the interviewees. In cases where there was improper diction, the remarks were captured as closely as possible.

From the interviews, four themes developed: size, patterns of interaction, progression, and external influences. Each will be discussed with subsections intertwined with student quotes from the interviews.

When asked what it means to live on campus one student shared, "...like it's my group of friends, but it's like honestly family. 'Cuz we'll all have movie night every weekend in one person's room 'cuz they have the biggest TV or something like that. It's the people I eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with. The people that I play intermural with and like study with, go to the library with. So, it's like that's my group of friends. The closest ones." As another student simply said, "everyone's a tight knit group in the dorms." The idea of spending time together out of class, eating together, playing together and even occasionally studying together is what this research is truly about.

This study focuses on students who, based on their MAP-Works survey responses, should not have been retained through the end of the first academic year; much less a second year. These students had already beaten the odds of the more than 50% of the students in the same grouping who did not return for the second semester.

In order to understand what allowed these students to persist, as you read the following statements, listen closely to what they had to say when asked, "Why did you choose to become involved?":

I chose to become involved, ah like I wasn't originally involved, and it's just not healthy. I was just sitting in my room all day, even if I was studying, I wasn't a happy person. Becoming involved kind of lets you get that stress off so you can do better later at school.

Really, just, ah, 'cause I know it helps your grades. I don't have the best grades, but I'm learning. (laughs) But, um, but just to stay involved, really. Because I don't want to be that person that had every opportunity in the world to stay connected and to, I mean have a core group of friends, and stuff, and just feel like I wasted that opportunity.

Well, it was mainly because my group of friends in my dorm are like my close friends wanted to do it (intramurals). So they just, everyone, asked each other like, "Hey, you want to startup a team?" and we said sure. We made up names, and it was just like something fun. Just something to do together. Just college (laughs).

Joining the group is not as much about being involved, as it is directly intending to or indirectly having the opportunity to make 'friends'. It is the need for social interaction that drives most of these students to seek some sort of campus involvement.

For a much smaller group of students who did not get involved, who will be discussed in more detail at the end of this section of the chapter, their persistence at Georgia College was talked about in a very different way. When asked why they did not get involved in clubs or organizations at Georgia College, I was told:

First semester I didn't really know what I was doing, I was almost in shock for the whole semester. Second semester I decided I need to pick up a job to help pay for the lack of HOPE funding I was going to have next semester. That's pretty much it.

Mainly just because I wanted to get used to everything else, like grade wise, school and studying, friends and – like I wasn't really involved, like... I guess like toward the end of the year I got involved in the Hall Council for Parkhurst (Hall).

I don't know. I guess because I didn't know anyone. Now that some of my friends have already did [join groups], they are all like you should do this or you should join this. It makes me want to engage myself.

For this self-identified non-involved group of students, I asked them how they spent their time outside of the classroom. The responses were:

Usually I just hangout with people in my dorm, and play video games.”
“First semester I spent going out and meeting people, not studying.
Second semester was just cracking down studying and working. I would go out every Thursday night and got in a lot of trouble.

Chilling with my roommate. Like this semester especially. Like me and my roommate are really close though. We had movie nights nearly every night. I changed roommates. First semester, ah, it’s not like we didn’t get along, she was great I just ended up finding somebody like that was losing her roommate and I was friends with both of them. Then the friend that was leaving was like, why don’t you take my room? I’m like you can stay with Emily ‘cause she’ll be by herself and then she won’t know the suitemates. And, I was like, okay. Then my first roommate didn’t care. She was like a major sorority girl, so she was always busy. Like we weren’t incredibly close, but we definitely got along. But, I switched.

Lack of focus, time management and overall procrastination were the keys to those who did not become involved. Instead of focusing on a group, their network was usually a single person, a roommate or a ‘friend’. A balance between social and academic seemed to be missing. Hanging out watching movies and playing video games filled the time that the more socially engaged students used for interaction in organizations and building broader networks of friends.

For both groups I asked, “Why do you think it is important to be involved in clubs and organizations?” The answers for the involved group as well as the non-involved group started sounding the same:

Well, it kinda gives you something productive to focus your time which is not spent academically on. And, ah, meet a lot of new social groups that way.

So you meet more people. Once you meet people you’ll have new friends. Cause just being involved in studying is pretty boring.

Well, I mean, all the standard things. There’s a lot of unity in those. I think I got to know some people. Like, they were acquaintances at the time. Though playing soccer with them I got to know them pretty well. I would say community I guess.

When one listens to both involved and non-involved students, it becomes clearer that organized forms of social involvement encourage or increase the opportunity for friendships to develop. Not only are friendships formed, wider networks of friends are formed when students are involved. For some non-involved students lucky enough have built a friendship with a roommate or someone else on their residence hall floor, that friendship may have been the single thing that kept them in school. As outlined early in this chapter, many of the students who left did so because they had problems adjusting to being away from home and they had not developed a friendship prior to leaving.

Even in these the brief student statements, one begins to pick up on common themes. What follows are overriding larger themes as well as subthemes that emerged from interviewing, listening, transcribing, reading, and re-listening to the interviews.

Through student comments, I believe we can start to gain insight and better understand what it is about student interaction, or what was referred to as ‘personal’ reasons for the students who did not return, of the students who remained. What follows are the unassuming, yet wise insights of the first-year college survivors.

B1 – Size

B1.1 Campus Size

Georgia College is proud of, and promotes as a strength, its intimate size. While it is a state university, unlike other state schools with goals to grow in size, for most of its history Georgia College has intentionally remained small. As Georgia’s designated “state public liberal arts university”, it is part of the mission of the institution to ‘not grow’ the undergraduate class. Based on the thousands of applications received, there certainly is

opportunity for Georgia College to grow; but in the last decade the decision has been made to cap the enrollment at 1,200 entering first year students.

Part of the reason behind the decision to remain small has been that the campus is landlocked in the downtown historic district of Milledgeville; for that reason space for available classrooms is limited. What for some may be identified as a weakness, has turned into a strength for the university; with selectivity has come desirability. My personal observation is it is human nature to want what is difficult to obtain and desire to have what others cannot. This has, somewhat unintentionally, become a marketing strength for Georgia College.

b1.2 Class Size

Read the marketing materials at many universities across the nation and they will boast small class size, small student-to-teacher ratio, and a caring community. This is not just marketing at Georgia College, it is reality. As has been stated, Georgia College limits its first year class to 1,200. It is the strong desire of the university to provide to students the ambience of a private education at an affordable state university price focusing on the liberal arts. This is fitting since Georgia College started as a small state normal school in the former antebellum state capital of Georgia. For the majority of its history, Georgia College never exceeded 1,200 total students and it was not until 1975 that the institution reached 3,800. Georgia College has always been small.

When questioned about how students are fitting in at Georgia College, one is likely to hear a variation of this student's response, "Everybody is real friendly and it's just easy to meet people here." Because the campus is so intimate, it is likely that

meeting people even while simply waiting for class is a way of developing personal contact. As stated by this student, “I’ve met a lot of new people in the dorms and outside of the doors in the classrooms and whatnot.”

The small class sizes allow students to learn names and get to know more about each other. In most classes it is not possible to hide, not participate or not to have ones’ absence noted. For these reasons Georgia College becomes the right place for many students. As one put it, “ ‘Cause I got to, you know, maybe meet people in my classes that I didn’t know before. Maybe we studied together.”

b1.3 Dining Hall

To most people a dining hall is a place where you go to meet your nutritional needs. In reality, the dining hall is a center for social interaction. This is especially true at Georgia College where, due the lack of a true student center, the dining hall serves as a place where people often socialize.

National campus food service providers such as Sodexo, ARAMark, and Chartwells are well aware of the longitudinal study of EBI which indicates that dining halls are the second most important factor when students are making decisions on campus tours regarding which school to select (EBI student survey, 1996-current). At the start of any academic year, a visit to any dining hall would reveal student visits lasting a matter of minutes, students often sitting alone or in very small groups. However, a visit to the same location near the end of a semester would reveal much longer visits and tables often times pushed together to accommodate larger groups. Long after the student is finished

eating they often extend the visit as other students join and leave the group according to their schedules.

Based on personal observation, students arrive at dining halls in groups after a class, after a meeting or just at a learned predetermined time that the group meets at the cafeteria. Like most creatures of habit, they will often sit in the same area, at the same table and likely even the same seat.

Because Georgia College is aware of the social importance of the dining hall, this past summer a more than \$4-million renovation was completed to update the facilities to offer a better, more modern experience. This investment confirms the importance of the dining experience to the student and the university.

Through the interviews, I heard about the dining hall experience in many different ways. Feedback was never about the food; it was always about the social interaction. As one student said, “I’m now friends with people, and I met a lot of people through class and Saga (dining hall)” and another stated, “If I’m going to eat, I don’t eat in my room, like I’ll eat in the community room or I’ll go to the cafeteria. It’s just better to be out and about. I’d rather be involved than just being cooped up in my room.” In several interviews I heard reference to their relationships on campus as, “It’s the people I eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with.” The dining hall is very much a center of social interactions.

b1.4 Setting

A single visit to Georgia College and a walk across the front lawn will suggest that, “this is how a college campus should look.” I have suggested to administrators on

campus that we should be marketing ourselves as a backdrop for movie sets. Massive 100+ year-old trees, open green spaces and buildings framed in Greek Corinthian columns make Georgia College one of the most beautiful campuses in this country.

For students seeking a small campus experience, the campus look is nearly perfect. Repeatedly, the size of the school, the grass and the trees emerged from the students being interviewed. The ways in which the students said it were:

It's perfect here because it's like the perfect size, and the grass, and it's like really comfortable and that's what I want.

I really feel the environment is outdoorsy enough for me. I was attracted to the small feel from the beginning when I visited in high school from my tour.

As soon as I came on my visit I knew that this was one of my top schools. I just like the campus, it is amazing. I really like it.

b1.5 Size Matters

For the student who selects Georgia College, size does matter. The first impression for the students who grew up in metro Atlanta is the drive through the timber-lined roads and open cattle fields to a small town in “the middle of nowhere”. Parents develop a sense that this is a place that will be “safe” for their student.

The student that selects Georgia College and remains is not the same student who attends the University of Georgia or Georgia State. They are not looking for the amenities of an urban college campus. They are also not looking to get lost in a sea of 30,000 students, riding busses across campus, and taking classes in large lecture halls with classes taught by teaching assistants. They will not experience any of these at Georgia College and most are very happy with the school and location they selected.

“I like the set-up of the campus. My brother attends the University of Georgia and I have been up to visit him a few times before I came here and actually attending college myself and I don’t think I could ever go to UGA. It’s just too big. I’d get lost, like instantly. Here it’s very easy to get around campus, easy to find where I’m going, takes me maybe ten minutes to walk from my dorm room in Foundation to main campus. Maybe ten minutes, sometimes less, depending on how I hit the lights.” (Note: there are two stop lights/crosswalks between the residence halls and central campus where classes are located.)

Yeah, it’s small. I didn’t want to go anywhere too big or too small. I’ve made friends. I’m pretty much in with all the kids that I fit with. So I think I fit pretty well.

‘Cuz like in high school, it’s just like people in like your class and you can’t really talk, but here it’s like you can communicate with others. Like people, like just between lunch you can just like go like any time cause it a lot more freedom. Here it’s, really, I like it ‘cuz I can just walk down the hall if I want to talk to someone. It just like open and feel secure and talk and it’s a really good social life. If you go on front campus, it’s like people are advertising about band stuff and they just walk up to you and like just have a conversation. It’s really comfortable.

b1.6 University of Georgia (UGA) Envy

While the student that selects Georgia College most often selects it for its size, which is not to say that many of them do not long for what they see as a traditional collegiate experience. Some Georgia College students long for an experience that is highlighted by football games in the fall, Greek row, the variety of the bands and the bars available, and overall nightlife options. After several of the interviews, I came to the conclusion what the students were telling me is they had “UGA envy”. The comments

below repeat their desire to have a blend of what they have at Georgia College and in Milledgeville and what they believe to be a more traditional college experience.

Social life is fine [in Milledgeville]. I mean obviously there's not much to do here. You have like a few things to do downtown. There's Bartram Forrest, I'll go to every now and then. It would be nice if there was more music down here. Not really trying to relate it to Athens, because Athens is Athens. If we had some sort of music scene here that would be a lot nicer. Otherwise I guess it's fine.

I know a lot of my friends are planning on going to UGA. People around here think Athens is the greatest place in the world, and I don't. I guess they really want to go there for the social scene. I really don't want to go there. - I think I need to transfer somewhere where school is a little bit easier (laughs). Like, I'm kind of struggling here. I need to go where I can do well in school and I know I would not do well at UGA.

Well, probably if I had made better grades in high school I would have gone to Georgia [UGA]. Since I didn't and since I got here I figured it was like a sign. I was wearing a Georgia College shirt the day I got accepted so I figured it was a sign. The other college I was going to go to was Georgia Southern and I visited there 'cause a couple of my friends go there and I don't like it that much. It's just a great community here. Everybody like cares. Like I heard college professors don't care at other places, but I think they do care here. It's the perfect size for me; not too big, not too small. The only thing I would want to happen here is to get a football team.

B2 Patterns of Interactions

To put it simply, students are looking for a sense or a feeling of belonging. At a university they find it in many ways. We hope they find it in positive interactions. However, we know that many find it through negative or abusive behaviors. Some students consume excessive amounts of alcohol to be a part of a group or to impress friends. Some students begin an addictive behavior like smoking to fit in with a peer group. Some do it in many other ways. Fortunately, the overall number of these students is small.

What I found more commonly among the students interviewed were students who found ‘that one connection’ that allowed them to feel they belonged and were a part of something bigger. In the following sections I will outline and share the many positive feelings of connection Georgia College students expressed.

b2.1 Community

When we think about a feeling of belonging, for most people the first time they felt the emotion of the feeling was within the family in which they grew up. So it was no surprise to me that the term ‘family’ was the word most commonly used to describe the feeling of many of the students when describing the groups they belonged to. The way in which they expressed it may have varied, but at the heart it was about a sense of closeness which developed.

Wow, okay, because I live in Bridge, it’s like we are already a family... being in a close space brings people together, that’s one reason Bridge students are naturally close.

Like it’s my group of friends, but it’s like honestly family.

I’m always hanging out with everybody that lives here. Mostly everybody in this building is like a really huge big happy family. We all stick together.

b2.2 Fear of Seclusion

It did not come as a surprise to me that students wanted to become a part of a group. What I had not expected as a motivator to get involved is what I called “the fear of seclusion.” One knows that fear can work in two ways. Fear can motivate students or lead them to avoid the situation which is the cause of the fear. For the students who did

not return, the questions that need to be asked are whether they were fearful of getting involved and whether a lack of interactions was a part of their decision to not return? It seems that the students in this study were motivated to seek out interaction to avoid a feeling of seclusion:

Well, it's not really a good thing to be secluded all the time. It's just good for [getting involved], I guess, mental health.

Like I wasn't originally involved, and it's just not healthy. I was just sitting in my room all day, even if I was studying, I wasn't a happy person.

It's important to be involved in clubs and organizations, otherwise what are you going to do, sit in your room in the dark? If you are not gett'n out and do'n stuff with people, then then you're not really doing much at all. There is more to life than studying.

Over half of the students with whom I talked used phrases such as “it's not healthy”, “I would just sit in my room”, “I needed something to do”, and it is “hard to meet people.” It is against human nature to be isolated. The successfully retained students in this study fortunately understood this and sought out some sort human interaction.

b2.3 Friends

In the era of Facebook, the word “friend” has been redefined to mean a person with whom you may not be in regular contact, but can virtually “stalked” via their on-line postings. A friend may even be a person you may have never met, but have “friended” with the click of the “accept” icon.

For the most part, within the college campus the word “friend” still means a person with whom one spends time with and often shares common interests. The process

of acclimating to the new living environment requires students to find ways to identify “friends.” For many this is not a major challenge, but for others it is a process which creates a lot of stress. As noted above, it is possible that the fear of seclusion may feed the motivation to get involved and to make friends.

A friend, for many of the students interviewed was, “the one connection” that they suggested caused them to remain at Georgia College. Had they not made the connection with a friend, it is very likely that they would have not continued to attend college.

I don’t do any organizations, no real organized events. But, you know, I have my friends and we keep ourselves busy.

I was gonna do a fraternity, but I ended up not doing it. But, I mean I still have all my friends that are in them. I have a lot of friends here. It’s not like I’m a hermit in my room all the time. I’m out and about with friends that I’ve met since I got here.

It makes your college experience much more enjoyable. I mean, obviously you want to get out there and meet friends, especially your freshmen year. This is when you form a foundation and when you meet the other people that you probably are going to be friends with for the rest of college. You might as well get out there and meet some people. I have friends from high school here, but I have met friends which I enjoy their company more.

b2.4 Groups

The group of 31 students I requested to interview were all students who indicated that they did not plan to get involved on campus. Of the 22 with whom I was able to speak, all but seven directly or indirectly became involved with something by the end of the year. For some it was a church group, but for most it was some sort of athletic or intramural recreation. The largest number of the students I interviewed participated in

one or more intramural groups over the year. For most it was not initially their idea to join, but they responded to the invitation of a friend to participate.

Intramurals may be the ideal group for students who don't know how to join or get involved in campus life. It is one of the most noncommittal activities in which one can participate. Yet, when one does so, they interact not only with their own team members but with the members of all the other teams as well. While I have worked on a college campus for well over 20 years, until this study I had no idea of the power of involvement that comes with intramural activities. The best way to understand this is to hear it from the students:

I've joined the soccer intramural. Last semester and this semester I did the Frisbee, I mean not Frisbee, dodge ball. Next year I want to try the Frisbee one. And that was the only club activity I did here and it was enjoyable, like some of the scheduling is kinda late, but it's a good get together, studying, meet new people, play like good sportsmanship game. It's just nice to get involved in stuff like really easily. You just have to sign up and you are in it. It was just a good way to meet new people and all that stuff.

[intermurals] I guess it's kinda, the same and not cause intramurals were just like a small chunk of our time. Like, it was a few weeks things. But my life like eating, studying and hanging out with my friends but, it's just kinda that once on occasion things that we got to do and be together and it's just – it would be the same without it I guess. Like, intermurals was like that was like just all get together we got pictures together we went out to eat afterwards make jokes and like talk about. We did great on this team and it was just a good sense of to be around. I would probably be (laughs) pretty sad if that was gone.

Ah, there was this one person on the soccer team that was not on our team, but I meet him as a just a friend of a friend. We just talked to each other and like he was an English major and he would help me with English papers and I would help them with math. So I guess like I met another person that I could help each other just understand things. So, again it's just like meeting new people that have different strengths, and helping each other. That helped my grade. (laughs)

During the year, an interesting phenomenon occurred. A single student with no prior experience, but with an interest to explore the possibility to start a rugby team, may have single handedly caused the retention of several at-risk students. Of the 22 students I interviewed, four were connected to this single student's dream. They were fortunate to connect with one of Georgia College's most seasoned and student-centered professors who had prior rugby experience and had coached league rugby at Georgia College in the past. The passion in the students voices regarding their interest in the rugby team is evident in the following comments.

Actually me and two of my roommates started the Bobcat Rugby Team. So, that's new this semester for the university. We are hoping that [it] will take off. We have been putting a lot of time into it, so I didn't really have time for other things.

...two suitemates were, ah, one of them had been playing rugby for three years, and I just started watching games online with him. I hung out with them most of first semester when they talked about doing it... when they started going to practice every day, I kinda like lost my group of friends I would hang out with. So I was like I'll just go and see what it's like and if I don't like it I didn't really lose anything. And I really, really, like the sport, so I just kinda stuck with it. ...it was about 15 people who had no idea what they were doing and then three people that had a little idea.

I definitely would not have had as many friends as I have now. 'Cause I made a lot of close friends when I was playing [rugby]. I mean, ah, I study with these kids, I hang out with them every day. Definitely would have had a lot fewer friends.

I was interested to hear from the students if they thought their involvement with a campus group or a friendship they had made allowed them to be more academically successful. Time and again students provided direct examples of how getting involved enhanced their academic experience.

Yes. Because, yes there is a time to play, but there is a time to sit down and study. Now I have people that I can study with. People I can go to

the library with. Sit down in the community room and aren't going to distract me.

I guess my roommate and suitemate, like when I am slacking off, cause they are on my intramural teams, they push me to study some times. When I'm watching a game or something they say something like, don't you have a test tomorrow. Yeah, I should get on that. Besides them, not really, I just hang out with those guys.

Yes, my second week of school here I met this girl who lives on the same floor as me. We've just become really good friends. A lot of times I put things off and she will be like, I'm doing work and you need to come in here and do work. She like pushes me to do my work. Like if it were up to me I'd play, but she's like come-on, come-on ya'all do this you might as well you are not doing anything. So I would say yes, they do really push me to do my work sooner instead of procrastinate.

b2.5 Residence Halls

Living on campus and in a residence hall does not necessarily make one intellectually smarter. However, the on campus residential experience is important to the social adjustment of the college student in their first two years. While some may argue that certain universities require their students to live on campus for their first-year out of concern for the financial bottom-line, the reality is that living on campus for one or more years exposes the student to the campus social climate and increases their participation in extracurricular activities.

For residential students, personal growth and maturation come more quickly since they are required to interact with other students in a close setting. Being away from home for the first time they must take on responsibility for themselves.

Groups form in the residence halls because of constant and intense contact that students have as they share experiences.

At the dorms you are right next to everybody so you see the same faces and then you begin to hang out. Like, I've already made at least 15 to 20 friends from my dorm. And that's probably my best friends right now.

Everyone in the residence hall is like friendly and I know everyone there, and then the social thingies that happen every week, you go to that and that's fun. And you meet people and I feel like those people I can see on the road and talk to and hug. We are pretty close.

Especially in the beginning of the year, you know like there is this activity going on. Like that hypnotist thing. We went to that and some kind of play or show or something we would go to those. I probably wouldn't have gone if I didn't meet other people who were going.

While most of the residence halls at Georgia College are geographically near the center of campus and the academic classrooms, about 800 apartment-style bed spaces are built in an area called "The Village" about one and one-half miles from the center of campus. Two of the six apartment-style buildings house first-year students, so approximately 250 first year students live at The Village. Most live in apartments which contain four single bedrooms, share two bathrooms and a common living room and full kitchen area. It is often the perception that these first-year students are disadvantaged due to the distance from central campus where classes are held. A campus shuttle bus operates from early morning until early evening and runs every 8-10 minutes.

Being at The Village is kind of hard, but because you are not on campus. But you do have a lot of like resources here than you do out there. You have Sandella's (restaurant) and you have free printing and the pool and everything. You are close to the (team sport and intramural) fields. But, um, I feel like we have a bunch of like get-togethers in the community room. They have events going on, so that kind of gets everybody involved in the community.

The Village was initially built to house students who lived there would be second year and above students. This also meant that no Central Campus students could return

for a second year at that location. This was ill-advised for two primary reasons: 1) some students felt like they were being evicted at the end of their first year from the place they had come to feel was ‘home’, and 2) it is healthy for first-year students to be blended with returning students for mentoring and other reasons.

Because a private bedroom can be isolating for first-year students, both of the buildings at The Village which primarily house first-year students have special academic programs which provide advisement and mentoring. Due to the special program in one of the buildings, it has one of the highest retention rates on campus. The second building is just beginning to develop into a physics and chemistry residential learning community and shows great promise.

b2.6 Roommate / Suitemates

First-year students 10-20 or more years ago came from homes where they often shared a room with a sibling and likely shared a bathroom with the entire family. Those days are long gone. Based on experience, the average student entering college today not only had their own room at home, but often their own bathroom, their own cell phone, TV with hundreds of cable channels and a computer. While they shared a house with their family, their room resembled an efficiency apartment. When they come to college, they share a room with another person they most likely have never met and a bathroom with two other suitemates. This is a very foreign experience for most students and something that they often approach with apprehension.

Students who are assigned a private ‘single’ room think they are selecting privacy, but often find that they have received isolation. Most colleges designed and

built double rooms with common bathrooms as facilities efficiency. In the past, ‘gang’ bathrooms placed all the plumbing in a central location for lower cost to build and service. When universities began building suite-style rooms, sharing a bathroom between four students in two rooms, it was simply a way to not have to build a bathroom in each room which cost less to build and maintain.

However, through this study I discovered there is a side-effect to the suite-style room. In the event that a person does not make friends with their assigned roommate, it is often the case that at least one of the suitemates with whom they shared a bathroom with became a close friend. After more than 20 years of working in university housing, I do not recall anyone discussing this fact. I found it fascinating to hear students talk about the relationship they built with their suitemate, because they did not get along as well with their roommate:

My suitemate, David, who is actually one of my good friends now, also played [intramurals]. We both sort of joined at the same time. So we sort of kept each other going to it.

I met a ton of people in the dorms and stuff. My suitemates were all best friends and we had never met each other before last semester. I live in Sanford, so we pretty much know everybody since it’s a small dorm.

Ah, my roommate is very much an introvert. So I, she really didn’t have an impact, but my other suitemate, she ahm, she goes out a lot. She is a lot of fun and she is very talkative. I started hanging out with her a lot more, toward the middle of the year. We would go out and eat dinner once a week together. So, she just, she’s kind of been that person that has been there to just talk to me, opened things up for me.

Another perspective on the roommate/suitemate is offered when the assigned roommate is the shy, quiet, introvert and the other roommate attempts to get them involved.

Actually, I've had so many different roommates. They keep changing schools. They're very, I'm really outgoing and they're like reserved. They don't like doing some of that. I always try to bring them and let them meet new people. Cause, I don't want to say otherwise they wouldn't meet them, but they are not going to go out of their way to stop and say "hey" to people. 'Cause they're just very shy. So, I mean, in a way I would say, they kinda depend on me, 'cause they are just there. (laughs)

They [suitemates] kind of tried to encourage me. I'm not like the most social person out there, but they've helped me and they've kind of encouraged me to not stay in at night sometimes to go out and have fun with them. Sometimes I have.

One of the most common questions from potential students and their parents is how roommates are assigned. Any university that tells you they have an elaborate system of pairing roommates is simply not telling the truth. Many schools make a questionnaire part of their application process to appease students and their parents. Any question other than "do you smoke" is simply a placebo. More frequently than not, randomly assigned roommates make the best matches.

Well we'd [roommate] usually go together, if one of us didn't want to go alone.

Ah, well, my roommate and suitemate, one of my suitemates, they're both on the same intramural teams as me. That had a pretty big impact. My roommate is on SGA, he is always busy and sometimes I'm not. So I feel like I got to get a little more busy. I feel like I'm tired of doing nothing and I have to get involved too if he is going to do everything.

Ah, I've had two roommates actually. My first roommate, I just pretty much just got involved. Me and her were not compatible, so I would just leave the room and do other things. My new roommate we actually do a lot of things together, like, we go to programs together. We go to the cafeteria together; we had class together last semester. I do a lot with my new roommate, but my other roommate we just weren't compatible. That's why I got out and got involved in the first place.

B3 Progression

As I transcribed the interviews of the 22 interviewed students, I kept wondering what college might have been like for the ones that left after just one semester at Georgia College. Data from the Office of Institutional Research indicated that the major reason most of the students left college was ‘personal’. Most of the reasons they shared were that they were homesick, felt they had not made friends, felt isolated, or had a problem with their roommate.

Based on my interviews, if the students who left school had belonged to an organization or made a single connection with a person with whom they could have become friends, it is likely they may have been retained. What follows are a number of examples of students who persisted and gave it a bit more time. As a result these students made the connection that was the key to their eventual feeling of belonging.

b3.1 Progression

For the 31 social high risk students I identified for this study, the majority of the 22 I interviewed suggested they ‘stuck it out’. They could have been victims of a future retention study, but something caused them to stay. A club, an organization or a friendship connection was the key to their returning second semester, and for the majority (19 of the 22 interviewed, 86.4%) it was the reason they were going to Georgia College for their second year. What I heard from most of them is that there was a sort of transformation which took place as the year went along.

For some it was the relationship with the roommate or the suitemate they were assigned. For others it was simply the proximity of all the students with whom they had

been placed in the residence halls. If it was not by their own initiative to seek out interaction, it was often the roommate or the fellow resident in their building who invited them to join an intramural game, join a group activity or organization, or participate in something as simple as going to eat together in the dining hall. Slowly over time, introductions led to relationships and many into firm friendships. Many of the students who left did not make a connection, which led to isolation. This is how many of the students described the progression:

Originally at the start of the semester I wasn't very social, but I started in the last couple of months going out more, so I feel like I fit in. I was actually thinking this morning that it was really more my home here than at home.

I feel like I belong now. I didn't feel like it at first because it was just a foreign place to me. I wouldn't necessarily call this my home yet, but, um, I feel like people are starting to like me and I'm starting to like them. I'm getting used to it.

When I first got here I kinda felt a little awkward, but I feel a lot more in touch and fit in here now. I started picking up friends and met people.

b3.2 Institutional Fit

As has been shared prior, 37.3% of the students who did not return for a second semester or a second year indicated that Georgia College was not their institution of first choice and 31.4% confirmed that it had always been their intent to transfer. Throughout the interviews, I picked up a theme of progression of 'fit' for the school. Some students were not sure at first that they had made the right decision, but by the time I spoke with them (the week before finals) they had it set in their minds that Georgia College had been a good selection. Only three of the 22 indicated to me that they were not sure, and they were the same three that were not enrolled the next fall.

Certainty about satisfaction over their selection of a university is important for the overall success of the student. For the university, admitting a student who has intentions of transferring does not help with retention goals. 'Fit' is very important for both the student and the university.

I feel like I was supposed to go here. Actually I didn't know I was going here until a month before for sure. I really feel at home here. There is people I know and not too many people from where I'm from at this college. I've met people from different areas and different countries. I just feel like this is where I am supposed to be.

I mean I was kinda nervous coming to college, like big jump and all that stuff, but like that whole process of moving in with other kids. Like, help each other, like here you help your roommate and like here can you help me. It was good, I feel like really comfortable here. Like I can walk around anywhere around campus and just feel I just fit in because, like everyone else is like a student. Everyone is like in the same situation. I like it.

I applied for Georgia State, Georgia Southern, and here and I was going to apply to Tech, but like money wise and the transfer program here, was all cool so I thought I would try it here. But like once I got here and just like I just pretty much fell in love. So, most definitely if I knew what I knew now I would have just have only applied here and not even have my back up schools. I guess this is not like bias but, it's like once you get comfortable with something you really enjoy it. It was really easy for me here. Because it was, everything was just comfortable, and easy to go with. I just really liked it here and I'm just really excited for next semester actually.

b3.3 Academic Fit

When students are uncertain of or lack direction in their academic major they become confused and frustrated. The lack of focus they bring to the classroom that connects what they are studying to their academic major causes them to question why they are at the university and problems can develop. Based on the data from the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research, the second most common reason students left

beyond ‘personal’ was ‘academic’. Since I only interviewed first-year students, and most do not select a major until well into their second year, concerns about academics were not often verbalized.

Georgia College is a liberal arts school. As a result, students are encouraged to explore their options and discover what they are interested in after being exposed to a number of general courses. This does not mean that some are not already looking forward to a focus on a major. Beyond the social interactions, once students are in their selected major in their third year and beyond they tend to meet students with common interests. There were several students in my study who were concerned about making a major selection as they prepared to enter their second year. The quote below put it best in context of this study:

I guess I want to do a lot more things that are involved with my major. I will probably go look though something thing that had to do with biology that where we would go out and do stuff. My teacher, one of my teachers, he’s studying crawfish so I probably will go help him with that. I like going out there with teachers and helping them with the hands on stuff and ah, (pause) I don’t know.

Once I get done with all the core classes, I’ll be interested in joining like a marketing group or something like that. Something more major specific.

B4 External Factors

This subsection is a mix of two very different areas shared during the student interviews, but are summed up best by calling them ‘external factors’. These two areas included issues that were, for the most part, out of the control of the student, yet added pressures which could have caused them to not continue their education at Georgia College.

b4.1 HOPE

Anyone who knows anything about higher education in the state of Georgia is aware of the HOPE Scholarship. Via revenues generated from a state lottery, funding is provided to any student who graduates from high school with a 3.00 or higher GPA. Initially, HOPE covered all tuition, books and fees associated with attending a university in the state of Georgia; this was not true at private schools. In recent years however, the amount of the funding provided and the criteria for receiving HOPE has changed.

Current students entering college in Georgia have known throughout high school if they kept their grades up, they would go to college for little or no cost. To maintain HOPE a student must retain an overall cumulative GPA of 3.0 or above. With the recent changes in funding, students who are closer to a 3.0 than a 4.0 experience increased pressure. Those who lose HOPE by allowing their GPA to drop below a 3.0 often have lost access to their chances of continuing college.

The Director of Financial Aid at Georgia College confirmed that student GPAs are checked at the end of two terms, as well as at the point that students attempted reach 30. Since some students enter with earned credits and others attempt fewer than 15 credit hours in a semester, the state uses as a standard measure 30 attempted credit hours before GPAs are checked. For Georgia College freshmen entering fall 2010, approximately 69% retained their HOPE eligibility at the end of spring 2011. According to the sources to whom I spoke, the state of Georgia is not good at providing comparative data on HOPE. I found it interesting that the HOPE Office does not calculate or keep records of GPAs; this is a function of each school and data is not submitted to their office. Based on

the Director's communication with her peers in the state, we know that 31% of Georgia College students losing HOPE is well below the state average.

When students do lose HOPE, it seems that they look for less costly options to attend college:

Ah, I'm going to go to GMC [Georgia Military College] for the next two years to get HOPE scholarship back and knockout my core classes cheaper while I don't have HOPE. Then, come back here and get my bachelor's.

I'm not really sure if I want to transfer closer to home. 'Cause I don't have the HOPE and I won't have it next year. So, I might head home just to save money. But, I don't know yet. [Kennesaw]

b4.2 Parents

One would think that a parent would be encouraging or supportive of their son or daughter completing an education at the student's institution of choice. However, of the students interviewed, nearly 40% had a parent putting pressure on the student to transfer to the University of Georgia or a specialty school with perceived status, such as Georgia Tech or in one case Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). Much like the 31.4% of non-returning students who told us that they had always planned to transfer, several of the students interviewed entered college with parents expecting them to stay at Georgia College for a year or two and then transfer to another school. These students were conflicted over their new-found appreciation for Georgia College and their parent's expectation that they transfer. The reader can see the pressure that students feel from their parents to leave Georgia College for what their parents perceive to be a "better" university.

Well I want to [to stay at Georgia College], but my parents don't. Seeing as I am an art major, my parents would prefer me to graduate from an

actual art school like SCAD. But it was funny because originally they didn't want me to go to an art school and now they want me to. They are like, you need to graduate from an art school. I mean I'd prefer to graduate from here, but I mean they are the ones paying the bills so it's kind of more their choice. It's like \$42 grand! Like this was actually a funny story, this was actually my fall back school. 'Cause I was gonna go to SCAD. I got in there and I even got like a scholarship, I think like \$25,000 and still couldn't really afford it. With like all the things you would have to buy for each class, couldn't afford it. My parents were like, you know our friends, our friend Ronnie grew up in Milledgeville and apparently there's a college down there. And I was like whatever. So I never even saw the school, so I didn't see it until I moved in. And then I was like, I'm going to hate this. I saw it at orientation, that's not true. But then when I got here I didn't get the whole like everyone needs to wear a dress memo. So, I kind of stuck out like a sore thumb. I was like oh my god I am going to hate it, all these girls are so snotty, they are all like major Christian, and this and this and this. But then when I got here I ended up loving it. So, I would prefer to graduate from here.

I was going to be a transfer student to go to Tech, but in like two and a half years. (laughs) I kinda don't want to go now. I kinda want to stay, so I'm looking around for different majors, I can probably switch to. If my parents would agree, I would actually want to stay here. 'Cause this is, like UGA that's a huge campus, and I hate just walking around and just like, it's perfect here because it's like the perfect size, and the grass, and it's like really comfortable and that's what I want. Georgia State, that's too urban for me. I don't want to commute, so, here I really kinda want to stay and all that stuff. I want to try... I'm like still taking my core classes, but I'm pre-engineering going to Tech to mechanical engineering. But I might want to lean into physics major here if they have one, if not like environmental science, if my parents let me. I'm just playing it by ear now. (laughs)

However, on the other hand, there were students who wanted to transfer and were feeling pressure from their parents to stay at Georgia College. In at least one case, the parents were advising the student on the majors available to him.

This is like the only school that I can go to. Like, this is my only option. Even if, like, I didn't go here, I wouldn't go to college. That's how things are set up back home. Like very stressful. This is where I am graduating from. I'm gonna stay here. (laughs) I'm not going anywhere.

I would love to major in many different areas, the problem is none of them have jobs available, ever. I've looked at other majors, but I'm not allowed to do them. Cause right now my mom and dad are the ones picking up the tab. -- If I get an education in something where I cannot get a job, then my parents don't see any point for sending me to college to get an education in the first place. So, I am working with a preapproved field of degrees; doctor, lawyer, businessman, computer science, those are the four big ones.

The majority of the students I interviewed suggested their parents were very supportive. The students felt confident they had selected the right school for them and were looking forward to returning. In the case of the quote below, the parents were so supportive that they planned to buy the student a house in which to live while she was mourning the opportunity to continue living on campus:

My parents are getting (me) a house and I really wish I could get a house right in the middle (of campus). Because it's just the place, like, all your friends are around you so it's a place you can easily accessible to see.

I actually chose Georgia College at the time; I just didn't want to choose anything, so my mom was like, "Hey, let's go here." I think if I had done research, I would have picked this place again because it suits me very well.

Ah, I don't really know. I mean I do want to graduate from here. But if like if something happened, and since my sister's going off to college, I'd have to go home and help out or whatever. I'm really open to anything. But, it would be very nice to stay here because all my friends are here and the academic atmosphere is very good compared to a lot of the other schools I heard about.

Other Influencers

I was interested in who was responsible for encouraging the students I interviewed to reach out, become active and join a club or organization on campus. As

expected, a friend or a roommate was the most frequently credited, followed by family, and a handful of faculty and advisers.

b4.3 Friend

A friend. He just asked me to do intramurals one time with him. And I did that fall and the winter with him. Also I just got involved with a high school friend of mine who goes here, HP, he's actually a KA and he's introduced me to all of his friends and stuff. Starting to meet a lot of new people.

Our captain, he just came and asked me if I wanted to play. I've always wanted to play. I didn't know how to work IM leagues or anything. So I wanted to become part of a team, but I didn't want to be on a team where I didn't know anybody. So I went on this team 'cause he asked me to do it.

One of my friends, Tyler. Actually I ran into him. I didn't join right away. I saw him all the time practicing. I would kick the ball with him. He would always tell me to join. Eventually I just did.

b4.4 Family

I was very surprised to learn that 'mom' or family played such a strong role in encouraging students to be involved out of the classroom while at college. With this knowledge in hand, I worked with our University Housing Marketing Coordinator this fall to produce a postcard to arrive in the parent's mailbox early the third week of classes (see Appendix F). The cards urged the parents to call their student and ask them if they had joined any student organizations and whether they were making friends on campus. If we know that families play such a large part in getting their students connected on campus, then it is important for the university to let them know:

My mom for the most part. When I first got here I would call her and be like I am so bored and I wish I had more friends. She was like, well,

you'll have to go out there and make it happen yourself. So, that's what I did.

Probably my aunt. I called her crying like the second day of college and she told me I have to get involved and meet people.

Well, in high school I didn't join any clubs either. My parents wanted me to join a club or something. Which I went to the fair and stuff [week of welcome] and looked around, but I didn't really like any.

b4.5 Faculty / Advisers

Outside of friends and family, there were a few students who were influenced by campus staff. Direct contact with advisors, faculty in first year classes, and residence hall staff played a role in encouraging and guiding students to make a connection on campus.

Using the fifth-week data gathered from MAP-Works, advisors, interested faculty and residence hall staff, Georgia College now has a tool with which to quickly identify its struggling first-year students. The campus finds that multiple points of contact assist some of the students who may have left college without the guidance they are being provided. As with other tool, it is one thing to gather the data, but another to gain understanding and receive the buy-in from key members of the campus to utilize the information.

Ah, Mike Augustine [Director of Advising and Student Success] and Mike Chambers [Coordinator of Student Disability Services]. Mike Augustine is my advisor and Mike Chambers is, I'm in special ed I guess. I have accommodations and he checks up on me every month or to just see how I am doing. He stresses the importance of the classes I take, and you know, how I should be a student at Georgia College.

We were told about the clubs like through our classes, like my first year business orientation class they told us about the different clubs and stuff. But, I didn't know if it would be a good idea to do that first semester.

Mark (CA), my god, Mark. Yeah, he was always like you should do this, you should do this, you should go, you should go. He definitely is very hands on.

Isolated Case

There was one student who was not like any other that I interviewed, I'll call him Mike. He was extremely negative on each response. I was so concerned by his responses to the research questions that after the interview I contacted Mike's academic adviser. The adviser was well aware of Mike's negative perspective and diagnosed depression. The adviser and the Counseling Center had both been working with Mike over the course of the academic year. Mike was part of an intensive academic program at Georgia College for conditionally admitted students called Bridge Scholarship Program (BSP). Mike's comments were in such contrast to the other interviews; below is an excerpt which illustrates insights into the state of mind which Mike was in at the end of his first academic year.

I don't feel like I belong anywhere. I enjoy video games and writing for fun, even though I am a complete amateur. Reading for fun, not like textbooks and things. Mostly science fiction and fantasy. – I have noticed there are two reason's people don't like me. Number one, I am not much to look at [Mike was short and extremely obese]. And the second reason is I am too smart for my own good. I talk in big topics in an expanded vocabulary. And I think on levels that I find enjoyable which are levels that most people when they think at, it makes their head hurt. Like philosophy, does god exist, what's the purpose of life, the continuation of existence, when you are dead are you dead or do you continue in some form or fashion? You know, big topics. I would love to major in many different areas, the problem is none of them have jobs available, ever. I've looked at other majors, but I'm not allowed to do them. Cause right now my mom and dad are the ones picking up the tab. There is a little bit from the state, HOPE and all that. - My mother went and got a degree in nursing and she is currently a nurse and she is very unhappy in life in general as well as in her career field. My father he actually has a Ph.D. He went for a criminal justice with the hope of

becoming a lawyer. Then he got a master's in something else, and is still trying to become a lawyer. Then he got a degree in sociology for his Ph.D. He basically just flip-flops jobs; whatever is available. Currently he is a consultant working in some kind of business firm; which he does travel all over the nation to do. Before that he worked for the Atlanta public school system. At every instance he's not that happy with his career either. - I am seeing a trend. The problem is I don't want to work at McDonalds the rest of my life. The only way to avoid that is to get an education of some kind. If I get an education in something where I cannot get a job, then my parents don't see any point for sending me to college to get an education in the first place.

While Mike was in a program which offers intense monitoring and advising with a cohort of about 80 students, he was not connected in any way. He had three apartment-mates, he arrived on campus in June with his cohort and took classes together over the summer and lived in the same building, was encouraged to participate and become active in programs and activities and yet at the end of the year was lonely, isolated and disengaged. His intentions were to leave Georgia College and return home to take classes at nearby Kennesaw State University.

Fortunately, this was not the case for all of the other students interviewed. While they may have started their first academic year at Georgia College indicating that they were not going to become involved, join an organization, run for an elected office, or volunteer, over time they all found something with which to connect that allowed them to be persistent and to thrive. For some it was a connection to an organization or a sports activity and for others it was a simple peer friendship made with a roommate, a suitemate or another resident on their floor or in their randomly assigned residence hall.

Section C

Observations of involved students.

The reason the majority of the dozens of students did not return for a second semester or a second year was because they were not engaged in the overall social activities at Georgia College and did not make the ‘personal’ connection. Of the 22 students who were interviewed as part of this research, those who remained most often found a single group, most commonly intramurals or residence hall social activities, which allowed them to find a personal/social connection.

Those that did not find a traditional organized student activity found a way to make a single isolated friendship. The friendship connections among those students interviewed most commonly occurred with a roommate, suitemate, or another student within the building in which they lived their first year. In all of the interviews there was not a single suggestion that a ‘friendship’ was made in an academic classroom. There were two examples in which a connection was made outside the physical classroom while waiting to go into class. It is interesting in that higher education we place so much emphasis on academics and so little on the experience outside the classroom.

To contrast the student interviews with at risk students I attended several end-of-the year banquets representing most of the major active student organizations at Georgia College. There were a total of eight such events that I was able to observe:

Date:	Time:	Group:	Location:
April 13	6:00	President’s Volunteer Service	Magnolia Ballroom
April 16	5:00	National Residence Hall Honorary	Centennial Center 237
April 17	5:30	Resident Student Association	Magnolia Ballroom

April 20	5:30	University Ambassadors	University Banquet Room
April 21	5:30	SOAR	Magnolia Ballroom
April 25	6:00	Athletics	Magnolia Ballroom
April 26	5:00	Bobcat Awards	Magnolia Ballroom
April 27	7:00	Student Government Association	Health Sciences

These banquets acknowledged and celebrated the accomplishments, leadership, and involvement of students who chose to participate throughout the year. My goal was to see if I could find what it was that these students did or found as a participant that allowed them to become active, and in many ways, successful students on campus.

Compared to the students who were interviewed who had little to no interaction and did not seem motivated by joining groups, the students who attended end-of-the-year banquets sought out and participated in organized groups. These students discovered what for many students is the key to a successful college experience - a sense of belonging.

From the moment a student explores the possibility of attending Georgia College, he or she learns through the marketing materials and web pages they browse that being a part of Georgia College is about being socially engaged. Unlike other campuses that might display pictures of students in deep scholarly thought in a library or studying quietly under a tree, it is a standard for Georgia College to present students in groups and engaging is some sort of social interaction.

When the student and their parent visit campus they can validate the interaction when they walk the front campus and see students in intimate class groups or tossing a

frisbee on the front lawn, see students walking in groups to and from the residence halls, and the interactions they witness when they walk through the dining hall.

Most students will join their parents for Fallfest and/or Springfest, which are primary campus visitation days for applicants to Georgia College. Again, they will see the activities just listed above, but will also spend about an hour interacting with hundreds of active participants and leaders of campus clubs and organizations who share information about the many opportunities to get involved. With more than 250 registered student organizations it is hard to believe there is not something for everyone. Yet potential students are told that if they cannot find an organization that meets their needs, we will assist them in creating a new student organization and help build its membership.

Why is it so important for a university to provide its students with opportunities to be a part of a social club, organization or intramural/athletic opportunities? The simple answer is that the more involved students are on the campus the more satisfied they are with the overall campus experience and more likely to stay.

When a student develops a resume, a very small part of the resume addresses the academic experience. The resume will include the degree earned, a major and sometimes a minor, and if high enough, a GPA listed. Those few lines sum up the entire 4-6+ years of a college student's academic experience. A future employer may express interest in the degree earned and gives some weight to the GPA, but it is just an introduction to the potential candidate.

It is my experience, that that the employer is primarily interested in the ability of the person to be able to present themselves and to communicate well. They want to see evidence that the applicant has experience in successfully interacting with others and they

often desire a person who may have taken on a leadership role. These are not usually skills the employer can measure from a degree earned or a GPA, but from the activities, work experiences and leadership opportunities that the student has acquired while in college.

Thus, the opportunities that campus clubs and organizations bring to the overall college experience are as important, or in some cases even more important, than the classroom experience itself. Knowing that the experience is good for the student, what is it that draws them to join the club or organization and what do they unknowingly gain from it?

As discussed in the interview portion of this chapter, some are seeking friendship, some are avoiding seclusion, and others simply want to be a part of something bigger. For whatever reason the student joins, what is very clear is if they do not make a connection of some sort, chances are significantly greater that they will be less happy with their academic and overall campus experience. These are the students who will likely not persist.

But, what else is it that students get out of the experience of becoming a member of an organization? Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, (2004) suggest it is a wider “social network”. A wider experience of opportunities, a more diverse perspective of interactions, and what I believe based on 20 plus years of experience in higher education and the information from Georgia College Office of Institutional Research data as well as my interviews confirm, a wider network of ‘friends’.

What was witnessed time and again at the end-of-the-year banquets were large groups of very satisfied students. They came formally dressed to present themselves as

best they could and out of respect for the experience they had. Most often a subgroup from the organization spent a good deal of time coordinating some sort of theme, with decorations, table center pieces, lighting, special music, and nearly always some sort of PowerPoint presentation. The presentations highlighted pictures of the activities the group members participated in throughout the year, often with ‘inside’ humor only understood by members of the group. The presentations would show progression and growth of the members. It was important to most of the groups that each member was represented in some way in the presentation. Often the presentation was made available after the banquet to members of the group via a copy on a CD or an announced YouTube location.

The banquets were always held in locations that students identified as more formal on campus: the Magnolia Ballroom, the University Banquet Room or in the case of SGA the large and open room of a remodeled academic hall on campus made available to no other groups for these sorts of functions. The menus included items not traditionally offered to students during the year through the dining hall. Attention was paid to meet the dietary restrictions of nearly every member. Most often this consisted of some form of chicken and cheesecake or a very rich layered chocolate cake. One key administrator who attended most of these events referred to the end of the year as the “rubber chicken circuit” because of all the variations of chicken being served night after night.

In prior years, these events were made more special by having the meal served to the table. However due to more limited budgets and increased catering costs, nearly all

of the meals have been offered buffet style; one table excused at a time to select their meal.

Most events were held near the end of a business work day, and a few over a weekend, to allow more important and busy administrators to attend. Because key administrators were often invited, and students desire these events in the closing weeks of spring semester, there was a banquet hosted nearly every night for the last two weeks preceding finals to make sure there were no scheduling conflicts. Due to scheduling conflicts, but not among the banquets I attended, there were a few of evenings where there was more than one banquet occurring. In some cases, students were members of both groups requiring them to make a choice or cut one event short to attend both. In the case of athletics, an entire team sport was missing because a previously scheduled game that had been canceled due to weather had to be rescheduled for the date of their banquet. The reservations on the rooms and the schedules are usually set up a year in advance to confirm the banquet spaces.

Most of the rooms for the banquets were set up with round tables of eight. It was interesting that a couple of the events where seats had been pre-assigned, members switched locations to sit with their preferred group of 'friends'.

Each of the banquets started with members of the groups smiling, laughing and socializing. It was obvious the relationships which had developed over the year created strong bonds between the members of the groups. At the end of each banquet the group members stayed long after the afterwards to take group photos. I witnessed many of these photos being loaded immediately to Facebook, thus sharing the experience with others outside the group to proudly say, "Look at me, I belong!"

At each event there was recognition extended in many different ways. It may have been a simple verbal ‘thank you’, a certificate handed out, flowers, a plaque or even a crystal trophy. These honors were awarded for the ‘best’, the ‘most’, the ‘longest’ or nearly any category you could think of. While members knew each other very well, it was most common for the name of the award recipient to be left out of the description to build suspense of the announced ‘winner’, within a few lines everyone in the room knew the identity of the recipient.

Each organization recognized those members that were graduating and therefore leaving the group. For some, this recognition came with a special trinket or certificate and for others it was a cord or a sash to be worn at commencement to recognize their membership. In many cases it involved some sort of brief, tearful farewell speech.

There was a common language for the groups to display that they were a special. Administrator address, keynote speakers and award presenters most commonly used the following lines (in alphabetical order):

- Above and beyond
- Bobcat nation
- Community
- Future community leaders
- Impactful
- People
- Successful
- Thank you
- The best
- This has been a great year
- You are what we are all about
- You made an impact on someone

When students left these events it was with mixed emotions. They were upbeat and positive for having recognized a successful year and their accomplishments. At the same time, many were sad that this was the end of their experiences and interactions with

that particular group. There was usually some sort of ‘passing on’ the leadership to the following year. This most often included the leaders or members taking an oath or pledge and in the case of the top leaders involved the passing of a gavel or other ‘insider joke’ trinket. Those members who knew they planned to return for the following year shared a special bond knowing they would be the primary role models for the next generation of the organization. These were the people that would arrange to come back to campus during the summer for orientation dates to sit at organizational tables to recruit future members of the incoming first-year class.

Summary

The social transition from high school to college might be harder than the actual academic classes that students attend. The broad networks that are created during the first-year are important for many reasons. As this chapter stated, these are the people with whom individuals eat in the dining halls, spend their evenings and weekends, share good and bad times, study, and make life long connections. Some of these relationships may develop into a seasonal holiday card, an occasional phone call, or a greeting on Facebook, while others may lead to a lifelong friendship, relationship or, in some cases, marriage.

Given the choice of isolation or involvement, it is likely favorable to most to have broad and wide friendships. As outlined in the first section of this chapter, the reason most students left the university were that they felt isolated, lonely, and in broad descriptions, unconnected. Those that started with a high risk of leaving made some sort of connection as the year progressed, if not through an organization or activity, then via a

friendship with an individual. It is these senses of belonging or connectedness that made most students consciously or unconsciously choose to remain at the university.

As one student said, “Because if you don’t [get involved], you are more likely to transfer. I know girls that are transferring next year because they don’t feel involved. But it’s because they didn’t go out and get involved and seek out friends. You’re just not going to feel at home here or connected. You are going to feel out of place constantly pretty much.”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, we have failed to live up to our opportunity legacy, especially in higher education. In just a decade, we've fallen from first to ninth in the proportion of young people with college degrees. That not only represents a huge waste of potential; in the global marketplace it represents a threat to our position as the world's leading economy.

President Barack Obama

To a joint session of Congress, February of 2009

College retention has been extensively researched and written about. When reviewing research on higher education retention, all roads lead to Astin and Tinto. While some would say both authors are old-school, they are at the center of everything written on the topic of retention, attrition, and persistence for the last thirty-to-forty years. It would be hard to believe that anything related to students in higher education has not been written about, and at their base are the works of Astin and Tinto.

Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002) tell us, "Too many students who begin college leave before completing degrees. Only half (51%) of students who enrolled at four-year institutions in 1995–96 completed bachelor's degrees within six years at the institutions at which they started. Another 7% obtained baccalaureate degrees within six years after attending two or more institutions." (as cited in Kuh et. al, 2008)

As I outlined in chapter two, despite the incredible volume of literature on retention, and attention given to graduation rates, enormous numbers of students drop out of college before they achieve their educational objectives. At many colleges over the last decade the retention numbers remain stagnant or worse (Glenn, 2010; Jones, 1986).

With all that has been researched on college retention, the numbers reflect little if any change.

The list of reasons a student might leave college before the second year number in the hundreds. Research on retention attempts to get at the underlying causes. Any attempt to create a list to identify reasons for attrition would only become a partial list of the multiple factors. There is no single factor at any school.

Kuh (2005) suggested that student success is everybody's business. Like other researchers he offers, "we may not know all the variables that contribute to student success, we do know the best single predictor of student academic success is the individual student's academic preparation and motivation" (p. 87).

While this is true academically, it is not the best predictor of retention if the student does not find the proper social comfort at the college. Social comfort is defined by "how comfortable a student feels meeting and interacting with others" (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). A student may feel as though they are not fitting in due to feelings about a roommate, a club or organization, a classroom, a major, or even relating to a professor. They may not have a close friend on campus. They may not feel they fit into the peer culture. They may lack social involvement or have difficulty identifying with groups. In general, the student may lack the ability to socially integrate on campus. Schools that focus solely on academic factors of retention risk losing students who are leaving largely due to non-academic factors.

Barefoot (2000) outlined a number of objectives needed for a successful first-year transition program. Barefoot (2000) said the key to enhancing student success is helping to "create student-to-student interactions and student-to-faculty interactions". She found

that as student time and involvement on campus outside of class increased, the link between the curriculum and co-curriculum areas were solidified.

After controlling for students ability and academic preparation, research indicates that a major factor in student success is engagement (Kuh, 2001). My research is based on interviews with students at Georgia College who were identified as being at high-risk of leaving the college because of social factors. Any student admitted to Georgia College enters with one of the most qualified preparations to enter a university in Georgia. As outlined in chapter one, the average SAT score at Georgia College of the entering first-year student is 1156 and a high school grade point average of 3.42; these are indicators that the students should be academically successful. Yet in fall 2011, 204 (17.0%) first-year students who entered in the fall of 2010 did not return for a second year.

My student interviews, confirmed by data from the Office of Institutional Research at Georgia College, suggest in addition to the traditional retention measures currently being utilized, which is primarily academic in nature, Georgia College has to make improvements in building stronger out-of-classroom experiences. As outlined in chapter one, the most recent president of Georgia College reminded the faculty and staff of the reasons students leave, “for many, it is a personal adjustment issue — homesickness or an inability to make new friends loom large... very few of our students leave us because they are failing academically... our challenge now is to put into place the support and intervention strategies that will impact student success as measured by persistence and degree completion.”

However before I continue it is important to note that not all student attrition is bad. There will always be an inevitable level of naturally occurring attrition. No college

has total control on the issues and conditions that lead to a small number of students who depart. Tinto (1982) refers to these students as those who, “leave because of unwillingness to attend to the demands of higher education” and those that suffer from “student disengagement”. Tinto (1982) continues, “nor are all students with given abilities and skills equally interested in, committed to, and/or motivated to finish a course of study once begun. Some students simply do not care enough to finish their college degree programs”. While there is not a one-size-fits-all retention plan for colleges, positive strategies to reduce the numbers of students leaving must recognize differences at each academic institution.

For financial and, more recently, political reasons, institutions feel under pressure to “do something” about attrition and retention. In the race of prestige each school desires to become unique and distinctive. Schools need to look at retention methods in the same way, recognizing the uniqueness of the mission, size, setting, and make-up of the student body.

Colleges tend to behave isomorphically. Consulting firms have made large profits from evaluating and providing feedback to schools, but often offer cookie-cutter suggestions on how to improve retention. Designs by colleges to impact student retention are complex; students at each college are uniquely different. A simple way to remain distinctive and unique is for schools to align their retention efforts with their mission.

For the remainder of this chapter I will share observations made during the research, personal observations made over the past four years working at Georgia College, and a career in student affairs of over two decades. The faculty and staff at Georgia College are motivated for student success. With a bit of training on important

retention issues and a nudge from the administration, I firmly believe further positive impacts can be made to lower the attrition rates at Georgia College.

Many of the ideas I will outline flow from the premise of my findings within chapter four. Everything that follows is directly or indirectly tied to the idea that relationships and feeling students have are a part of the community on a college campus and are vital for retention. Based on my research student-to-student and student-to-faculty connections are key to retention at Georgia College.

Social Engagement Curriculum

Kuh (2005) said, “if we believe something is important, the curriculum should feature it and we should require students to experience it” (p. 102). I could not agree more. Student engagement has been recognized as important to college student retention for years (Astin, 1977, 1987; Kuh 1991). Instructors spend hours creating very structured syllabuses to outline expectations and requirements to aid student success in the classroom. On average students spend only 16 of the 168 hours in a week in the classroom. Advisers consult with students to make sure they are meeting their core requirements, yet we have no required face-to-face time with students to make sure they are connecting socially.

Some of the best advising and mentoring which occurs on many college campuses is that of the relationship between athlete and coach. Near individual attention is provided through a low student-to-coach ratio allowing a deep and understanding relationships to build. For athletes, study hall is controlled to make sure that they are giving appropriate attention to academics.

Imagine if we organized the out-of-classroom experience in the same way that an instructor builds a syllabus or that a coach establishes a direct mentoring role and required study hall. Our students would have regular check-ins with an adviser or faculty assigned to mentor them to make sure that they are actively participating in organized campus activities. The student would be accountable to a minimum level of expectation of ongoing social interaction, participation, and attendance at social, cultural, and athletic events.

It would be nearly impossible with all the interaction occurring for relationships and friendships not to occur with mentoring from faculty and with other peers the student would interact with. To take this a step further, grades could be assigned for out-of-class experiences to hold students accountable for participation. Faculty evaluation and tenure promotion could include their level of success in interactions and mentorship with their assigned students. At Georgia College, this would be an approximate 1:5 ratio of faculty-to-student guidance for first-year students.

When we look back to chapter four, the reason that most students left the university was not academic, it was personal. Yet the university continues to focus most of its efforts on retention improvement within academic areas. The college may have an impact on attrition if efforts were shifted and more emphasis was placed on the reasons students told us they were leaving.

Faculty and Staff Training

The focus of most retention efforts tend to be related to academics. The courses being offered, academic advising, study skills, tutoring in math and English, libraries and

computer labs, and other areas are the primary retention measures at many campuses.

While all these are important, positive personal contact with faculty both in and out of the classroom can make a huge difference in the student's sense of belonging.

Jones (1986) suggests that the perceptions of faculty of the reasons many students leave college are "more often erroneous than not". He suggests that one of the first steps to correcting this is to offer, or even require, faculty and staff awareness workshops regarding who drops out, why, and most importantly what can be done to assist with student retention. Many faculty do not see their role in student retention; if they have academically strong students they persist; if not, they drop out. If faculty were able to connect with students, both inside and outside the classroom, the student would be much more likely to take an interest in the course as well as put in stronger efforts to do better academically. Students need to know faculty care about their success.

The president of a college has to be well informed of active campus retention efforts and assist department chairs, deans, and vice presidents in order to contribute to raising student achievement. When top leadership communicates clear expectations and emulates positive attitudes it influences priorities and the campus can come together to raise retention rates. As suggested above, this may mean that retention goals become a part of annual departmental and personal evaluation systems or even tenure processes.

Non-Academic Support

Offering involvement opportunities for non-academic support may include orientation programs, first-year seminars, peer leaders, diversity support, disability services, information technology, health services, personal counseling, and many others.

Each student has individual needs and colleges that expect to retain the largest numbers of students must recognize this.

Utilizing non-academic services may be thought by some students as remedial and give the impression that they do not belong in college. Introducing non-academic support systems by integrating them into academic curriculum, students will understand they are not only important but necessary for their academic success. I would suggest that there is a need to make non-academic supports intrusive enough that students are forced to encounter them. Making participation in advising or student success courses mandatory would produce retention paybacks for colleges.

For some college students asking for help, understanding relationship-building, finding their way through bureaucratic systems, and knowing how to participate in class are not natural skills. Being a successful student in college is often based on assuming the student was successful in high school, even though the cultural differences between high school and college have changed significantly.

Students in high school have structured days, minimal homework assignments, and often parental guidance and support. College offers unstructured daily schedules, significant reading and work assignments, and often a lesser level of parental input. It is not surprising a good number of first-year college students struggle with finding a balance between classes and all the other “distractions” college offers. Faculty guidance and mentoring can smooth this period of transition.

Student Culture

The issues college students face are ever-changing. Therefore higher education personnel must keep up with the most current trends and technology to allow students to feel they are in a place they can relate to. Something as simple as understanding pop culture references sends subliminal messages to students that they feel faculty and staff understand them. For example, when speaking of “community” a recent vice president used the context of PBS’s Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” The entering class of 2011 has likely never seen the show or even heard of Fred Rogers. The program left television in 2001 and Rogers died in 2003, the entering first-year students would have been under the age of five at the time.

The Beloit College Mindset List is produced annually to remind college professionals and others of the importance of keeping current. Since 2002 the list has outlined the experiences with which students enter college and cultural and historical references that students will likely not be able to relate to. The entering first-year class of 2011 may not remember a time when Berlin had a wall, Nelson Mandela was in prison, Russia did not have a multi-party political system, and Fox was not always a major network. Most college professors remember life without personal computers; their students do not. Many of our entering first-year students don’t remember life before laptops.

Neil Howe is an author, national speaker, and recognized authority on generations in the United States. Together with William Strauss, Howe has coauthored several books including *Generations* (1991), *Millennials Rising* (2000), *Millennials Go To College* (2003, 2007), and *Millennials in the Workplace* (2010). Anyone being offered

employment on a college campus today should be required to read all four of these books as a term of pre-employment. Understanding the mindset of the students with whom we work is that important.

If faculty, staff, and administrators assume our entering first-year students grew up with the same life experiences they did, the first year students will not be able to relate to them. Something as simple as the assumption that knowledge comes from “books” to students who can access information more quickly on their smartphone puts professors at a disadvantage in relating to their students. While the knowledge professors obtained during their own education and research is relevant, it needs to be shared with students in ways in which they can relate to it.

College Culture

Kuh (1993), Magolda (2001), and Young (1999) all point out the importance of a strong campus culture and the associated traditions and rituals. “Success-oriented colleges use rituals and traditions to introduce newcomers to the academic ethos and institutional norm, with a special sensitivity to welcoming and affirming members of historically underrepresented groups” (as cited in Kuh, 2005, p. 103).

This is a problem for Georgia College. Given the frequent institutional mission changes that have occurred at Georgia College, even the alumni are confused and are not convinced they can identify with the school that Georgia College has become. All the rituals and traditions of the women’s college were removed when the school allowed men to enter. As an open regional comprehensive college, most students were local and lived at home. As a result the only time only spent on campus was for classes. In 1996, when

Georgia College became a liberal arts school, it continued to be a regional commuter campus. However since Georgia College became a residential campus in 2004 and required all first-year students to live on campus, the level of student engagement has grown annually.

Unlike most colleges, Georgia College has no football team. Without football there is no activity to pull students together in the early fall. Georgia College has attempted to create a homecoming activity around basketball in the second semester, but it occurs well after research tells us that students are building their feeling of belonging and connecting to the campus.

Week of Welcome is held at the start of each year for first-year students to learn the “academic ethos and institutional norms” as Kuh (2005) calls them. However, according to fall 2011 MAP-Works survey, participation in these events has been low and over 40% of our first year class tell us they do not enjoy it or understand the purpose.

In many ways, Georgia College is suffering from a dearth of traditions and rituals with which each entering class can identify with. At older, more establish colleges many of these traditions have organically evolved from the students and what they have done together. This has yet to occur at Georgia College under the new liberal arts mission and changed student body.

Structured programs developed and organized by college professionals can jumpstart the process of events that become student traditions. Since University Housing has all first-year students living on campus, and the staff and resources to begin inter-hall competitions, I will be leading conversations with my department after this dissertation defense is completed to begin building events early in the year to allow for greater

student interaction. It is important that students meet each other as quickly as possible after arrival on campus. Since these interactions are not currently occurring, our department will seek to offer these experiences to first-year students.

An extension of this concept may be allowed to grow even further. There is currently a campus discussion regarding a second-year live-on requirement for all Georgia College students. If this were to be put in place it would offer opportunity for a tradition to be built offering competition between the first and second year classes. An identity with a building and a class could become the first steps to even further campus traditions.

Tinto (1993) points out students are likely not going to remain enrolled unless they become socially connected. Events which draw students together to interact and feel comfortable with the college assist in promoting persistence and institutional commitment.

Living on Campus

Throughout the interviews with residential students at Georgia College unintentional overtones of gratitude were expressed. Students reluctantly move into residence halls in the fall and over time come to understand the value of living and interacting with other peers during the first semester. As one of the students interviewed said, “At the beginning, the students in my building were the only friends I had. Randomly I’ve met people and gotten a good friend base.”

This past summer I attended the memorial for J. Doug Toma, the professor who developed this Executive Ed.D program. One of the speakers at the memorial was

Doug's first-year roommate and life-long friend, Michael Brown. While I have included the complete text of the speech in Appendix E, I will share a few of his comments relevant to my research:

"I had the very good fortune of being selected to live on the 4th Floor of South Case Hall. Many of the guys from Case Hall have become my closest friends, and several of them are here today. I will do my best to represent them as we reminisce a little about some of the greatest times of our lives. ... I cannot begin to put into words how much fun we had that freshmen year. Doug was the best roommate a guy could ask for. He literally made me laugh every day ... we would go to all of the MSU football games, most of the basketball and hockey games, and many other events on campus. Somehow, Doug could even make going to the cafeteria for lunch a memorable event."

While these were thirty year old memories of the first-year of college, Doug's roommate and friends present for the memorial relived them as though they had just occurred yesterday. The memories they had were of experiences and friendships identified through a random room assignment. Details of hall names, room numbers assigned, events, and even conversations held over meals were remembered. Removed from context, the experiences shared sounded very much like the Georgia College student interviews I completed this past year.

Thirty years from now I am not sure that students will remember the professor they had, the class they took, or the details of the content. The experiences they had living on campus and the people they met will remain with them. Alumni often show up decades after graduating wanting to walk through the hallways of the building they lived in during their first college years. The experiences of residence halls are a connection to the college most students value and will carry memories of the rest of their lives.

MAP-Works

It is one thing to collect the data by use of the MAP-Works survey and another to use it. The use of the collected data is one of the best retention opportunities Georgia College has at this time. Once students are identified they can be directed to programs on campus that focus on improving the factor(s) of concern. For example, this may be academic counseling and advising for a student who is expressing concerns in time management or having trouble with academic integration.

Within the residence halls, staff are trained to use MAP-Works to address issues such as inability to make peer connections, home sickness, roommate relationships and other areas which would hinder social integration to the campus. Prior to the implementation of MAP-Works, staff would have to wait for the student or a parent to contact them to identify there is a concern. With the use of MAP-Works, students self-identify a broad range of issues which may prevent them from remaining at the college.

Again, training the campus and gaining buy-in on the value of the use of the tool is the key. Students who share information through the survey and do not receive prompt follow-up are nearly assured to be lost before the start of the second year. The accuracy of MAP-Works improves each year as more data is collected from increasing numbers of colleges throughout the country joining.

Finances of Retention

A lower rate of first-year student retention is not just a financial concern for the college, but is a public indicator that it is unable to fulfill its primary purpose of graduating students. Bean (1990) reported that a single student retained until graduation

would generate the same or more revenue to the university than four students leaving after one year. It requires more money to recruit a new student than it does to retain an already enrolled student (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975) said, “In four-year institutions, any change that deters students from dropping out can affect three classes of students at once, whereas any change in recruiting practices can affect only one class in a given year. From this viewpoint, investing resources to prevent dropping out may be more cost effective than applying the same resources to more vigorous recruitment” (p. 2).

The American Institutes for Research reported in October 2010, “2003-2008 data from the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reflects that the 30 percent of first-year college students who failed to return to campus for a second year accounted for \$6.2 billion in state appropriations for colleges and universities and more than \$1.4 billion in student grants from the states. Additionally, the federal government provided \$1.5 billion in grants to these students (AIR, 2010)”

According to the same report, Georgia ranked ninth in the nation for higher education spending: \$168 million in state appropriations, \$86 million in student grants and \$41 million in federal student grants for a total of \$256 million. Legislators and taxpayers are increasingly taking in interest in total investment in higher education and what they perceive as the lack of students graduating.

There is a significant financial loss associated with students leaving college. Keeping the budget for student services slightly lower than the potential loss of students is a net gain to the college. Investment in retention efforts on behalf of the university is a sound business decision. With the current economy and resulting reduction in taxpayer

dollars available to distribute at the state level, universities will need to retain more students for the needed tuition revenue, student fees, and auxiliary dollars to maintain fiscal viability.

Opportunities for Future Research

The research on college retention is enormous. However there are a number of areas, including my own of socially at risk students, that could benefit from further examination. One area which I was unable to find literature on was the group of students that “inevitably depart”. This group of students will likely leave the college no matter what support systems are put in place for them. Within the data from the Georgia College Office of Institutional Research, these are students for which there are no identified reasons as to why they left. Further research may find that this “inevitable” is a group without reason. As Tinto (1982) says, “...for a number of students, it is in their own best interest [not to remain in college]”. I find this interesting.

Another area I find to be of interest is the group of academically talented, but socially awkward students. In chapter two I referred to Tinto (1988) using the framework of “culture and acceptance” as a possible explanation for student attrition. The premise is that movement from established relationships with family and high school to those in the student’s new home at college is often a difficult transition as indicated by national retention rates.

Using the inverse perspective of Tinto, my question is, “Would less connection to membership from the student’s high school experience allow for an easier or more comfortable transition to their newly formed membership at college?” My natural

curiosity wants to know if students who are bookish and socially inept, often referred to as nerds, find a stronger membership at college than they did in high school. The stereotype of this group of students is they enjoy things related to fantasy and science fiction such as comic books, role-playing games, video games, trading cards, comic books, television programs, and films. These are the students who would rather study than party, are often intelligent, and come to college with more than average academic enthusiasm.

Summary

Not that long ago first-year students were commonly introduced to college often by a president saying, “Look to your left, look to your right; one of you will not be here at graduation.” This was expressed with almost a sense of pride suggesting that one of the three students would not be able to survive the level of academic rigor of the selected college. Today, the same quote could be used to suggest that one-in-three students will not return for a second year of college.

The concept of mutual support should be at the heart of college retention plans. The French novelist and poet, Anatole France, has been quoted as saying, “Nine tenths of education is encouragement”. Nearly thirty years ago, Noel, Levitz, and Saluri (1985) wrote, “The caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus”, and Tinto (1982) says, “Simply put, the more time faculty give to their students, and students to each other, the more likely are students to complete their education”.

According to a quick internet search, it was American author John Maxwell who said, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

First-year college students are seeking an educational environment where they know they are valued and people care about them.

In a December 6, 2010 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, when asked about graduation rates, Tinto was quoted as saying college efforts towards retention are like getting “a fleet of small boats all to sail in the same direction.” Improvement, he said, depends “not on how many programs a university has, but how coherently they are aligned in a consistent way”. For colleges to make a difference, the entire campus must provide a culture that is student-focused and create an overall exciting first-year experience.

Imagine a college where in the introduction to the first-year class a president speaks the following words: “Look to your left, look to your right; one of the three of you will not be here at the end of this academic year unless all three bond to support each other to assure all three of you are still here until graduation day.” What an ideal setting where the commitment from students, faculty, staff, and most importantly administrators is that no one will be left behind. What a powerful message it would be for the students to know they have become a member of a community that will assure them that if they put in the required academic efforts, every member of the community would engage them socially and assure them they will do everything possible to see that each entering student completes his or her bachelor’s degree. I am not sure that this sort of ideal place exists. Each one of us as potential future key college administrators, and possible presidential

candidates, offers the opportunity of hope that this sort of caring campus culture could be created.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INVITATION TO STUDY

Date

Dear :

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Sheila Slaughter, professor at the Institute at Higher Education, at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled Connecting Early Social Engagement and Student Satisfaction, Success and Retention. The purpose of this study is to examine student involvement outside the classroom in clubs and organizations at Georgia College.

Your participation in a single focus group at Georgia College should only take about 1 hour. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. While the results and specific examples of comments made in the focus group may become part of the dissertation, you will have the opportunity to request confidentiality by selecting a pseudonym. If you select this option the results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used without your written consent.

The findings from this project may provide information on ways students entering college may become more successful by becoming involved in campus clubs or organizations within the first month of their first semester.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me by email at larry.christenson@gcsu.edu or by phone at (478) 445-5160. My dissertation chair is Dr. Sheila Slaughter, who can be reached at slaughtr@uga.edu or (706) 542-0571. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

I am also attaching a consent form for your review for further information. Please indicate if you wish to be a part of this study via email or phone.

Thank you in advance for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Larry C. Christenson, EdD Candidate
Institute of Higher Education
University of Georgia

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of Georgia
Informed Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled "Connecting Early Social Engagement and Student Satisfaction, Success and Retention" conducted by Larry C. Christenson, EdD Candidate of the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia (478-445-5160), under the direction of Dr. Sheila Slaughter, Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia (706-542-0571). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

This study will explore student involvement and its connection with retention/persistence at a college or university. It is important to know what impacts a student's decision to stay and ability to succeed. This study will research the idea that students assisted within the first month of the first semester in identifying social niches are likely to be more satisfied, more engaged and retained by the university.

The individual interview will last approximately 30 minutes; if extended time is necessary, I will be asked for permission to continue. Interviews will be audio recorded and notes will be taken with my consent. I may be requested for a brief follow up to confirm/clarify comments made during the focus group. I will be provided the opportunity to review and amend any statements made during the focus group / interview and/or follow up.

There is no foreseeable risk in my participation. The data collected will be kept confidential and stored securely. The data will only be made available to the persons conducting the study. The recordings will be destroyed within one year (2012), once the study is complete. No references will be made in oral or written reports that could link me to the study without my permission, however due to the small number of participants in the study; it is possible my comments could be linked to me.

The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project.

Contact: I understand if I have any questions about this research project, I can contact Larry C. Christenson by email at larry.christenson@gcsu.edu or by phone at (478) 445-5160; or the dissertation chair Dr. Sheila Slaughter, who can be reached at slaughtr@uga.edu or (706) 542-0571.

Consent:

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

_____ Name of Researcher	_____ Signature	_____ Date
_____ Name of Participant	_____ Signature	_____ Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I have generated the following list as guided questions for participant interviews. The responses to these questions will assist understating of the level of social involvement and satisfaction of the students.

- Overall, to what degree are you fitting in at Georgia College?
- Overall, to what degree are you satisfied with your social life at Georgia College?
- Overall, to what degree do you feel you belong at Georgia College?
- Please list the clubs and organizations you chose to be become involved in at Georgia College.
- Why did you choose to become involved?

If they did not join any clubs or organizations, then they will be asked:

- Why did you choose not join clubs and organizations at Georgia College?
- How did you spend your time outside the classroom instead?
- Why do you feel it is important to be involved in clubs and organizations?
- From who did you received the most encouragement to become involved?
- To what extent did living in the residence halls play in your getting involved?
- What impact did your roommate/suitemate have in you getting involved?
- Did you initially join any groups you later chose not to remain involved with? Why?
- Is there a group you desired to become involved with and did not? Why?
- If you did not join _____ what would your life at Georgia College be like?
- Has _____ helped you make friends that allowed you to be more academically successful?
- Did you volunteer at the GIVE Center? To which cause/issue?

- Assuming you plan to return to Georgia College next year, which groups do you plan to remain active in or join?
- To what degree do you hang out with other residents on campus?
- To what degree are you committed to graduating from Georgia College?
- Overall, to what degree would you choose Georgia College if you had to do it over again?

APPENDIX D

In her January 21, 2011 State of the University address, former Georgia College President Dorothy Leland made it very clear that academic and social engagement of our students is her first strategic priority. Here is part of her address which I feel is relevant to my proposal:

Strategic Direction 1 - Exemplary Undergraduate Learning Experience

Source: <http://infox.gcsu.edu/content/president-leland-presents-state-university-address>

“Continue to build excellence and distinction in the Georgia College undergraduate experience consistent with the university’s educational values and public liberal arts mission.

This strategic direction focuses on the character and quality of the undergraduate learning environment. It has to do with the academic, social, and personal support that we provide students, and with the ways in which we engage students as active participants in an educational environment grounded in the commitments to reason, respect, and responsibility.

Students who love Georgia College tell us over and over again what it is they value about their experience here: the interactions with faculty who care about them and challenge, motivate and inspire; the wealth of experiences they have to grow as leaders, thinkers and creators; the beautiful grounds and buildings and the student-friendly, “we

are a community” atmosphere of the campus. The good news for us is that these are the very same characteristics that students at elite private liberal arts colleges also highly value. In this respect, we have succeeded in becoming an affordable alternative to private liberal arts colleges for the state’s academically talented students.

*But our success in creating the atmosphere of a private liberal arts college is not yet matched by student success **as measured by retention and degree completion at the best of these institutions.*** Don’t get me wrong: we have made steady improvements. But top tier private and public liberal arts colleges have long known how to “pull out all the stops” when students are failing academically or *socially or otherwise* are at risk for drop-out or transfer. These schools have sophisticated and aggressive intervention strategies that succeed in helping academically or socially troubled students stay on track for graduation.

*Thanks to work conducted by the Retention and Graduation Taskforce and also by Student Affairs through its survey instruments, we now have a fairly sophisticated grasp of the reasons students leave Georgia College. **For many, it is a personal adjustment issue — homesickness or an inability to make new friends loom large in this category.***

For others, the stumbling blocks relate to their academic majors — the inability to get into the majors, the lack of course sections in the major, the lack of the major that the student has decided he or she wants to pursue. Very few of our students leave us because they are failing academically, and very few leave because we were not initially a school of choice. Today, thanks to your efforts, we are a destination of choice for most freshmen who come to Georgia College; *our challenge now is to put into place the*

support and intervention strategies that will impact student success as measured by persistence and degree completion.

Our response to this challenge will focus on the ways in which we engage students in the academic and extra-curricular life of the university, the academic and social supports that we provide, and unblocking roadblocks in the majors or providing alternative paths to graduation for deserving students. In addition, it will be important to focus on campus climate challenges as these relate to the recruitment and retention of students from underrepresented groups. Each one of our students reaps life-long benefits from being a part of a learning environment where a diversity of life-experiences and perspectives is valued and supported.”

APPENDIX E

TEXT OF J. DOUGLAS TOMA MEMORIAL

“Good afternoon. My name is Mike Brown and I had the good fortune in 1982 of winning the lottery. A lottery that would enrich my life in ways too numerous to list in the short time I am given today. The lottery I won was the roommate lottery for freshmen housing at Michigan State University.

I had the very good fortune of being selected to live on the 4th Floor of South Case Hall. Many of the guys from Case Hall have become my closest friends, and several of them are here today. I will do my best to represent them as we reminisce a little about some of the greatest times of our lives.

I was assigned to live in Room 455. When I arrived at Room 455 on the first day the dorms opened, I learned my roommate’s name was Doug Toma. Back then, in the pre-Facebook era, MSU freshmen were not told anything about their future roommate prior to arriving on campus. All I knew about this Doug Toma was that he had managed to get into the room before me (as evidenced by his stuff being all over the room) and he had already claimed the bottom bunk. That was not a good first impression. That might also be the last time Doug disappointed me in the almost 30 years I would know him.

Among Doug’s things strewn about the room were several items that quickly gave me a glimpse into who he was. There was his varsity letter jacket from Utica Eisenhower High School, so I knew he must be an athlete. There were several photo collages

showing his family, his groups of friends, and some travel photos. There were several academic awards, and even a few beer mugs. You can learn a lot about somebody in a short period of time by looking at how they decorate their freshmen dorm room. I thought to myself, “He seems like a good guy.” I had no idea he was about to change my life forever.

Doug and his parents arrived back in the room shortly thereafter while my parents and I were still busy unpacking the last of my things. Everybody made small talk for a few minutes as we all got acquainted, and then both sets of parents left Doug and I to get settled. Since Doug was mostly all moved in already, he sat on the couch and watched me unpack as we began the first of several thousand conversations. Some were short, some would last all night, but they were always fun. And educational. And filled with the wit that was unmistakably Doug Toma. In all of those thousands of conversations, I don’t recall ever having a single argument with Doug. Endless debate, but never an argument. He did, in fact, later offer to give up the bottom bunk if I really wanted it.

I cannot begin to put into words how much fun we had that freshmen year. Doug was the best roommate a guy could ask for. He literally made me laugh every day. We would talk sports, we would talk politics, we would talk about everything. I quickly learned that was Doug’s true gift – he was just as comfortable talking about spread offenses in football as he was talking about our Founding Fathers’ vision of constitutional democracy. In between the many insightful comments would be something incredibly witty and funny.

Doug and I, and most of the MSU guys here today, were enrolled in the James Madison Residential College program. For those who don’t know, James Madison

College at MSU is a public policy and pre-law curriculum. So we had lots of future lawyers on our floor. We also had lots of political discussion. That eventually led to us forming a group we called “The Senate.” Of course, that meant the 10-12 of us in the group were called “Senators.” It was not a formal, MSU-sanctioned student group. In fact, it was more like a clique – sort of like the actual U.S. Senate. I had to throw that line in there because that is the kind of line I would expect Doug to use.

Our room was often the place where these impromptu “Senate” meetings would occur. Doug, of course, was our Senate Parliamentarian and would generally run the meetings. Actually, calling these “meetings” is a little misleading -- they were spontaneous, joke-filled BS sessions about anything. Sometimes the topic was almost serious, like whether to admit another Senator or maybe plan a party, but most of the time it was just some excuse to get together and trade light-hearted jabs at one another. Senator Toma always made the meetings fun.

Whether there was a Senate meeting or not, there always seemed to be somebody visiting our room. People just liked hanging out with Doug, maybe talking about our classes, sports, or just about anything else. Sometimes people would drop in for no reason at all. I can remember several times coming back to the room after classes or studying and seeing Doug there with one of the other guys from the floor, neither one saying anything. When the guy would later leave, I would ask Doug “what did so-and-so want?” Doug would look at me (and deadpan as only Doug could do) and say, “I have no freaking idea. He just came in and sat down.” Yet, Doug would never dream of telling the guy to leave, even if he had a paper due the next day. If somebody needed a few minutes of company just for the hell of it, Doug made sure our door was always

open. From what I hear, he had that same policy while he, Linda and Jack lived in the dorm at the Residential College here.

One could argue that we squeezed as much out of our freshmen year experience as any college kid possibly could. Doug was a huge part of that experience. We would go to all of the MSU football games, most of the basketball and hockey games, and many other events on campus. Somehow, Doug could even make going to the cafeteria for lunch a memorable event.

We had Ooh-Ba-Loo parties in our rooms on Thursday nights after the day's studying was done. Don't ask me what Ooh-Ba-Loo means because to this day I still do not know. But I do know the little gatherings were a ton of fun, even if it meant we would be somewhat sleepy for our Friday classes. Yes, I am using the word "sleepy" as a euphemism for hung-over. Every Ooh-Ba-Loo party started by playing Van Morrison's song "Moon Dance." We would all sing along and act like we were playing the instrumental parts of the song. I guess you could say that was the unofficial Senate song. To this day, every time that song comes on the radio I have to crank it up and sing along - and think about freshman year.

Doug also planned a huge party at the RenCen hotel in Detroit over our winter break that you had to see to believe. I happened to find a copy of the original invitation to the RenCen party, and several other Senate artifacts, in a box of keepsakes from our time at MSU. Among the items was a birthday card Doug made for me during our Sophomore year. It is classic Doug Toma, and each item he put on the card recalls some funny moment in our lives. I would be happy to explain most of those references.

Doug was not what I would call a “party guy” but he made every party he attended more fun for the rest of us. I hope I am not bursting the bubbles of those who only knew Doug as the mature and worldly professor he would become. Just trust me when I say that one of the reasons Doug related so well to college students was because he was the consummate student himself. He studied when he needed to, he played when he could, and he filled our entire dorm with his great attitude. He also provided me with endless memories, and for that I am eternally grateful.”

Michael J. Brown
Lansing, MI

APPENDIX F

TEXT OF POSTCARD TO PARENTS

Though your child has been an independent college student for two weeks now, study after study tells us that they still look to you as a role model and valued advisor. That's why University Housing has developed Parent Connection – a way for Bobcat families to stay informed about opportunities at Georgia College.

Through Parent Connection, you will have access to information via the *Campus Link* newsletter, special mailings and an area of our website dedicated to Bobcat families.

At this point in the semester, one of the key predictors of success in and out of the classroom is whether or not a student has become involved in a group or organization. When a student is engaged in campus life through a club or activity, they develop a support network that gives them a sense of belonging and connection to the university.

We encourage you to give your student a call *today* and find out what kind of connections your student has made. With hundreds of student organizations, there are countless opportunities to begin building that network.

Give the University Housing office a call if you have any questions throughout the year. We are here to ensure your student has all they need to succeed at Georgia College.

University Housing