STUDENT SUCCESS CENTERS

AND THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENT RETENTION

by

JAN WHATLEY

(Under the direction of Karen Webber)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if a Student Success Center (SSC) impacted the retention of students at a northwest Georgia college. A mixed method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methods was used to examine the research questions. Log Linear regression was used to analyze the quantitative data to predict the persistence of students before and after the SSC. Additionally, focus groups and telephone interviews were used to obtain the perceptions of students about the SSC. The findings indicate no significant difference pre versus post SSC although financial aid was found to significantly impact persistence. Significant differences in persistence were found also for several variable including campus attended and student major. Focus groups and telephone interviews indicated that the SSC provides students with a helpful start to their educational experience. Students stated that the

INDEX WORDS: retention, persistence, early departure, attrition, drop out, Tinto's longitudinal model of student departure.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Barry Webb, the individual who most supported me throughout this lengthy process. Your love and encouragement made completing this dissertation so much easier. You were always there to take care of everything while my time was spent working on this project. I will forever appreciate and love you.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Students enroll in college for many different reasons. Often, individuals opt to continue their education beyond high school because of their desire to obtain new knowledge, a better understanding of the world, and/or a satisfying and rewarding career. In their review of the Current Population Survey (CPS) for 1998, 1999, and 2000, Day and Newberger (2002) report that approximately 60% of United States' high school graduates attend college. Seventy-seven percent of the CPS respondents report that they enrolled in college because of their desire to obtain new skills or knowledge, while twenty percent wanted to enter a new career field, enter the workforce, or start their own business (Debell & Mulligan, 2005).

In addition to obtaining new knowledge and better skills, many individuals expect to be rewarded financially for completing postsecondary education. A large majority of students attend college with the expectation that they will earn higher wages upon graduation or that their employment opportunities will be better or greater upon degree completion (National Freshman Attitudes Report, 2007). Hollenbeck (1993) bases these expectations on the "human capital theory" and suggests that individuals "pursue postsecondary education based on a comparison of expected benefits in the form of enhanced lifetime earnings (and perhaps non-investment costs that accrue to the individual) to investment costs that include direct costs and foregone earnings" (p. 213). Psacharopoulos (2006) contends that, in the development of human capital, individuals initially forgo resources while in college for the sake of future gain. He states the following:

The more educated worker sacrificed earnings early on in his or her career, so his or her initial earnings are lower than those of the less educated one. However, after the training period is over, the earnings of the trained worker exceed those of the untrained. (p. 114-115)

Students expect to receive a return on the time and money spent on completing a postsecondary degree, and those expectations are generally met. Leslie and Brinkman (1988) report that the payoff of an education is more than usually expected. They found that "conventionally measured, the internal rate of return on the private investment in an undergraduate degree is of the order of 11.8-13.4 percent" (p. 9). Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007) findings also indicate that students who earn degrees beyond high school have seen financial gain since 1979 for having furthered their education. In particular, the first quarter 2009, weekly earnings for full-time workers aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree was \$1,115 per week. In comparison, high school graduates earned \$619 per week while those with less than a high school education earned \$459 weekly (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Similarly, Ashenfelter & Rouse (1998) found that for every year of education completed, there is an average of a nine to 10% of financial return to an individual. Kane and Rouse (1995) concur, stating that those individuals who attend a two-year college earn approximately 10% more than those without any college education. And, this number was true even if a degree was not completed. Leigh and Gill (1997) found increased earning with the completion of college coursework, and the point at which students enrolled in college was inconsequential; there were no difference in earnings between students who enrolled in college immediately after high school and those students who entered at an older age.

Furthermore, postsecondary education equates to an increase in lifetime earnings. Census Bureau data (Day & Newberger, 2002) indicate that earnings over an individual's lifetime are greater for those who attend college, even if a degree is not completed. Basing their projections on 1999 dollars, on full-time employment, and on a 40 year work life, Day and Newberger (2002) found that, for those who attended some college, but who did not earn a degree, lifetime earnings were projected to be approximately \$1.5 million. In comparison, those with a bachelor's degree could earn a projected \$2.1 million during their lifetime. Those who completed a master's degree could expect lifetime earnings of \$2.5 million while those with a doctorate degree could earn as much as \$3.4 million. Census data showed that those who did not complete a high school diploma would make the least amount over a 40 year period, with projected earnings of \$1.0 million. High school graduates, with lifetime earnings of a projected \$1.2 million, faired a little better than those without high school diplomas but still fell behind those with some college or with college degrees. As this indicates, those who participate in postsecondary education reap financial benefits over one's lifetime, and the higher the level of education, the higher the lifetime wages.

In addition to earning advantages, postsecondary education impacts occupational status or the type of job an individual obtains (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Occupational status is defined as the prestige or desirability of a job (Featherman & Stevens, 1981). Employers often believe that individuals with postsecondary education possess skills and knowledge that are not held by those without such an education. This "sheepskin effect" (Jaeger & Page, 1996) suggests that employers consider a college diploma a signal that an individual will be productive at work. Knox, Lindsay, and Kolb (1993) and Hyllegard and Lavin (1992) support this idea that individuals who possess a college degree are hired for positions that are considered more

desirable. Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note that some employers perceive college educated students as having competencies and values needed for managerial and technical positions that high school graduates may not possess. As a result of participating in postsecondary education, individuals are rewarded in the labor market with better job opportunities just because they attended college or earned a degree.

Similar to its impact on wages and occupational attainment, postsecondary education also affects job satisfaction. Those who attend college experience increased job autonomy and increased decision-making power in their positions than do those with no college education. This increase in decision-making ability in many cases leads to greater job satisfaction. However, those with college degrees often have higher expectations about the benefits they should receive and are in general more knowledgeable about the possible benefits available to them in their work environment. These higher expectations often lead to job dissatisfaction when these benefits are not received but are believed deserved (Reskin & Ross, 1992). So, while education can result in satisfying earnings and better job opportunities, job dissatisfaction may result when other benefits are below expectations.

With this opportunity to earn higher wages and obtain desirable employment also comes the opportunity to work year round. Those with bachelor's degrees are more likely to work year round when compared to high school graduates or high school dropouts. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) found that the unemployment rate of blacks with a college degree was 2.8 percent while this rate was 12.8% for blacks with less than a high school diploma, a difference of 10%. Similarly, the unemployment rate of whites with a college degree was 5.9 percent less than whites who did not complete high school. In the *Employment and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment Report 1970 to 1996* (1997), 85% of those aged 25-64 with bachelor's

degrees were working compared to 75% of those with a high school diploma. Differences were also evident for those possessing less than a bachelor's degree. In comparison to the 75% of those with high school diplomas who were working, 82% of those with an associate degree, 84% with a vocational associate degree and 79% with postsecondary education credits but no degree were employed (Employment and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment Report 1970 to 1996, 1997). As is evident, the more education you have the greater the opportunities to remain employed.

Even though benefits of college attendance exist, students often do not persist to graduation. Evidence suggests that student attrition is experienced to varying degrees by all postsecondary institutions, both two and four year. The National Freshman Attitudes Report (2007) indicates that only 47% of students enrolling in four year institutions complete their degree within five years (National Freshman Attitudes Report, 2007). Conversely, persistence statistics collected by American College Testing Program (ACT) over the last 20 years show that approximately 52% of students in Bachelor's, Masters, and doctoral programs graduated from four year institutions within five years. This is compared to 34% to 44% who graduated from two year institutions within a three year period (McClanahan, 2004).

While there are variations in persistence numbers, there are also various reasons why students depart prior to graduation. These reasons include academic performance, time lag between high school and college, lack of college fit, institution type, economics, and first generation status. For one, academic performance is an indicator of college persistence. Those who have poor grades in their first year often do not remain for a second year often because of either academic suspension or poor motivation to continue. Academic performance in high school is also an indicator of how well students will persist in college. Those who scored well in

high school typically score well in college and will persist to graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In addition to academics, students who enroll directly out of high school have a greater likelihood of persisting in college. The transition from high school to college is often easier than it is for those who delay their college enrollment. These non-traditional students, who begin college later in life, often have established families, are working, and/or have other responsibilities which make a strong focus on their student role difficult (Bean & Metzner, 1985). These added responsibilities sometimes result in non-traditional students departing early to address personal or financial matters that conflict with their academics.

As is the case with non-traditional students, economic circumstances can cause all students to depart early from their postsecondary studies. Lack of financial aid can reduce the chance that students will enroll and even continue with their studies once admitted. With financial aid options available to reduce college costs including loans, grants, scholarships, and work-study programs, those who receive financial aid are less likely to drop out of college during their first two years and are more likely to graduate (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In some cases, however, student financial aid may not be perceived as being adequate for students to meet their financial obligations while in college, so some students work, particularly those non-traditional students who must provide family support (Bean & Metzner, 1985). And, working can impact student persistence. Berktold and Horn (1998) report that those who work 15 or more hours weekly may not persist; however, those who work 14 or fewer hours per week persisted at higher rates than did those students who worked more hours. Other studies show that non-working students may be just as likely to depart college early as are those who work 15 – 34 hours per week (Berktold & Horn, 1998).

Additionally, those students who are the first in their families to attend college frequently work significantly more hours per week than those students whose parents attended college. (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). These students often focus more on work and less on academics and may choose to work greater hours and attend school part-time. Second generation students, whose parents attended college, often work less hours and attend college full-time. For first generation students, work responsibilities and adjustment difficulties may result in their departing early from postsecondary education because of their increased interest in working and less focus on academics (Terenzini et al, 1996).

Furthermore, first generation students often do not have others within their family who can provide them with information about the college experience. Second generation students, however, can receive guidance when making academic choices and when deciding on social activities. First generation students, however, often do not have a base of knowledge about the college experience and must adjust culturally as well as socially and academically. Also, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella and Nora (1996) found that first generation students often choose to attend less academically selective colleges and complete fewer credit hours over three years than did those whose parents attended college. Their focus on work plus their lack of information about attending college may result in these students departing before graduation.

Another reason for early departure is the lack of institutional fit, which can cause students to lose their focus on college and to eventually drop out. Tinto (1993) refers to institutional fit as academic and social integration. Students have certain expectations about the quality of education they will receive and also about the programs and courses offered. If their expectations are not met, students will depart. Likewise, students have certain ideas about the social aspects of college, and they often expect opportunities to participate in activities outside of

academics. When these opportunities fall short of what was expected, students will leave college prior to graduation. Students will not continue to attend a postsecondary institution if they are dissatisfied with the social and academic services provided. If they are unable to integrate into these systems of the college, they will depart or leave to attend other institutions (Tinto, 1993).

Early departure can also be influenced by the type of institution a student enters (Cuccaro-Alamin, 1997). Those students who start at four year institutions persist at higher rates than do those students who matriculate at a two-year college and then transfer to a four year institution. This is true even when considering the characteristics that students bring with them to college such as career goals, academic abilities, and other relevant traits. Attending a two-year college reduced the likelihood of completion of a bachelor's degree by 15 to 20%. For some students, however, a four-year degree is not their end goal. Often, students are able to attain their educational objectives at a two year college, which can include upgrading skills or completing a two-year degree. In other cases, personal responsibilities such as family and financial obligations get in the way of transferring to a four year institution. Either way, those students enrolled at two year colleges have been shown to complete their bachelor's degree at a lesser rate than those beginning at a four year institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

While students leave college for many different reasons, Kezar (2004) reports that student departure gives institutions the opportunity to understand student choice and to develop strategies to reduce attrition. And, postsecondary institutions have implemented a variety of procedures and programs to increase the number of graduates. These have included developmental studies courses aimed at improving students' readiness for the rigor of their college coursework (Evon, 2003). Students who are not academically well-prepared for college are at risk for dropout. Often these students enroll in developmental studies courses early on in

their college experience to improve their academic skills and to increase their likelihood of educational success. These courses can include instruction in such areas as reading, math and English and have been shown to be modestly effective in assisting students in overcoming their academic shortcomings (Desjardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2002).

Another option aimed at improving retention is orientations/first year seminars. The manner in which these seminars are offered vary as do participation requirements, with some colleges mandating the courses and others allowing students to make the choice to enroll. Some seminars are one semester in length while others span an entire freshman year. Research shows that enrollment in these seminars has improved the retention of students into the second year. Those students who participated are more likely to remain in college than those who did not (Boudreau & Kromrey, 1994).

As a form of first year orientation, some colleges have implemented learning communities as a method of integrating students into the academic and social environments of college. Learning communities create academically-focused cohorts in which students are grouped by some commonality such as their residential setting or program of study. By enrolling as a cohort, students build a support system that they can carry with them from course to course. The camaraderie that develops in learning communities increases both academic and social integration, which has been shown to result in higher rates of student retention (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Research indicates that learning communities have a positive impact on the retention of second quarter and second year students (Tinto & Russo, 1994).

Another strategy used to increase retention/success is to reduce class size (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). A reduction in the number of students in the classroom allows for greater student and faculty contact. Students and faculty have more opportunities to interact regarding

coursework, and instructors may have more time to assist students with questions and course difficulties. Increased interaction may result in greater student understanding of and comfort with the course material. Tinto (1993) reports that academic integration is an important component in retaining students. Smaller class sizes may result in greater academic integration for students who may not see similar results in a large classroom. In the end, some colleges have experienced an increase in student retention due to reduced class size (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

Other methods used to retain students have included the implementation of advisement and counseling activities. Studies show that, when advisors sit down with students and map out a realistic academic plan, increases in the retention of students into their second year of enrollment have resulted. These programs assist students in becoming oriented to their postsecondary institutions and help them become involved socially and academically (Seidman, 1991).

One such counseling program is being implemented at a technical college in North Georgia. Beginning 2004, the technical college implemented new admissions procedures for first quarter students that led to the creation of Student Success Centers (SSC). The SSC represents an effort by admissions staff to connect early with students to increase student retention and improve graduation rates.

The Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine if the Student Success Center (SSC) at three branch campuses of a northwest Georgia technical college have improved the retention rates of students at this institution. A review of retention rates at this institution, which falls under the direction of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), reveals that students often drop out after their first quarter of enrollment, particularly those students who enroll in academic

remedial courses. Typically, most diploma programs offered by colleges within the TCSG have a completion rate of approximately 50%, while some diploma programs lose students at even higher rates (Peters, 2003). No data has been examined to determine if a reduction of student departure has occurred as a result of the implementation of the SSC.

In addition, the development of the SSC required the use of many resources. Funds were used to redesign areas of buildings, and walls were knocked down and rebuilt, furniture purchased and computers bought to accommodate the needs of these centers. Software was purchased to test students for admission and to assist them in determining a program of study that is appropriate for them. The hours of operation of each SSC were expanded on two campuses to be open four days per week for 12 hours per day plus one additional day per week for four hours. The SSC on a third campus, which is the smallest of the three, is open one day per week from 8am to 8pm, and more as needed. The increased hours require more staff to maintain the centers' operations; therefore, non-admissions staff members are reassigned from their regular tasks to work in the centers approximately one day a week until 8:00 p.m.

Extensive training was necessary to ensure that all staff presents the same information to students on all campuses. SSC staff members are interchangeable from campus to campus, allowing more flexibility when scheduling professionals to work in these centers.

Substantial resources were dedicated and center goals and objectives were established for college's SSC aimed at reducing student attrition. However, no empirical evidence exists to determine if the SSC is meeting these objectives. Hopefully, the SSC has improved college retention and students will experience the benefits associated with completing their degree such as higher wages, more desirable employment and greater opportunities to be employed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is three-fold: (1) to determine if student retention increased after the implementation of the Student Success Center (SSC), (2) to establish if there are differences in students retention by student demographics, time status, financial aid pre versus post SSC and (3) to reveal the perceptions of students about the SSC.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are: (1) Are there differences in the retention of students before versus after the implementation of the SSC?; (2) Are there differences in students' grades pre versus post the implementation of the SSC?; (3) Are there differences in the retention of students by personal attributes, financial resources and intellectual disposition before the SSC versus post the SSC?; and (4) What are the perceptions of students about the SSC and its role in retaining students?

Significance of the Study

Early departure impacts both the student and the college. When students fail to complete their program of study, they can leave college feeling negatively about themselves and their efforts. They also miss out on the opportunity to grow personally and to obtain knowledge that can be gained from completing their postsecondary education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Cangemi, Edwards, and Kowalski (2001) agree, pointing to the missed opportunities to develop both personally and intellectually.

In addition to the missed opportunity to grow intellectually and personally, students who do not persist often compete unsuccessfully against those with degrees for more desirable jobs in the labor market. When compared with those who have earned college degrees, non-completers often are perceived by employers as less productive employees. Research also shows that not

only do those who persist obtain more desirable jobs, but they also are employed more often than those who possess a high school diploma or less (Day & Newberger, 2002).

Studies also show that potential earnings can be reduced when students do not persist to graduation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Although completion of courses has been shown to increase an individual's salary, there are financial benefits to earning a college degree, with increasing benefits as one moves from associate to graduate degree completion. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concur, while Leigh and Gill (1997) find that college enrollment results in a wage increase of approximately five to eight percent per year of college credits completed, even if a degree is not earned.

While students stand to be impacted negatively both financially and in the job market, postsecondary institutions also suffer as a result of non-student completion. The reputation of a college can suffer if graduation rates are low; the college may be perceived to have poor quality of instruction or other services. Thus, the attrition of students may negatively reflect up on the institution itself.

Another such negative impact of student attrition is the effect that the loss of students has on the budgets that colleges use to recruit students. Institutions apportion funds annually in an attempt to persuade students to attend their college. Promotional materials and marketing programs are utilized to convince students that their college is the best choice. When students decide to attend the postsecondary institution, the money used for advertising is well spent. However, the benefits of the marketing efforts are lost when students depart early.

In addition to lost funds designated for marketing and recruiting, low graduation rates can further hinder college budgets since funds received from state budgets are sometimes tied to graduation rates (Barefoot, 2004). Often state legislators are held accountable for the methods in

which they spend taxpayers' money. When postsecondary institutions are perceived as not operating efficiently and effectively, legislators may opt to spend the taxpayers' limited money on other state programs. The re-appropriation of funds away from those colleges with low graduation rates can result in increased budget difficulties for those institutions.

In addition to state funds, college programs and services are often funded in part by tuition; the loss of students results in a loss of tuition dollars. The college's operating budget is then reduced so the quality of instruction can suffer. Furthermore, when enrollment is reduced due to attrition, colleges can also lose funds that are generated by student expenditures in their bookstores and cafeterias. When students leave, there are fewer students on campus to purchase items in these areas. Thus, postsecondary institutions lose revenue that can be generated by tuition and by funds spent in these ancillary areas.

There is also a loss of economic wealth when students do not complete their education. Students could have gained knowledge that would enable them to contribute to the economic growth of society. One example to note is that technical colleges profess to be the trainers for local communities. Their mission is to be responsive to the needs of employers in their service areas. When students do not complete their programs, jobs requiring skilled workers go unfilled. Furthermore, the reputation of technical colleges is tarnished when employers need workers and there are no qualified employees being produced by these institutions.

Exploring the implementation of the SSC is important because student attrition impacts both the student and the institution. This exploration can best be done through a mixed-methods approach of examining descriptive quantitative data on retention rates and success measures as well as qualitative focus group and interview data on students' perceptions about their reasons for college attendance, how it integrates in their life, and their experiences with the college and

SSC. Examining this data on the effect of the SSC will help institution officials know if admissions procedures are meeting the goal of improved retention and satisfaction among students. Furthermore, administrators from other colleges may want to implement similar procedures in an effort to improve retention and other measures of student success at their institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure. This model has been used widely as the basis for examining the retention efforts at academic institutions. It continues to be used by many educational planners for its usefulness as a predictor of student persistence. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) found that this model has been the focus of hundreds of studies and has been cited in as many articles. Additionally, it has been used as a guide for the development of programs and procedures for reducing student attrition (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Tinto's Model is longitudinal in nature, in that it believes that students bring with them a set of attributes that, over time, influence their level of commitment to their educational goals and their motivation to completing their program of study. These attributes can include such factors as past educational experiences, intellectual ability, and family background. Students also bring with them varying levels of commitment to their career goals and to the institution itself. As students interact over time with the social and academic environments of the educational institution, their commitment and motivation increase and decrease as they attempt to incorporate the behaviors and norms of the college community. If the process of integrating these behaviors and norms into their own lives is too difficult, or if the students' expectations about what the experience should be are not met, students will depart. An individual who is

socially integrated but not academically integrated will most likely depart prior to graduation. Likewise, students who are academically integrated but not socially integrated will quite possibly depart early. Ideally, students will be both socially and academically integrated, thus increasing the likelihood that they will persist (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) intends his model to be policy oriented in the sense that administrators and policy makers can use the model to guide them in the development of procedures that will decrease student attrition (Tinto, 1993). He suggests that departure research should first focus on why students leave to then reveal methods or procedures that can be implemented to increase retention. Tinto focuses on the postsecondary institution's impact on the student and on how changing procedures can increase student enrollment and attendance. His retention theory empowers colleges to take control because of the institution's ability to develop strategies and to take measures to retain students (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto also believes that early contact and community building with students are essential to improving retention and states that "the more frequent and rewarding interactions are between students and other members of the institution, the more likely are individuals to stay" (p. 166). Institutions should consider the first year of college as very important in the attempt to retain students and should use their scarce resources during this year for this purpose. Further, since recruitment and admissions offices are often the first formal contact that students have with institutions, staff should present information to students that can result in a high match between their expectations and their realities of the college experience. In addition to admissions and recruitment efforts, identifying students' needs early through counseling, advisement and academic support can also reduce student departure. Assisting students in determining the most

appropriate educational course can result in students being more confident about their enrollment and more goal-oriented.

Even though widely supported, some criticize aspects of Tinto's theory. Because Tinto's theory is based on research data obtained from a four-year, residential institution, it excluded community colleges and commuter students (Kezar, 2004). Cabrera, Castenada, Nora, and Hengstler (1992) point out that one gap in the theory is that the role of external factors is not considered in student persistence. They believe that Tinto excludes many external factors that impact student attrition, focusing mainly on the institution's role in this process and less on those variables that cannot be controlled by the college.

Currently, there is little research that addresses the applicability of Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure at technical colleges. Using Tinto's model as a framework, this study will determine if the efforts of the technical college improve student retention by providing students with an initial positive admissions experience.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One presents a background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance of the study, and the study's theoretical framework. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature pertaining to student persistence, student departure from college, strategies used by colleges to retain students, and theories of student persistence. Chapter Three presents the methodology used in this study including the design of the study, the research site, the study population, the quantitative and qualitative methods used and data collection procedures. Chapter Four presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative methods, and Chapter Five includes conclusions about the findings and recommendations for future research. The Appendix includes consent

forms signed by focus group participants as well as questions asked during these sessions and during the telephone interviews.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to determine if a Student Success Center (SSC) improves the retention rates of students at a technical college in northwest Georgia. The associated research questions are: (1) Are there differences in the retention of students before versus after the implementation of the SSC?; (2) Are there differences in students' grades pre versus post the implementation of the SSC?; (3) Are there differences in the retention of students by personal attributes, financial resources and intellectual disposition before the SSC versus post the SSC?; and (4) What are the perceptions of students about the SSC and its role in retaining students?

Much literature has been written that addresses the retention of students in postsecondary education, and many theories have been developed concerning this phenomenon,
particularly since losing students results in the loss of revenue to educational institutions. In
addition to this loss of income, students themselves lose monetarily, intellectually and
occupationally when they do not complete their post-secondary education. This chapter will
review the literature concerning student departure by analyzing student enrollment, costs
associated with dropping out, reasons for departure, strategies to reduce attrition and theoretical
models of departure.

Student Enrollment in Postsecondary Education

The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2008) indicates that an increasing number of individuals in the United States is enrolling in postsecondary education, now standing at over 16 million. Enrollment at colleges and universities increased 16 percent during the years

1985 through 1995 and grew at an even higher rate, 23%, during 1995 through 2005 (NCES, 2008). This continued growth in enrollment is projected for students at community colleges and universities each year from 2004 through 2013, although the majority of these increases are expected at four year institutions (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004).

Along with this growth, student populations have become more diverse with greater numbers of minority students participating in higher education (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). Data indicate that, of those enrolled in postsecondary education in 1976, 15% were minorities. In 2004, this number increased to 31% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008), indicating that colleges and universities are being accessed by those students other than white.

Similarly, growth in the enrollment of women is on the rise. In 2005, the number of females enrolled in post-secondary educational programs outweighed the number of men (NCES, 2008). According to Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, and Tobin (2004), women have earned over 50% of bachelor's degrees awarded each year since 1981. And, the rate at which women are earning these degrees is increasing at a rate faster than for men. Between the academic years of 1995-1996 and 2005-2006, the rate of degree awards for women increased by 33% compared to 21% for men (NCES, 2008). In reviewing the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) from 1966 – 1996, Astin (1998) found that as more women have enrolled, their interests and career goals have become more similar to that of their male counterparts, and women have generally become more interested in jobs traditionally considered for men. Astin (1998) adds that the growth in the enrollment of females is expected to continue through the next decade, indicating that postsecondary institutions must be prepared to meet the needs of this increasing group.

Furthermore, Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, and Tobin (2004) report that there is an increase in enrollment of older students, attributing it to a United States population that is living longer and working at jobs that require them to return to college to update their skills. National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2008) projects the number of students aged 25 and older will grow at a rate faster than those 24 years of age or younger. Specifically, NCES (2008) projects that from 2005 through 2016, the number of college students over age 25 will increase by 21% while those under age 25 will grow by only 15%.

Moreover, Horn and Berger (2004) found that there was also an increase in the enrollment of low-income students from 1989 to 1995. Low-income students were defined as those whose family income was less than 125% of established poverty levels. Dependent status is defined as those students who were under the age of 24 and who reported on financial aid applications that they were dependents of their parents (Horn & Berger, 2004). The low income student enrollment increased from 13 to 16 percent at all postsecondary institutions during the 1990s.

Not only are greater numbers of students from all backgrounds participating in postsecondary education, but those enrolling are taking longer to complete their degrees. Students enrolled in bachelor degree programs at public schools are taking approximately five years or longer to complete their programs of study (Barefoot, 2004; Greene & Greene, 2003; NCES, 2008). Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen and Tobin (2004) report that students enrolled during the 1989-1990 academic year were more likely to have earned a degree within five years while those who began in 1995-1996 were more likely to still be enrolled in their fifth year.

Others report that students who start their education at the community college level and later transfer to a four year institution take approximately six years to graduate (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004; White & Moseley, 1995). Similarly, those students attending two year colleges take an extended amount of time to graduate with an associate degree, with completion estimated at close to three years (McClanahan, 2004). Overall, students are enrolled for longer periods and are taking longer to earn their college degrees regardless of whether they enroll at a community college or at a four-year institution.

Student Departure from Postsecondary Education

Student departure is one of the most studied areas of postsecondary education, and it continues to be of concern because of the negative impact it has on colleges and universities and on students themselves (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Barefoot (2004) reports that "over the past 20 years, few topics in American higher education have commanded as much attention from as many college and university administrators as student retention" (p. 9). Enrollment management is so serious an issue that it is considered by college administrators as one of the most important challenges facing colleges and universities (Dennis, 1998). This concern is understandable especially since financial and academic opportunities are missed as a result of students leaving the universities and community colleges prior to completing their degrees. This departure causes many postsecondary institutions to lose tuition dollars needed to operate their educational programs and to maintain the quality of their course offerings. The reputations of these institutions are at risk when students enroll and then later decide to leave and seek other opportunities, making these colleges and universities appear to offer inadequate services (Barefoot, 2004). At the same time, students who depart early deprive themselves of opportunities related to employment, potential increases in wages and intellectual development.

And, even though enrollment at United States colleges and universities is projected to grow in the next decade, competition among these colleges to attract and recruit stable students is stout and makes retaining students all the more important (Johnson, 1997).

Furthermore, the difficulty in retaining students is exacerbated by the growing diversity of the student population. This often requires college and university administrators to be more deliberate in the development and implementation of strategies to keep these various student groups enrolled. The seriousness of student departure is further illustrated by the large numbers of those who leave college prior to degree completion. Tinto (1993) reports that

More students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay. Of the nearly 2.4 million students who in 1993 entered higher education for the first time, over 1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree. (p. 1)

In their work, Edwards, Cangemi, and Kowalski (2001) also found high rates of student departure at both private and public universities, with over one-third of students leaving private four year schools before graduating and nearly 50% dropping out of the public, four year institutions. Attrition is also high at commuter institutions, as revealed in a 12 year study by White and Mosely (1995), who found that nearly 60% of students depart from these institutions prior to degree completion. Other findings have been more optimistic indicating that only 25-30% of students on average drop out of public and private colleges by the end of their first year of enrollment (Greene & Greene, 2003).

Barefoot (2004) reports that "the most significant dropout occurs at two-year, associate-degree-granting colleges (i.e., community colleges) – a sector that enrolls nearly half of all undergraduate students in the United States" (p. 10). Some findings report that only about one-

third of students enrolled at these institutions stay until they earn their associate degree (Nippert, 2000), while other reports indicate that departure could be as high as 45% (Summers, 2003). These persistence rates have created a concern in college administrators who report that persistence greatly impacts educational institutions and students (Dennis, 1998).

Impact of Early Student Departure

Early student departure impacts multiple groups including college and university officials, students, and society as a whole (Dennis, 1998). "The consequences of this massive and continuing exodus from higher education are not trivial, either for the individual who leaves or for their institutions" (Tinto, 1993, p. 1), creating a need not only for extensive research in this area but also for the implementation of prevention programs to reduce student departure.

Tierney (1992) reports that there are at least three benefits to retaining students which include many rewards for students, income for colleges and universities, and a more productive society. This section will review the impact of early departure on students including financial impact and influence on personal development and general well-being. The impact on colleges and universities and on society will also be discussed.

Impact of Early Departure on Students

Financial impact. Students enroll in college for many different reasons and similarly, their reasons for departure vary. When deciding to depart, students must weigh the net benefits of staying with the benefits of leaving (McClanahan, 2004). The benefits of completing college are many, including employment and wage benefits and what is called a "sheepskin effect" of having a degree. When students earn a degree, employers often assign value to college completion. The "sheepskin effect" is demonstrated when employers pay those with college degrees higher wages than they do those who have completed the same amount of college but did

not earn a degree (Jaeger & Page, 1996). Belman and Heywood (2001) concur that having a college degree actually influences the hiring decisions of employers. Employers base wage and hiring decisions on the fact that they believe college graduates are more productive and have greater capability in the workplace. Specifically, Belman and Heywood (2001) found that blacks with college degrees have been shown to receive greater increases in occupational status from college graduation. Arkes (1999) found similarly that associate and bachelor's degrees signal to employers that potential employees possess attributes such as motivation and perseverance. When pursuing career opportunities, there seem to be more options for those with degrees than for those with lesser education. Those who depart before degree completion lose out on these opportunities.

Additionally, individuals who leave college prior to degree completion miss out on financial opportunities. College graduates earn twice as much as high school graduates, and their lifetime earning power is greater than it is for those who do not complete a degree (DeJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2002; Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004; McClanahan, 2004; Strother, 1986). National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) data indicate that from 1980 through 2005, earnings increased as the level of educational attainment increased, and during these same years, the difference between the median incomes of those with four-year degrees grew in relation to those without such an education.

Furthermore, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) data indicates that those full-time workers in 2006 age 25 and over who did not graduate from high school earned a median weekly salary of \$450 while high school graduates earned \$620 weekly. In comparison, those workers with a minimum of a bachelor's degree earned \$1,138, indicating that completion of college does in most cases result in higher salaries.

While there are wage gains for those who obtain four year degrees, evidence exists that shows similar wage benefits for those who earn associate degrees (Grubb, 1997; Kane & Rouse, 1995). Using data from two national studies, Kane and Rouse (1995) determined that those who attended a two year institution had earnings that were 10% higher than those with only a high school diploma. Similarly, Lin and Vogt (1996) found that "individuals from all groups on average improved their earnings and/or job status by attending two-year colleges and earning certificates or degrees. Thus, the two year college opened a clear avenue of individual opportunity" (p. 467). The completion of either a two or four year degree confers higher wages to those who earn such credentials.

In addition to greater earning power, evidence exists that those who earn college degrees have more opportunities to enter occupations with greater prestige. Reskin and Ross's (1992) telephone interviews with 557 Illinois workers in 1982 indicate that increased education provides greater job autonomy for those who enroll in educational programs beyond high school. However, an increase in education also increases the worker's job expectations. Workers with greater education are satisfied with the control over their work, but this satisfaction is diminished when they have unmet expectations regarding benefits and other work related perks (Reskin & Ross, 1992).

In conclusion, those who depart early do not make as much in wages as do those who graduate from college. Additionally, college completion provides students with a level of prestige that leads employers to believe that they will be better employees, which then can result in better job opportunities and pay.

Impact on personal development and general well being. In addition to future earnings, early departure from college can influence an individual's general well-being and personal

development (Edwards, Cangemi, & Kowalski, 2001). In general, those students who attend college have improved interpersonal and intellectual confidence as well as increased intellectual skill and ability as compared to their pre-college levels (Astin, 1979). College completion also increases the likelihood that those within the family with also attend and graduate from college (Hill, Hoffman, & Rex, 2005). Conversely, departing college early reduces the likelihood that students will experience increases in such areas as interpersonal and intellectual confidence and ability.

Furthermore, the more educated an individual, the more likely that individual is to report better health. Of those earning between \$55,000 and 74,999 who completed college, 83% reported being in excellent health compared to 75% of those who earned associate degrees, 74% who attended some college, 73% of high school graduates and 66% of high school non-completers. Even those who had earned a college degree but whose income was low were more likely than high school graduates at any income level to report better health (College Board, 2007). Furthermore, college completers were less likely to be smokers, although there has been a reduction in the number of smokers at all educational levels since the 1970s. Graduates were also more likely to engage in exercise on a regular basis (College Board, 2007).

In addition to an improvement in the perception of personal wellness, students who attend postsecondary education possess an increased level of self-understanding as well as an improved understanding of others (Astin & Antonio, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Studies also find that, after four years of college, women in particular were more apt to involve themselves in civic and social activities and in volunteer work (Astin & Antonio, 2004). The completion of a college degree seems to improve individuals' understanding of themselves and society and in some cases results in greater participation in activities to help others. Those who depart college

early abandon the opportunity for personal development that is often associated with degree attainment.

Overall, college completion results in many positive benefits that include an intellectual growth and confidence, perception of greater personal well-being, and a willingness in many cases to participate in activities that are of benefit to others. Those who opt out of college miss out on opportunities for personal and intellectual growth that so often accompanies college enrollment and attendance.

Impact of Early Student Departure on Post-Secondary Institutions

The early departure of students from higher education is a major concern for postsecondary institutions administrators, particularly since the loss of students impacts these institutions financially (Dennis, 1998). While students lose out on the occupational, financial and other personal rewards, colleges and universities may experience a decrease in the perception of their institution and a reduction in their financial resources (Tinto, 1993). Wild and Ebbers (2002) report that, "whoever references it – internal administrators, faculty, legislators, state policy makers, and so forth – student retention is significant for measuring institutional effectiveness in the prevailing environment of accountability and budgetary constraints" (p. 503). Tinto (1993) notes the following:

Little wonder then that institutions have come to view the retention of students as the only reasonable course of action left to ensure their survival, and that a growing number have turned their energies in that direction with a renewed passion. (p. 2)

In another example of the importance of student retention, Dejardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) report that the state of Virginia intended to award funding to colleges based on their graduation rates. Other state legislatures are considering the same action (Barefoot, 2004).

Failure to graduate students leaves a negative impression about the effectiveness of the institution and its quality of education. "No American college or university wants to be known for its higher rate of dropout" (Barefoot, 2004, p. 10). Furthermore, recruiting new students costs more than retaining current students, so it is in the best interest of higher education institutions to retain the students they have (Summers, 2003).

Additionally, the *U.S. News and World Report* uses retention rates as part of their criteria for the inclusion of college and university in their annual rankings of excellent institutions.

Measures of retention and graduation are given a weight of 20 percent when determining which colleges will make their lists. The reputation of these institutions is at risk if their attrition rates are not kept in check. Postsecondary institutions must develop strategies to deter student departure if their financial status and the reputation of the institutions are to remain positive.

Finally, with the increased enrollment of diverse populations, Adebayo (2008) suggests that colleges and universities must realign their program offerings to meet the occupational interests and needs of student groups. For example, more women are enrolling in programs that have traditionally enrolled majority men (Astin, 1998), Teaching methods and content should reflect this understanding and should acknowledge the enrollment needs of more diverse student populations (Adebayo, 2008).

In conclusion, student departure from college impacts the financial stability and the reputations of colleges and universities. Postsecondary institutions must be prepared to implement programs to retain students as well as be willing to review and adjust course offerings to reflect changing student populations. Otherwise, educational institutions risk losing funds needed to operate their colleges and universities and risk damaging the perception of the quality of their program offerings.

Impact of Early Student Departure on Society

College completion not only benefits students and postsecondary institutions, but it also has a positive impact on society. McClanahan (2004) reports that societal benefits include increased tax revenues, greater worker productivity, increased consumption and reduced reliance of individuals on government monies. Many officials or institutions, including University System of Georgia (2005), Humphreys (2009) and the Huron Group for Georgia Tech (2009), report many economic benefits afforded to a local regions based on student and staff spending and consumption of local services.

In addition to institution and regional benefits, those students who complete college are also less likely to commit a crime. (Hill, Hoffman & Rex, 2005). Those who have little education often resort to crime for financial gain, which costs society as government spending increases to arrest, convict and incarcerate these individuals. Those with higher educational levels earn higher wages and are less likely to engage in criminal activities. Greater education results in less criminal behavior and often reduced incarceration rates (Hill et. al, 2005).

Also, those who graduate from college are more likely to be working (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; McClanahan, 2004) and are also more often involved in civic and charitable activities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). "Higher levels of education are correlated with higher levels of civic participation, including volunteer work, voting, and blood donation, as well as with greater levels of openness to the opinions of others" (College Board, 2007).

Furthermore, a more educated workforce may lead to improved economic growth as worker productivity increases. College participation often results in employees who possess

greater knowledge and ability, which then allows for the incorporation of advanced technology and innovations into the operations business and industry (College Board, 2007).

Overall, the benefits of college completion to society are many and include reduced crime, greater participation in service to others as well as increased productivity of business and industry. Student early departure from college reduces these benefits to society and further indicates the need for programs to retain students.

Student Personal Attributes and Departure

The issue of student retention is a major concern of college administrators because of the negative impact that it has on colleges and universities, on students, and on society (Dennis, 1998). When addressing student departure, administrators must consider the varying attributes of students that make it difficult to improve retention (Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1993). This section will review student attributes that impact persistence including traditional versus non-traditional status, ethnicity, gender, financial need and student intellectual disposition.

Non-Traditional vs. Traditional Students: Impact on Student Departure

In recent years, the number of older students enrolling in college has increased (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen & Tobin, 2004; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008). These non-traditional students have been defined as those students age 24 or older who were employed with family responsibilities and who delayed their college experience until several years after high school (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002b; Sandler, 1999). These students often commute to college and may be enrolled part-time due to the need to manage multiple life roles (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Non-traditional students bring a variety of experiences to the classroom that makes them different from more traditional students. Traditional students, aged 23 and younger, are often

similar in their backgrounds in that they move directly from high school graduation to college enrollment with limited experiences in between. Conversely, non-traditional students are often more diverse in their life experiences (Schlossberg, 1986). They bring with them differing occupational backgrounds that impact their classroom interactions, and they have often lived in a variety of places and have had a wide variety of personal experiences prior to their college enrollment (Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991).

Adult students also bring with them concern about their place in postsecondary education. Tinto (1993) reports that, "returning adult students face a number of other difficulties. Not the least of these has to do with the perception that one might be too old to do college work or that one is out of place and out of tune in the youthful environment of college" (p. 187). There is discomfort associated with their return to an educational environment, which may lead to early departure.

In addition to the insecurities that non-traditional students experience about college enrollment, these students often possess departure characteristics that are not within the control of colleges and universities to resolve. Non-traditional students often have multiple responsibilities that make remaining in college difficult. In many cases, these students are required to manage academics, home and work simultaneously, and are challenged to persist to graduation because of the difficulties of balancing these responsibilities (Benshoff & Lewis, 1999). Additionally, students sometimes experience a conflict with scheduling college classes because the course offerings interfere with their time at work. When asked to choose between non-academic responsibilities and college, non-traditional students will often forgo academics to attend to family or employment matters (Cross, 1980).

Furthermore, non-traditional students are not always enrolled to attain a degree. These students sometimes enroll to upgrade their work skills or to earn a certification (Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991). By completing one or two courses, they may have met their educational goals but they may be counted in retention numbers as non-persisters (Benshoff & Lewis, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Also, these students generally commute to their institutions and do not have an opportunity to become socially integrated like those students who live on campus, an important component of persistence to many retention theorists. Tinto (1993), however, notes that for those students who commute to postsecondary institutions, the social aspects of college may not be as important in the retention of these students as it is for more traditional, residential students. Commuter students rely more on "in class" interactions with other students and with faculty to establish their social integration into the college and less on non-academic relationships.

Additionally non-traditional students are older and often have more opportunity costs associated with attending college, such as time away from work and family. And because many of these students enroll in college at a later age, they have less opportunity to recoup the time and money they have invested in higher education. The longer it takes to see a return on the time and money spent, the more likely students will depart early (Dejardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002).

In conclusion, non-traditional students appear to be impacted by their external environments in ways that traditional students are not. As a result, their ability to persist is sometimes difficult, which could lead to their dropping out of college prior to degree completion. As Tinto notes, "for those whose commitment to the goal of college completion is weak, the difficulties they face appear to be instrumental in their failure to complete their degree programs" (Tinto, 1993, p. 76).

Ethnicity: Impact on Student Departure

In recent years, colleges and universities have seen an increase in the enrollment of minorities in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) report

Minority students are altering the nature of higher education in many ways. Over the past twenty years we have witnessed dramatic changes in the classroom and the curriculum (with the inclusion of ethnic/racial perspectives and the use of learning communities), in students services (with race based programs), and in faculty and staff composition, among other areas. (p. 152)

However, even with the gains in enrollment of minorities, the rate of dropout of these students is higher than the rates for Caucasian students (Tinto, 1993). African Americans were found to be one-fifth less likely to complete their degree in six years as compared to Caucasian students, and for every two white students who drop out, three African Americans leave early (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Kalnser, 1996).

Several reasons have been thought to cause the early departure of minority students. For one, these students often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, which sometimes results in minorities having access only to inferior educational opportunities prior to their enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Kalsner, 1996). For these reasons, minority students are often more likely to begin their participation in postsecondary education with lower academic abilities (Dejardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Cross (1974) concurs stating that

One of the most difficult barriers to higher education for members of minority ethnic groups, however, has been low test scores and low academic performance. In a meritocratic era, in which college admission is determined by test scores and grades, the

barriers imposed by the conditions of poverty homes and poverty schools have proved formidable for minorities of college age. (p. 120)

In addition to the lack of academic preparedness, social connectivity appears to be a factor in minority persistence. Minority students often find it hard to develop relationships in colleges and universities that are predominantly white. Minority students can sometimes experience feelings of separation from the overall college environment (Loo & Rolison, 1986). However, in their study of student departure at a medium sized Midwestern commuter institution, Liu and Liu (1999) found that ethnicity alone does not determine student persistence. Faculty and student relationships were seen as important to retaining minority students, whether these interactions were formal or informal (Chang, 1996). Additionally, a welcoming college community that is considered to have fair and supportive administrators is seen as instrumental in retaining students of color (Liu & Liu, 1999).

The college and university environment must also be free of perceived discrimination and prejudice. Perceptions of prejudice, particularly those associated with student peers, were found to have "statistically and negative net effects on minority students' transition and adjustment to college as well as on their sense of belonging and attachment to their institutions" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1993, p. 420). In particular, Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella and Hagedorn (1999) found that students who perceived prejudice in the college environment were more likely to depart early. Furthermore, Cabrera and Nora (1994) report that minorities and non-minorities perceive discrimination in the college classroom differently, with non-minorities detecting less discriminatory experiences than do minority students. These perceptions of discrimination by minorities were found to lead to feelings of alienation and ultimately to the early departure of minorities.

In review, lack of academic preparedness, social isolation and prejudice are factors that have been shown to increase minority student departure from postsecondary education and are important issues to address when considering student retention strategies.

Gender: Impact on Student Departure

In addition to other factors that influence retention, a review of the literature indicates that there may be persistence differences between males and females, although the findings are mixed. Johnson (1997) reported that gender contributes to the persistence of students, with men persisting more often than women because of economic need and because of their desire for career advancement. However, since more women are enrolling in and graduating from college, it is quite likely that previous findings on the influence of gender are now in need of revision (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

In his study of gender and persistence, Kalsner (1996) found that there is no significant difference in the dropout rate of men and women, although females who experience academic difficulties are more likely to dropout than are men who experience similar challenges. Kalsner (1996) reports that women may become discouraged and decide to dropout prior to academic dismissal although men may continue enrollment until they are academically required to discontinue their enrollment.

Additionally, women who are married are more likely to feel pressure to leave college when family obligations hinder attendance. Married women tend to have lower completion rates than do men, particularly since men are motivated by financial obligations to attain their educational goals (Tinto, 1993). This is particularly true for women of certain cultural backgrounds such as Chicana students who often leave because of family duties. These students

report that the primary reason for their early departure is their obligations to family (Tinto, 1993).

In other research, Burns, Cooney and Scott (1998) surveyed 287 mature women with children to determine differences in their motivation to complete college. The results indicate that those who leave college do so because of difficult personal circumstances such as poor marriages and unsupportive families. These individuals later returned to college to escape these hardships and to gain new identities for themselves. Similarly, the study shows that those who graduated and who lacked family support often continued their academics as a way of developing new self-perceptions. Those who experienced family discourse because of their college attendance cited support from college administrators and fellow students as encouragement for their continued enrollment (Burns et al., 1998).

Another study of women in college also indicated the stresses associated with college attendance. Bradshaw, Hager, Knott and Seay (2006), interviewed women aged 40 to 50 at an American university to determine the difficulties they encountered as older students attending a large institution. Their results found that the struggles of these women were similar to those from previous decades and included balancing family with academics. Frequently, these women reported that they were sleep deprived and that financial stresses often required that they work several jobs, which interfered with their study time. Furthermore, the women stated that they possessed a lack of self-confidence that made participation in academics difficult. (Hill, Hoffman, & Rex, 2005).

While family obligations increase college departure for women, college completion can, in some instances, impact a female's personal life. For example, Mason and Goulden (2004) found in their study of 160,000 doctoral recipients that the lives of females and males on

university tenure tracks are quite different. Mason and Goulden (2004) report that only one third of women who pursue an university tenure track prior to having children ever give birth.

Moreover, tenure track women are 50% more likely to be divorced than are their male counterparts. These women are twice as likely to be divorced than are women with doctorates who work in non-tenured university positions.

To further their work, Mason and Goulden (2004) surveyed 4,400 faculty members working for the California University System to determine their views on work and family. Of those surveyed, 38% of women reported that they had fewer children than they would have liked, suggesting that women must make choices between career and family. While men often can have family and career, women sometimes must sacrifice one for the other (Mason & Goulden, 2004).

In conclusion, studies indicate that women sometimes possess personal stressors that can lead to their early departure from college. Men can also experience these stressors but may be more motivated to persist, particularly since traditionally they have been considered the most important provider of family financial resources. Conversely, women often must choose between their career and family.

Financial Resources: Impact on Student Departure

While family personal obligations influence departure decisions, the availability of financial resources have also played a role in the departure decisions of students enrolled in postsecondary education (Kalsner, 1996). Tinto (1993) reports

The evidence regarding the impact of finances upon persistence leads one to conclude that the issue is much more complex than commonly assumed. Though there is little doubt that personal finances can and do impact upon persistence, there is still some question about how and why they do so. (p. 98)

In his review of the literature concerning student financial issues, Kalsner (1996) found that difficulties with finances have been reported as a primary reason for student departure, which may be especially true for low income students. Furthermore, the increase in tuition and fees during the 1990s impacted the ability of students to afford a college education. However, Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, and Tobin (2004) report that while college costs increased, financial aid programs have also expanded to assist students in covering the expenses associated with their college attendance. The availability of financial aid, and grants in particular, increased the likelihood that students would enroll in a second quarter as compared to those who received no grants (Porter, 1990). Likewise, financial aid received by students at universities appears to increase student persistence at the end of four years by 10 percent (Desjardins Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002a). The availability of financial aid also impacts the persistence of minority groups. For example, Nora (1990) found that Hispanic students at four year institutions, who receive greater amounts of financial aid, are more apt to enroll in a greater number of semesters, to earn more credits and to graduate.

And, students are taking advantage of financial aid programs with 17% more receiving aid in 2000 than in 1990. In 2000, 71% received assistance while 54% received financial assistance in 1990 (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen & Tobin, 2004). Overall, the amount of aid received by students increased during this period for all income groups and at all types of postsecondary institutions (Wirt et al., 2004). Additionally, 63% of students who were enrolled in the 2003-2004 academic year received some type of financial aid, with the majority of these students more likely to receive grants (NCES, 2008). Grants were obtained from a variety of

sources including 28% from the federal government, 18% from the college attended, 15% from states and 15% from other sources (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

While student financial aid impacts persistence, the type of assistance received also influences student departure behavior. The number of students receiving loans is on the rise with approximately half of low income students and 35% of high income students borrowing to pay for their college costs in 2000. According to Desjardin, Ahlburg and McCall (2000), grants had no impact on reducing student departure while a scholarship award increased the likelihood of student retention. Similarly, students who received loans were less likely to drop out, although the chance of persistence was less than for other types of aid received.

In some cases, the receipt of financial aid is thought to reduce students' need to work, thus increasing their focus on their academics and social interaction (Dejardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2000). The ability to have financial needs met by aid seems to increase the time and opportunities for students to engage in social activities that can promote integration, persistence and improved academics (Cabrera, Nora, & Castenada, 1992).

However, some students perceive that financial aid is not enough to allow their persistence. Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen (1990) report that, while financial aid is not the only factor that influences persistence, students are less likely to persist when the costs of remaining in college outweighs the costs of leaving. St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (2000) concur stating that

A student's finances are comprised of tangible and intangible factors. The tangible element includes indicators of student's ability to afford college related costs. The second component is more psychological in nature; it embodies the student's perceptions regarding her/his financial circumstances. (p. 37)

While the aid might be perceived as adequate for some, others may believe that it falls short of what is required for continued enrollment. When it is perceived as inadequate, students may choose to work or depart early.

For some students, income received from working is used to supplement financial aid packages. Orzag, Orzag, and Whitmore (2001) report that greater numbers of students are working while in college, with as many as 57% of students doing so. Working approximately 10 hours per week is associated with slightly higher grade point averages and with student persistence. Conversely, students employed full-time often report that work activities interfere with their academics and limits their ability to schedule classes. Full-time workers also report that they must enroll in fewer classes to balance school and work responsibilities (Orzag et al., 2001). Furthermore, working full-time negatively impacts an individuals' grade point average and their ability to remain enrolled. Overall, while working may be perceived as necessary to stay enrolled, employment appears in some cases to negatively impact students' grade point averages as well as their ability to persist.

Intellectual Disposition: Impact on Student Departure

Students who enroll in college not only experience financial difficulties but they often face academic challenges. In some cases, students enroll in college without the foundational skills needed to be successful academically and are often unaware of the demands of college (Kalsner, 1996). Tinto (1993) reports that those "whose prior academic training has not adequately prepared them for college level work, may have difficulty in adjusting to the more rigorous academic demands of college" (p. 163). Studies indicate that as many as 40 percent of students are underprepared in reading and writing upon college entry (Noel & Levitz, 1982). Underprepared students are evident at all postsecondary institutions, whether it is a small

community college or an Ivy League school (Moore & Carpenter, 1985; Noel & Levitz, 1983). Colleges and universities often offer assistance to those who are academically underprepared in the way of remedial courses; however, students enrolled in these courses appear less likely to persist (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004).

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and high school grade point averages have been used as indicators of the level of academic preparedness at the time college entry. Those with lower SAT scores and poor high school performance are less likely to persist (Daugherty & Lane, 1999; Tharp, 1998). However, in some instances, high school performance may be an indicator of how well students performed against their high school peers but may not be a reflection of a student's true academic ability (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002b). Students who performed well in high school may still struggle because of the lack of adequate preparation needed to be successful.

As is the case with high school academic behaviors, student academic performance while in college impacts persistence. Bean (1985) found that student grade point averages during the first two years of college influences dropout decisions, with those possessing lower grades persisting at lower rates. Others agree, finding that college academic performance is one of the strongest indicators of degree completion (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Data compiled by National Center for Educational Studies (NCES, 2008) show that, not only did students who perform at lower levels persist less, but they also took longer to complete degrees. Even though strategies, such as remedial courses, are in place to support students who have academic concerns, students in need of this assistance often do not seek this help (Adus, Chen, & Khan, 2007). Research shows that students who experience academic challenges sometimes find that dropping out before degree completion is easier than remaining enrolled.

While academic performance appears to be an important reason for student departure (Edwards, Cangemi, & Kowalski, 2001), studies show that nearly three out of four students who drop out possess the intellectual ability to persist (Kowalski, 1982). In some instances, students may become bored with their academics and become less motivated to do well in their studies. Tinto (1993) reports that academic boredom and voluntary withdrawal

Often result when the demands of the formal academic system are not challenging enough. Students fail to become involved in the intellectual life of the college in part because they find that life insufficiently rewarding. Though the individual may possess the needed skills, he/she may be insufficiently committed either to the institution or to the goal of education to meet the academic demands of the institution. (p. 117)

Clearly, research indicates that academic performance, whether in high school or in college, impacts persistence. Students who are not prepared for the academic demands of college may choose to depart while others, who become bored with their studies, may also leave early.

Time Status: Impact on Student Departure

A student's time status acts as an additional factor that affects persistence. Time enrolled has been characterized by three possible enrollment statuses including full-time enrollment only, part-time enrollment only and enrollment that is a combination of both (Chen & Carroll, 2007). Cohen and Brawer (1996) report that as the age of the student population increases, "the number of credit hours each student attempted went down. In the early 1970s, one-half of the students were full-timers; by the mid 1980s only one-third were full time" (p. 42). In 2004, approximately 37% of student enrolled at all postsecondary institutions were enrolled part-time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

In the last decade, the increase in the number of part-time students enrolled brought with it a change in the demographics of the student population. Those enrolled part-time tend to differ from those who are enrolled full-time with the majority of part-timers being older, female, Hispanic and first-generation students. Additionally, these individuals tend to be independent financially and often are from low-income backgrounds (Chen & Carroll, 2007). Part-time students primarily enroll at two year institutions while the majority of full-time students begin their enrollment at four year doctoral institutions. Over half of part-time students work full-time and focus more of their attention on their employment than on academics. Conversely, full-time students who work often are employed part-time and apply greater attention to their academics (Chen & Carroll, 2007).

As the number of part-time students increases, college and university administrators are faced with the difficulty of retaining these students. Overall, part-time students have been shown to depart before degree completion more often than full-time students. Chen and Carroll (2007) found that, of part-time students who began their enrollment during the 1995-1996 academic year, only 15 percent earned a degree. Approximately 73 percent dropped out and nearly half of these students departed during their freshman year (Chen & Carroll, 2007).

In summary, part-time students offer an opportunity for colleges and universities to increase their enrollment numbers; however, administrators must develop strategies for retaining these students who are more likely to depart.

Strategies for Retaining Students

Students leave college for many different reasons and college and university administrators have implemented varying retention strategies to decrease student departure.

McLaughlin, Brozovsky, and McLaughlin (1998) report that retention is an institutional issue

that requires the implementation of strategic plans to reduce student attrition. These strategies include strengthening admissions processes and advising/counseling programs,

Admissions Processes: Impact on Retaining Students

Admissions processes in place at colleges and universities often are implemented to influence a student's initial perception of the academic and social opportunities available at that institution. Through the admissions programs, students have an opportunity to determine if the academic and social environments are a good fit with their expectations (Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, first impressions can influence students' enrollment decisions because, if their perceptions are negative, students often will decide to attend elsewhere. Additionally, if first perceptions are good, students may establish a strong initial commitment to the institution. Tinto (1993) reports

It is during the process of seeking out and applying for admission to a particular institution that individuals form their first impressions of the social and intellectual character of that institution. The importance of such impressions goes beyond the decision to attend the institution. Since pre-entry expectations influence the character of early experiences within the institution they also affect retention following entry. (p. 154)

The impact of admissions processes on departure decisions is particularly strong if students believe that the information they received at the time of enrollment conflicts with what they thought to be accurate. Students may ultimately find that the college or university is not a good fit with their expectations (Tinto, 1993).

The admissions processes offered upon entry are important in that the first contact with students must be positive and the information provided must be complete and accurate with

regard to the academic and social environments of the postsecondary institution (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) notes that it is also important that college staff view students as

Consumers and act to provide students with the information they need for informed college choices. The work of admissions officers should entail counseling and advising as much as it does recruitment. The underlying principle is one of commitment, commitment on the part of the institution to the welfare of students and the resulting commitment engendered on the part of students to the institution.

If students believe that they received fair and accurate information at the outset of their enrollment, their decision to enroll will be based on an informed choice which will result in a student feeling positive about their college experiences.

Cohen and Brawer (1996) concur, noting that the impact of the admissions processes, particularly marketing, is often overlooked when considering retention. Students are sometimes influenced by the admissions process to enroll in college even though their commitment to the institution and to a postsecondary education may be weak. By participating in the admissions processes of an institution, students who ordinarily would not enroll in college may do so even though their motivation to persist may be minimal.

Admissions processes should provide students with information that will permit them to make informed decisions about their attendance at the institution. A poor first impression of the institution, as well as the perception that incorrect information is provided during the initial enrollment period, may result in a student who is dissatisfied and who ultimately departs early. *Advisement/Counseling: Impact on Retention*

In addition to admissions processes, advisement/counseling has been used to retain students. These programs are offered in many different variations and at private and public and

two year and four year institutions. Advisement/counseling programs can include "pre- and post admissions advising, intrusive advising, group advising, and a variety of enhancements in traditional advising programs" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 404).

Advisement/counseling programs can influence students' decisions to persist (Seidman, 1991; Boyd, Gurney, Hunt, Hunt, O'Brien, & Van Braunt, 1994). Research shows that students who receive advising/counseling complete their degrees at higher rates than do those who do not participate in these services. Vowell, Farren, and McGlone (1990), for example, tested the effectiveness of counseling on retention in a university setting and found that it had positive effects on retention, which continued throughout the time of its implementation. The results of their study showed that counseling especially impacted the persistence of students of average and above average ability. Those students of lesser ability showed an increase in retention but not at a significant rate.

Similarly, Seidman (1991) conducted a study of 278 students enrolled at a state of New York community college. The results show that those who received advisement persisted into their second year at a rate that was 20% higher than the group that did not receive services. Likewise, Schwitzer, Grogan, Kaddoura, and Ochoa (1993) found that those who were low performers academically and who participated in mandated advisement/counseling experienced an increase in their grade point average and moderately higher retention rates.

The benefits of advisement/counseling were also indicated in a study by Turner and Berry (2000), who explored the impact of counseling on both academics and retention at a western United States' university. They theorized that students who experienced academic concerns were more likely to drop out and that counseling could identify strategies to assist students through their difficulties. Responses to a survey showed that 60% of respondents

believed that counseling assisted them through their academic issues. Those who participated in the counseling were retained at a rate of approximately 85% as compared to a rate of 74% for the general student population.

Students of color also appear to benefit from advisement/counseling programs.

Shultz, Colton, and Colton (2001) conducted a study that reviewed the impact of an advisement/mentoring program at a Pennsylvania university minorities group. They report that students of color often feel isolated in predominantly white postsecondary institutions and that engaging these individuals in an advisement/counseling program could make them feel more connected to the college environment. The results show that students who received these services returned for their sophomore year at a rate of 77%, while those who did not receive the services returned at a rate of 67% (Shultz et al., 2001).

Advisement/counseling services also appear to positively impact student perceptions of connectivity to the educational institution. A study of an academic advisement program sought to determine if increases in the interaction of students with faculty in the Arts and Humanities Department at Atlantic Cape Community College (ACCC) would increase persistence of students enrolled in this field of study (McArthur, 2005). The purpose of this study was to determine if students believed they were more integrated into the college if they were faculty advised in the Arts and Humanities Department versus those who were registered by the Career and Academic Planning Center.

In this study, students in the Arts and Humanities Department were sent postcards with their faculty advisor named on the card and were expected to contact that individual for advisement. Students in the general population were registered by non-faculty advisors located in the college's Career and Academic Planning Center (CAPC) and were sent cards to be advised

in the center. Questionnaires were then mailed to these students to determine how integrated they felt after being advised. The results of the study indicate that the students in the Arts and Humanities advisement group felt more connected to the college than did those who were registered in the CAPC. Those who met with non-faculty advisors stressed the difficulty they had in contacting their program advisor and that, in some instances, they were unaware that they had a program advisor. The study suggests that, when there is a concerted department effort to advise students, students who met with faculty advisors had more positive experiences and felt more connected to the institution. The researcher reports that if students feel more integrated into the college, they are more likely to persist (McArthur, 2005).

In an additional study of the impact of advisement/counseling on retention, Seidman (1991) found that pre/post advisement/counseling programs at a New York state community college reduced student departure. Students enrolling for the first time were required to participate in scheduled meetings with faculty. The expected outcome was that students who attended the advisement/counseling program would experience higher levels of satisfaction with faculty and the college itself. Additionally students were expected to be retained at higher rates and exhibit a higher grade point average. Results indicated that those who received the advisement/counseling reregistered for their second semester at a slightly higher rate as compared to those who did not receive these services. Additionally, those receiving advisement/counseling were retained at a significantly higher rate of 88% as compared to those in the control group who were retained at a rate of 68%.

In summary those students who participate in advisement/counseling programs appear to perform better academically to persist at higher rates than do those who do not engage in such

programs. As a retention strategy, advisement/counseling programs appear to impact student performance and retention.

Models of Student Departure

Student departure is a complex process that has been explored by many researchers who seek answers to the issue of retention. According to Tinto (1982a) the "study of dropout from higher education is extremely complex, for it involves not only a variety of perspectives but also a range of differing types of dropout behavior" (p. 14). Retention models include those developed by Spady, Tinto, and Bean.

Spady's Model of Student Departure

In developing his model of student departure (see Figure 1), Spady (1971) relied on Durkheim's (1961) work on suicide. Durkheim reports that individuals whose values and beliefs are in conflict with those of society are more apt to commit suicide. In developing his theory, Spady saw how Durkheim's study of suicide could relate to the departure of students from college. He believed that, consistent with Durkheim's theory, students who do not share the values and beliefs of their college peers or of the educational institution itself will depart before college completion. In a way, they are engaging in suicide-like behaviors by dropping out of college or by removing themselves from the college community. Conversely, if their beliefs and values are congruent with those of other students or with the college, they are more likely to persist.

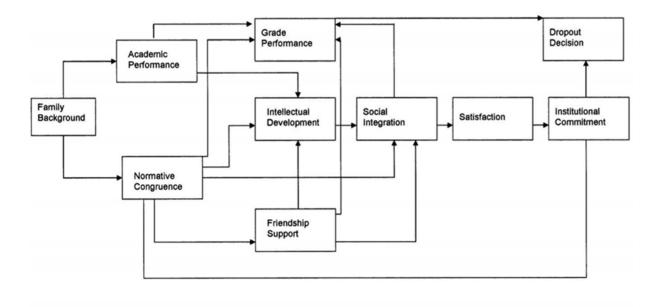


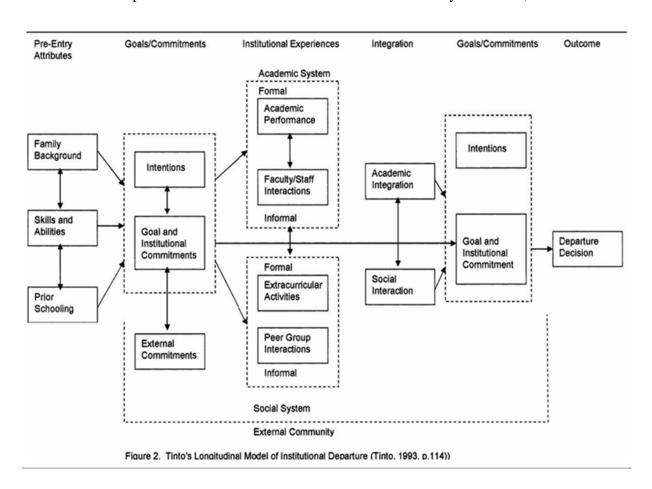
Figure 1. The Spady Model (Spady, 1971)

According to Spady, each student enters college with a definite pattern of dispositions, interests, expectations, goals and values shaped by his family background and high school experiences. He assumed that this entire range of experiences and attributes may influence overall ability to accommodate to the influences and pressures encountered in one's new environment. He states, "the diffuse patterns of interactions that (a phenomenon I call normative congruence) may either facilitate of impede the establishment of more consistent and formal patterns of interactions with specific individual in the college" (p. 38-39). Spady further asserts that full integration into the college depends on the successful meshing of the social and academic worlds of the college. Failure to do so will result in a student's early departure from college.

Models of student departure that are based on Durkheim's work on suicide have often been criticized because they assume that departure from college is all negative. However, in some instances, students attend college for short period of time and "stop out." That is, they leave for a period of time because either the students' educational objectives have been met or they decide to halt their enrollment with plans to return at a later date (Tinto, 1993). Their departure may not be considered negative by the student, although departure in general is negative for the educational institutional.

Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure

One of the most widely reviewed and applied models of student retention (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 2000) is Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure (see Figure 2). Tinto's model was developed based on the work of Durkheim and his theory of suicide, which he saw as



paralleling his beliefs about student departure from college (Tinto, 1975). In considering suicide, Durkheim (1961) believed that individuals who do not morally and socially integrate into their

community would opt out of life. In particular, Durkheim notes that individuals who engage in suicide do so because of their failure to integrate appropriately into their society. Similarly, Tinto believes that a lack of integration into the societal conditions of college leads students to opt out of the college experience much like those who commit suicide opt out of life. Tinto (1975) wrote that "presumably a lack of integration into the social system of the college will lead to low commitment to that social system and will increase the probability that individuals will decide to leave college and pursue alternative activities" (p. 92).

In addition to Durkheim, Tinto (1975) looked to the work of Spady (1970) when developing his model. Similar to Spady's work, Tinto concluded that within the college society, there exists two systems into which students can integrate: the social system and the academic system. According to Tinto, students bring with them to college varying personal factors that impact their ability to integrate adequately into these systems. These factors include pre-entry attributes, goals, and commitments to their education and to the institution in which they are enrolled. Adequate integration into both systems increases the likelihood that students will persist to degree completion. Tinto (1975) states

One would expect a reciprocal functional relationship between the two modes of integration such that excessive emphasis on integration in one domain would, at some point, detract from one's integration into the other domain. Too much time given to social activities at the expense of academic studies springs to mind as one example of such a relationship. (p. 92)

Tinto (1987) also incorporated the work of Van Gennep (1960) and his rites of passage. Van Gennep's anthropological view focused on the movement of individuals from membership

in one society to another. He states that individuals live their lives from birth to death moving from one societal group to another. The successful movement from group to group requires that individuals pass through three distinct stages that include the anthropological stages of separation, transition and incorporation. Each stage calls for individuals to move away from their past lives and incorporate the norms and behaviors of their new group into their lives.

In applying Van Gennep's rites of passage, Tinto believes that students who enroll in college must pass through the stages of separation, transition and incorporation. Students initially experience the separation stage and must disconnect to a certain degree from their past experiences and become familiar with what is required to be successful in college. Separation from what is familiar both educationally and socially can be extremely stressful. Those who do not successfully separate will find it difficult to integrate into the college environment and may decide to depart as early as the first six weeks of enrollment (Tinto, 1987).

Similar to the separation stage, students can experience stress as they enter the transition stage. During the transition stage, students begin incorporating new behaviors and norms required by the college and may depart as a result of the stresses that often come with attempting to cope in the new environment. If students attempt to transition into a college environment that is greatly different from their past experiences, there is an increased likelihood that they will not persist.

The third stage, incorporation, requires that students immerse themselves into the college experience and accept the norms and values of the academic environment. Failure to do so can result in student departure from the institution.

In general, Tinto stresses that students experience these three stages differently because of their varying levels of coping abilities and because of the differences in their past experiences.

Tinto (1993) reports that some students experience the three stages effortlessly while other students believe that enrollment is difficult. Those with less ability to cope often see departure as their only option. Differences in student characteristics and coping skills will lead to varying behaviors; some will remain in college while others will depart.

Many researchers have studied and tested Tinto's model, and the findings have been mixed (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 2000). For example, Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney and Blackwell (1984) found support for the model in their 1978 study at Washington State University to test its usefulness in differentiating between those students who dropout and those who transfer to other institutions. A questionnaire was developed using personal, institutional, academic and social variables as influences on departure. Getzlaf et al. (1984) found that Tinto's model was useful in studying student attrition, although precollege ability and college academic performance did not contribute to student departure as was suggested by the model. In addition, this study supported Tinto's academic integration construct and found that students who perceived themselves as performing well academically were more likely persist. However, those who dropped out tended to have lower academic ability, perform poorly in college, and be less academically and socially integrated into the college.

In another study, Murgia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) used qualitative analysis to determine the applicability of Tinto's model as it applies to ethnicity. Twenty-four junior and senior Hispanic and Native American enrolled at a large southwestern, metropolitan university were interviewed and asked about their level of social integration. While Tinto's theory applied to minority groups, Murgia et al. (1991) report that social integration is not always easy for students from non-dominant ethnic groups. They found that ethnicity may:

Limit access to majority enclaves either through self-selection or through enforced segregation. If in fact a student's access is limited largely to ethnic enclaves, then the efficacy of those enclaves in socializing the students to campus life becomes paramount. (p.436).

When considering social integration of minority students, they suggest that attention should be given to a minority student's level of participation in ethnic group activities and should focus less on their integration into the campus as a whole.

Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000) further studied Tinto's model with their work at a four year public institution with an enrollment of approximately 8,000 students. In their work, Elkins et al. (2000) administered student information forms to 1,134 freshmen of which 659 were returned and 614 were used. Using an instrument to test Tinto's separation stage, their work validated this stage and found that students who complete their first semester, or who pass through Tinto's separation stage, are more likely to enroll for a second semester. These findings suggest that during the early part of a student's enrollment, programs should be implemented to assist students with their integration into the college environment. Early academic and social integration was shown to increase student persistence.

Tinto's model was also used by Liu and Liu (1999) to determine its applicability to the persistence of commuter students. Using Tinto's model as a framework for their research, they found that students attending a mid-western university benefited from formal and informal relationships with faculty. In support of Tinto's construct of academic integration, establishing these relationships was shown to assist students in persisting to graduation.

In an additional test of Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure, Ashar and Skenes (1993) conducted a study to determine if the academic and social integration constructs

applied to the departure of nontraditional students at a metropolitan university. The results of the study partially supported Tinto's model. "While the social integration variable has a significant and positive effect on retention, the academic integration as well as the career integration do not have such an effect" (p. 98). Ashar and Skenes (1993) found that academic development was a secondary reason for enrollment in the college; students mainly enrolled for work related issues. In addition, Ashar and Skenes note that the data gathered in this study indicated that students were remaining in class largely due to the social environment in which the learning occurs. Retention occurred mainly in those classes that were smaller and more socially integrated as compared to those that were larger in size and less socially connected.

Partial support of Tinto's model was also found by Borglum and Kubala (2000) in their study of persistence at the community college. Students enrolled in their second semester at one of Florida's Valencia Community College's four campuses were surveyed to determine their pre-entry attributes, goals and intentions, social integration, and academic integration. Also, college placement test scores were used to determine if pre-college academic ability impacted retention. The findings show that Tinto's model is somewhat useful for understanding student departure at the community college level. The results revealed no correlation between academic or social integration and student departure. However, goal intentions were shown to be the greatest indicator of success for students. Their work also showed that student retention was significantly related to college placement test scores; those whose scores were high tended to not drop classes while those students who scored low were more likely to drop.

For these students, Borglum and Kubala (2000) found that participation in college activities was not important. The majority of students, 81%, responded that they planned transfer to another institution and showed little interest in extracurricular activities. Also, those

who were academically integrated also responded that they were socially integrated. Even though they did not participate in non-academic activities, students felt socially connected.

While there has been much support for Tinto's model, it has been criticized for several reasons, one of which is its use of Van Gennep's (1960) ritualistic stages (Tierney, 1992).

Tierney reports that Van Gennep uses ritualistic stages as the movement of individuals within one culture. Conversely, Tinto defines the stages of college enrollment as the movement of an individual from one culture into a new one. Tierney writes

If social integrationists are to employ an anthropological term, such as a ritual, then of necessity they must take into account the cultures in which those rituals exist. If one does so with regard to Tinto's model, one finds that he has developed an analytic tool that is dysfunctional: individuals from one culture such as Apache, are to undergo a ritual in another culture, such as Anglo. (p. 608-609)

According to Tierney, Van Gennep's definition of rituals are not appropriately used by Tinto, since in many cases minority students are moving into cultures that are not similar to their own, which is what Van Gennep intended in his writings.

In addition, Tierney states that, in true anthropological rituals, participants do not depart the process or commit cultural suicide, leaving behind their own culture to be socially and academically integrated into a different one. Unlike those entering college, participants in true anthropological rituals do not have the option to leave if the processes become too difficult.

Furthermore, Tierney states that Tinto does not address the cultural differences of students and assumes that all students will have similar perceptions of the college experience. In doing so, Tinto ignores differences in class, race, and gender and the role they play in the integration process (Tierney, 1992). Likewise, Attinasi (1986) criticized Tinto's theory for its

lack of applicability to minority groups. Specifically, Attinasi states that Tinto's concepts poorly fit minority populations and that when developing theories, the constructs should be reflect each minority groups' perspective.

Further criticism was made by Hurtado and Carter (1997) who state that Tinto's model lacks clarity, which results in inconsistent application and understanding. They believe that Tinto's model applies the construct of integration equally among students without regard to their individual interpretation of integration. Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) concur, stating that Tinto's model could be revised to understand how race, class and gender impact retention. Models should give rise to the understanding of how these variables impact student departure decisions so that strategies can be devised to address attrition. According to Rendon et al. (2000), Tinto's model fails to do so.

Berger and Braxton (1998) suggest that Tinto's model of student departure should be revised to incorporate organizational attributes into the persistence process. In their study of first time, full-time students attending a residential, Research I university, Berger and Braxton collected data from the August 1995 Cooperative Research Programs Student Information Form at three different points of student enrollment. The first point of collection was after the freshman orientation while the second point was midway through fall semester in October 1995. The last point of data collection was during March 1996. In addition, surveys were administered to college freshmen to assess student behaviors and perceptions related to college persistence and in particular to faculty teacher behaviors, student involvement, perceptions of the campus, reactions to stress and student satisfaction. Organizational attributes were also considered as an influence on social integration. According to Tinto, social integration is an important element in the retention of students with those perceiving themselves as socially connected to the institution

more likely to persist. Based on their findings, Berger and Braxton(1998) suggest that Tinto's model would be made stronger if organizational attributes were included in his model of student persistence, especially since "the organizational attributes play an importance role not only as a source of social integration, but in the first year persistence process in general at this institution" (p. 116).

In conclusion, Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure is one of the most studied and applied models of student departure. Even so, findings suggest that the model is mixed in its applicability and has been criticized by many for the vagueness of its constructs, the difficulty of its application to minorities, and for the manner in which it uses the work of Durkheim (1961) and Van Gennep (1960) in creating the basis for its development.

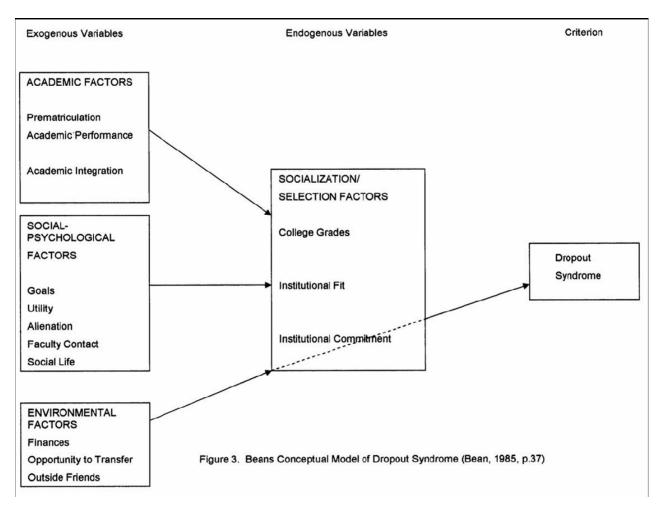
Bean's Model of Student Departure

In developing his model of student attrition, Bean (1980) (see Figure 3) looked to Price's (1977) model of employee turnover in work organizations. Price (1977) states that organizational variables influences worker's satisfaction with their employment, which in turn impacts their decision to stay on the job. Bean believed similarly that, if a student is not satisfied with the educational institution, he/she will depart. In his model, Bean included five classes of variables: student background, organizational, environmental, intention to leave and attitudinal and outcome variables. Student variables can be defined as those that students' bring with them to the institution upon enrollment such as background and academic ability. Organizational variables are considered as the students' interactions with the educational institution and include the social and academic realms of college.

In contrast, environmental variables are those over which the institution has no control (Himelhoch, Nichols, Ball, & Black, 1997). These include employment, financial difficulties,

and family demands. Bean's outcome variables include the perceptions of students about the institution and about what they are learning. Finally, Bean's variable of intent to leave is a student's plans to remain in the college or depart. Students may enroll with the intention of transferring to another institution or may enroll only to complete a course or earn a certification. A student's intent to leave is an important variable in a student's desire to persist.

In summary, Bean's model is based on an organizational model of worker persistence. If workers are satisfied on the job, they are more likely to remain at work. Likewise, students enrolled in college are more likely to persist if they are content with their educational experience. Bean states further that five variables work together to influence a student's satisfaction and will ultimately determine if they will persist (Bean, 1985).



CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to determine if assistance received at the Student Success

Center (SSC) impacts the retention rates of students at a commuter college in northwest Georgia.

The associated research questions were: (1) Are there differences in the retention of students

before versus after the implementation of the SSC? (2) Are there differences in students' grades

pre versus post the implementation of the SSC?; (3) Are there differences in the retention of

students by personal attributes, financial resources and intellectual disposition before the SSC

versus post the SSC; and (4) What are the perceptions of students about the SSC and its role in

retaining students?

Design of the Study

A mixed method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methods was used to examine the research questions. An ex post facto quantitative research design, that included student data accessed from the research site's student database system, was used to examine research questions one, two and three. Log Linear regression was used to analyze the quantitative data to predict the persistence of students before and after the Student Success Center (SSC). Additionally, qualitative methods were used to obtain the perceptions of students about the SSC and answer research question four. These qualitative methods included the collection of responses from two focus groups as well as telephone interviews with student non-persisters who were enrolled after the implementation of the SSC. The qualitative methods were

used as a method of triangulation to further detail the ex post facto data so that a full understanding of the impact of the SSC could be obtained (Mathison, 1988; Patton, 2002).

A northwest Georgia commuter college that operates under the authority of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) was the site for this study. Technical training at this institution is offered both day and evening, and in the areas of health, trade and technical, business and personal services. The college under study includes one main campus and two satellite locations. The mission of the college is to provide skills training, workforce development, and occupational education to area residents that meet the hiring needs of local businesses and industry (CVTC, 2007).

During fiscal year 2005, 4,877 students were enrolled in degree, diploma and certificate programs at the research site. Of this student population, 82.2% were white, 13.7% African American, 2.1% Hispanic and the remaining 2% were from other ethnic backgrounds. Full-time students comprised 39.6% of the student population while 60.4% of students attended part-time. The majority of the students were female, composing 65.9% of the student body (CVTC, 2007).

A review of enrollment over the past ten years reveals a student retention rate of approximately 53% for those in certificate and diploma programs. This rate is comparable to the completion rate at other diploma programs offered by TCSG colleges (Peters, 2003).

Student Success Centers

In 2004, Student Success Centers (SSC) were implemented on all three branch campuses in an effort to make a personal connection early in the first quarter with students at this institution. The purpose of these centers is to provide first quarter students with one-on-one enrollment services. School officials believe that this early connection with students through a

positive first quarter admissions process will result in an increase in student commitment to the institution and an improvement in student retention.

Prior to the SSC, a one-on-one personalized enrollment process was not always the procedure used to admit new students at this college. Typically, groups of students met at a set time and date in an arena-type setting to complete the college's admissions exam. Students would then return at a later date to register for classes and to complete the required student orientation. The orientation process required that, as a group, students meet in an auditorium setting with the Vice President of Student Services, who would provide information on school procedures, financial aid, and the registration process. After completing the orientation, students would then meet with their program of study advisor, who registered them for their first quarter classes. Students would take their registration forms to the Admissions Office, where their registration paperwork would be entered into the student database computer system. Financial aid staff would review the students' eligibility for financial aid and then print out each student's individual course schedules. Students were then advised that the registration process was complete.

With the new admissions process, students enrolling for their first quarter meet one-onone with an advisor in one of the three Student Success Center (SSC) locations. Each center is
designed to be welcoming and accommodating, with staffers available to meet with students to
discuss admissions procedures. Substantial institutional resources were dedicated to establishing
the SSC, including funds that were used to redesign areas of buildings to house the SSC.
Software and computers were purchased to address placement tests for admission and to assist
students in determining an appropriate program of study.

In addition to the physical construction of the SSC, the hours of operation were expanded to allow access to the centers' services at times convenient for both day and evening students. The hours of operation varied from campus to campus, with the main location open four days per week for 12 hours plus one additional day per week for four hours. Of the two satellite locations, one was open two days per week for 12 hours per day plus three additional days per week for eight hours. The other satellite location was open one day per week for twelve hours. The increased hours of operation require more staff members to maintain the centers' operations; therefore, non-admissions staff members are often reassigned from their regular work tasks to assist in the centers approximately one day a week. Extensive training was necessary to ensure that all staff involved in the SSC operations presents the same information to students on all campuses. SSC staff members are interchangeable from campus to campus, allowing more flexibility when scheduling professionals to work in these centers.

In addition to the adjustment in the hours of operation in the SSC, there was also a change in the admissions services offered. In one visit to the SSC, students can take the admissions placement test, decide on their program of study, apply for financial aid, identify other barriers to program completion, and register for classes. During this meeting time, students are also referred to appropriate support programs that can provide intensive services to increase the possibility of student completion. New students are also encouraged to return to the SSC if they have questions or need special assistance. Students complete this process by participating in a five to ten minute computer on-line orientation that reiterates the important points made during their meeting with the counselor.

At the conclusion of the admissions process, students are asked to complete a "Report Card" in which they grade the SSC staff member on performance, environmental conditions of

the SSC and the overall quality of the admissions process. Compilation of the report card grades for the calendar year 2006 indicate that 92% of respondents graded the SSC with an A on the quality of services provided (see Appendix A).

In summary, implementing the SSC required a major change in the admissions processes at the college under study that included physical changes as well as operational changes in the method of admitting first quarter students. Hopefully, these changes would result in students connecting early with the administrative staff at this institution and that an increase in the number of students retained would result. However, no empirical evidence exists to determine if the SSC are meeting these objectives. No data review has been performed to determine if the effort and costs associated with implementing the SSC have been worthwhile. The purpose of this study was to determine if use of the SSC services affected the retention of students.

Design of the Quantitative Research Method

The purpose of the study is to determine the impact of the implementation of the Student Success Centers at a northwest Georgia college. This section provides information about the selection of the quantitative research methods including sample selection, variables used for this method, data collection and data analysis.

Quantitative Population

The target population for the quantitative study included two groups of students. The first group consisted of 1,829 first quarter students enrolled in a diploma program three years prior to the implementation of the Student Success Centers. Of this group, 799 were female and 1,030 were male. The second group consisted of 1,712 first quarter students who enrolled in diploma programs during the first three years of the implementation of the Student Success Centers. This group included 638 female and 1,074 males. Random sampling was not

conducted since the entire group of students in select majors was included in the study. The pre and post groups were further divided into two groups which were persisters and non-persisters. Persistence was defined as the completion of two quarters and enrollment in a third within a one year period. While the college offers Associate of Applied Technology degrees and certificate programs, only those enrolled in diploma programs were included because the majority of students enroll at this level. Additionally, students in certificate programs were not included because many of these programs can be completed in one to two quarters, which does not follow the definition of retention used in this study. Also, some students enrolled in certificate programs must wait for their courses to be offered during a particular quarter. Subsequently, they might not enroll because the courses needed to complete their certificate are not offered. These students might appear to have voluntarily left even though this might not be the case.

In addition, student who participated in this study were enrolled in one of three programs areas offered at the institution. These included Personal/Public Services, Business, or Trade/Industrial. Health programs are also offered at the college but were not considered in this study because these students must complete their core classes and then go onto waiting list before entering their program of study. A break in their enrollment may be due to their waiting list status and not because of early departure. Associate Degree programs were not included in this study since the majority of these are offered in the Health area.

Defining the Variables

The variables for this study were selected based on Tinto's Model of Institutional Departure.

• *Low-income:* Tinto (1987) states that family and community backgrounds impact retention and are measured by social status, parental education and size of community.

For the purposes of this study, the measure of social status is the receipt of the Pell grant, which is paid to students who are identified by the federal government as in need of financial assistance to pay for their education. The Federal Student Aid agency uses a formula set by Congress to determine a student's ability to pay for college and is based on income and household information. Students were identified dichotomously as being either low-income or not low-income.

Parental background and size of the students' community were not available in the institution's student records database system and was not considered.

- Personal Attributes: Tinto (1987) identifies personal attributes of sex, race, age and physical handicaps as important factors in retention. This study considered sex, age and race only as variables that impact retention since those with physical handicaps are not identified in the student records database system. Sex was classified as male or female. Age was defined by two groups. The first group consists of students who were non-traditional or who are 25 years of age or older. The second group includes traditional students or those who were between 18 and 24 years old. Race is divided into three categories that included white, Black, and other.
- *Skills:* Tinto includes intellectual and social ability as skill attributes that impact student dropout. Placement scores were used as a proxy for intellectual ability. Students were tested in reading, writing, and math for admissions into the college and for the purposes of this study, were placed in one of several skills categories. The first group contains those who earned the minimum required score on the placement exam. Students who provide SAT or ACT scores that met the minimum required admissions score and that were less than five years old could be regularly admitted and were not required to take

the placement exam. The other groups contained those who did not earn the minimum score on these assessments. These students were categorized based on how many developmental courses they were required to take, which could have included one, two or three courses.

• Financial Resources: Those individuals who receive the HOPE grant and/or Pell grant were considered as receiving financial aid. The HOPE Grant pays tuition and fees for diploma programs at technical colleges in the state of Georgia. Approximately 98% of the diploma program students at CVTC receive this aid. The HOPE Scholarship was not considered as part of this study because it pays for Associate of Applied Technology degrees, which are not being considered in this research.

For the purposes of this study, five categories of financial aid were considered.

The first group was composed of those students who receive the HOPE Grant only. The second group was composed of those students who received *t*he Pell Grant only. The third group included those who received both Hope and Pell while the fourth group included those who received assistance from support agencies. A fifth group included those who received no financial aid.

- Student Success Center: Student Success Center (SSC) is defined as advisement centers located on each of the three campuses of the research site. All first quarter students are individually advised, placement tested, registered for classes and required to participate in a policy and procedure orientation when visiting these centers. (See above for detailed information on SSC).
- *Persisters:* Students are considered persisters if they enroll in a diploma program at the college, complete two quarters and enroll for a third quarter within a one year period. A

one year period is chosen because students leaving college who reenroll within one year are considered by the college to be returning students. Those students who leave college during or after their first quarter of enrollment and do not return within one year are considered new students by the college.

- Non-Persisters: Students are considered non-persisters if they enroll in a diploma
 program at the college, fail to complete two quarters and enroll in a third quarter within a
 one year period.
- *Time status*: Those students who are enrolled for less than 12 quarter hours per quarter were considered part-time. Those students who are enrolled for 12 or more credit hours per quarter were considered full-time.

Quantitative Data Collection

Data was gathered using the college's student records system (SCT Banner), which contains the most current and accurate student data. Data entered into the college's database system was obtained from the admissions application, from financial aid and registration documents and from other records. This information is entered by college staff members that are trained in the database system so that consistency of data entry is achieved. In the role of researcher, I requested specific information from the data system manager, and a raw data set was generated to answer this study's research questions. Data gathered included student gender, placement score, race, financial aid status, age, and time status. Reports were generated on the retention rates of students enrolled during the three year period prior to the implementation of the Student Success Centers. This data was compared to the retention rates of students who registered the first three years of the implementation of the SSC to determine if there were

differences in retention. Confidentiality of students was maintained throughout this process to ensure that personal information was protected.

Quantitative Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, students were categorized as being in one of four groups: persisters and non-persisters who enrolled before the SSC, and persisters and non-persisters who enrolled through the SSC. Retention rates of the two persister groups were compared to determine if there was a difference pre versus post SSC.

Students were matched by age (categorically defined as non-traditional versus traditional), race, placement scores, financial aid and receipt of the Pell Grant to ensure similarity in the pre and post groups. Logistic regression was used to compare the retention rates of the pre and post SSC groups. This method of analysis was chosen because the data gathered from the college's database system lent itself to the use of two category responses for the dependent variables (Allen, 1997). SPSS v. 15.0 and JMP v. 7 statistical software were used to process the data for analysis.

Design of the Qualitative Research Method

In addition to the quantitative analyses used to examine factors related to retention, qualitative analyses were used to answer research question number four: What are the perceptions of students about the SSC and its role in retaining students? Focus groups conducted with students enrolled in college and telephone interviews with student non-persisters were used to obtain student opinions about the SSC and its impact on the students' college completion. The next section summarizes the qualitative research, the procedures used to conduct the focus groups and telephone interviews, and the processes used to analyze the data obtained.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an analytic method used to reveal the meaning of some phenomenon (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Marshall and Rossman (2006) found that "qualitative research genres have become increasingly important modes of inquiry for the social sciences and applied fields such as education, regional planning, nursing, social work, community development, and management" (p. 1).

According to Merriam and Simpson (2000), qualitative research is interested in the following:

[How individuals] interpret their experience, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, to delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) or meaning making, and to describe how people interpret what they experience. (p. 98)

Marshall and Rossman (2006) further define qualitative research as consisting of five characteristics which include that it "(a) is naturalistic, (b) draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in the study, (c) focuses on contexts, (d) is emergent and evolving, and (e) is fundamentally interpretative" (p. 2). Qualitative research examines social phenomena in their natural context, uses multiple methods to obtain data, and lends itself to the interpretation by the researcher.

Generally, three types of data collection are used in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Among these are interviews, field observations and documents which are all used to answer research questions and to provide an understanding of occurrences or events (Patton, 2002). Interviews use open-ended questions to ask individuals about their opinions, experiences and

perceptions of certain occurrences. Mason (1997) states that interviews are often informal conversations and interactions that focus on topics relative to the research questions and that result in data generated by the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. Many use interviewing as their main source of data collection because it is a practical method for obtaining information about social reality (Mason, 1997).

Also used for data collection are observations of behavior, interactions, conversations, and other observable human experiences. Observation involves the "systematic noting and recording of events, behavior and artifacts in the social setting chosen" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 98). According to Mason (1997), observations are usually used to refer to "methods of generating data which involve the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research setting, and systematically observing dimensions of that setting, interactions, relationships, actions, events and so on within it" (p. 60). Among the questions a researcher should note is his or her level of participation in the data gathering. Should the researcher be a participant, observer, or a participant/observer? The researcher must decide on a level that would allow the best findings while limiting his or her influence on the research setting and observations (Mason, 1997).

A final method of data collection includes the use of documents which are frequently used to gain meanings of events. Documents can include such items as organizational or clinical records, personal diaries and letters, and official publications, to name a few (Patton, 2002). Marshall and Rossman (2006) report that documents used in qualitative research often are used to provide background and historical context for the study. They state that

Knowledge of the history and context surrounding a specific setting comes, in part, from reviewing documents. Researchers supplement participant observation, interviewing, and observation with gathering and analyzing documents produced in the course of every day

events or constructed specifically for the research at hand. As such the review of documents is an unobtrusive method, rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting. (p. 107)

For this study, interviews will primarily be used as the tool for gathering qualitative data.

Data collection will be conducted via focus groups and through telephone interviews.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a valuable and affordable method of information gathering used in business, science, non-profit/public and academic settings to obtain rich, detailed data on a particular topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups provide "a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, or service" (p. 4). In the case of this study, focus groups were utilized to determine the student perspectives on the admission process after the implementation of the Student Success Center (SSC). According to Patton (2002), a focus group is an interview with a small group of people who discuss a specific topic. The object of a focus group is to obtain quality information in a group situation where participants can consider their viewpoints about a subject and compare their perceptions to those of others in the group. Specific courses were selected because they met the requirements of an effective focus group (Patton, 2002) and because the majority of the students enrolled in these classes had enrolled through the SSC during the last year, making their remembrance of the admissions process reasonably current. Incentives were provided to students who participated in the focus groups to encourage their participation and included college give-a-ways such as ink pens and notepads.

Focus Group Population

The focus group populations consisted of both males and females that were non-traditional and traditional in age and were comprised of majority white students. For both groups,

permission was obtained from the vice president of academic affairs to conduct the sessions in a classroom setting. A day and night class were selected for the focus groups to obtain the perspectives of both student groups. Also, when selecting classes for the focus group sessions, attention was paid to the number of students enrolled in these courses to ensure that a good quality information could be obtained.

The instructors of two courses were contacted to obtain permission to conduct the focus group sessions during their class time. Student agreement was obtained by the instructors prior to the focus group sessions and by the researcher at the beginning of the focus groups both verbally and via signed consent forms.

The first focus group consisted of twelve students who were enrolled in a day introductory computer course during the Spring quarter of 2008. This group was comprised of eight women and four men. Of these students, six were traditional in age (less than age 25) while six were age 25 and older or non-traditional. Nine members of this course were white and three were black. The second focus group was composed of eight members who were enrolled in an evening marketing course offered during Spring quarter 2008. This group was comprised of three women and five men. Six of these students were white, one was black and one was Hispanic. Half were of traditional age and half were non-traditional. The majority of students enrolled in this course were majoring in marketing. Overall, the focus group students reasonably mirrored all CVTC students by age, race, gender, and placement scores.

Focus Group Data Collection

The focus groups were conducted during Spring quarter 2008 and were tape recorded to ensure that all information discussed during sessions was captured. All participants in the focus groups were advised that they were being taped and signed a consent form agreeing to participate

(see Appendix B). To protect the participants and to ensure that they did not feel limited in what they discussed, participants were advised that only their first names were recorded. Prepared questions (see Appendix C) also ensured that the interview was highly focused, which resulted in an efficient use of the interviewees' time and an ease of comparing responses. However, as necessary, this researcher asked students to elaborate on responses and included additional questions to clarify points and to acquire further information deemed helpful to this study. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

Student Telephone Interviews

Student telephone interviews were conducted to obtain the perspectives of students who were not retained since the implementation of the SSC. Telephone interviewees were students who had enrolled at the college through the Student Success Center (SSC) but who did not complete two quarters and enroll in a third quarter within a one year period. Initially, it was planned that these students would be selected from the same groups as the quantitative population. That is, they would be chosen from students who did not complete during the first three years that the SSC was in place. However, locating these students proved difficult since many of the phone numbers were disconnected or the phone numbers no longer belonged to the students. Therefore, the search for non-completers was expanded to include any students who did not complete since the implementation of the SSC. Expanding the group of students not only made contacting students possible but it also increased the likelihood that students would remember the SSC experience. Names and telephone numbers of students were obtained from the College's database system and were randomly selected from the list of students who did not persist. When contacted by phone, students were read a consent form (Appendix C) detailing the reason for the call and asking them to participate in the telephone interview. If they agreed to

participate, students were advised that by responding to the interview questions that they were agreeing to participate in the research study.

Fifty-two students were contacted of which ten agreed to complete the student telephone interviews. Of the ten students who participated in the telephone interviews, seven were women seven were black and three were white. Additionally, five of these students were traditional age, or less than age 25 years and five were non-traditional aged or 25 years or older.

Non-persisters were interviewed to determine their experiences with the SSC enrollment process and with the admissions staff. Students were read a prepared script explaining the parameters of the telephone interview and were provided with an opportunity to agree or not agree to participate in the study (see Appendix D). A standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2002) was used for the telephone interviews. Questions were prepared prior to the telephone interviews to ensure that all who were interviewed were asked the same questions and that consistency when interviewing was assured (see Appendix E). This researcher conducted the interviews to ensure consistency in the manner in which the interviews were administered (Patton, 2002).

Telephone Interview Data Collection

Participants for the study were selected if they enrolled in the college through the Student Success Center (SSC) and if they met the definition of non-persister, or failed to complete two quarters and enroll in a third within a one year period. The telephone interviews varied in length from 10 to 20 minutes and were tape recorded to ensure that no responses were missed (Patton, 2002). Participants were advised that they were being recorded and that they were not required to participate in the interview. Notes were also taken during the interview to "facilitate later analysis, including locating important quotations from the tape itself" (Patton, 2002, p. 383).

Participants were also advised that only their first names would be used in reporting the data and that because of this anonymity, they could feel comfortable about providing responses (see Appendix D).

Immediately after the interview, recordings were transcribed so that the interviewee responses were complete and understandable. Respondents were identified by their first name to maintain confidentiality, and all responses were aggregated into a single report.

Focus Group and Telephone Interview Data Analysis

The transcripts from the focus groups and telephone interviews were organized by matching the questions asked during the sessions with the responses of each of the participants. A descriptive summary was written for each question, noting themes in responses that were common to all students (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The recordings were evaluated for themes and patterns in responses using a constant comparative analysis. According to Merriam & Simpson (2000), constant comparative analysis requires that the researcher compare the incidents and responses of data and code it into tentative categories. These coded categories were further compared and were reduced to categories from which theory emerged. Data was analyzed to the point that saturation occurred; that is, no further information could be obtained from the data. Finally, the findings of the constant comparative analysis were compiled into a report and were compared to the findings of the quantitative research method so that an overall understanding of the impact of the Student Success Centers could be determined. This triangulation of data will seek to illuminate students' perceptions on their studies and benefits of SSC interactions.

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, researchers should be concerned with internal validity, reliability and external validity. Merriam and Simpson (2000) report that internal validity of a qualitative

study questions whether the findings are a true reflection of reality. Internal validity can be achieved through triangulation of data, peer review of findings and through the researcher's statement of experiences and biases. In addition, reliability questions whether the findings would be the same if the study is replicated. In qualitative data, however, findings are not necessarily replicable, primarily because researchers bring with them varying backgrounds and experiences which influence the interpretation of data. According to Merriam and Simpson (2000), this does not discredit the findings; the most critical matter is that the results are consistent with the data derived during the study.

Finally, external validity questions the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other situations. Merriam and Simpson (2000) state the ability to apply the findings of one study to other events is actually determined by the individuals involved in those situations.

Furthermore, the extent to which findings are generalizable to other situations is determined by "the consumer of the research" (p. 103).

To examine the data, three research strategies were used that included triangulation of data, peer review of findings and the researcher's statement of biases and perspectives.

Triangulation involved using quantitative research as well as two methods of qualitative research to confirm the findings. In the peer review, a colleague was asked to review the data results and provide comments about the interview and focus group findings.

In conclusion, validity and reliability were assured by triangulation of the data, by peer review of the findings and by conducting multiple interviews with individuals by telephone and through focus groups to gain a true understanding of student perceptions of the Student Success Centers.

Biases

In qualitative studies, researcher experiences and potential biases can be expected to have an influence on the researcher's perceptions of the data derived. First, as the researcher, I may have had prior experiences with some of the students interviewed in this study. Because all students enter the college under study through the Student Success Center (SSC), I, as a counselor in this SSC could have had prior contact with these students as they enrolled as first quarter students. In addition, as a staff member who works in and who played a role in the development of the SSC, biases may exist when interviewing students. However, I considered this study a method of bettering the services offered in the center and strived to be objective in the collection and reporting of data. By doing so, valuable data could be obtained that could improve the services offered in the SSC and better the experiences of first quarter students.

Furthermore, I am trained in counseling, which may influence my analysis of the data. I have a Masters degree in community counseling and worked in both career counseling and community mental health counseling. My experience in these fields could possibly influence my perceptions of what is said by the interviewees. On the other hand, my interpretations of the data could be more accurate because of my training in this field. However, care was taken to ask interviewees if my perceptions of their responses were correct so that true reporting could be accomplished.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, Tinto's Model of Student Institutional Departure is being used as the framework of this study. Attempts at social integration in this study are defined by the activities available to students in the SSC. Although this is not in the true sense the way Tinto defined social integration, the SSC is a response to the retention

concerns at CVTC and are an effort to connect early with the student. This is the institution's attempt to connect socially with the students outside of the classroom and to provide students with a place to go to get answers to questions and to gain information about their educational experience.

Second, the focus groups and telephone interviews are being conducted after the completion of the educational experience. The admissions process for some may be hard to remember or may be clouded by their experiences since having left CVTC. For example, if a student had a good admissions experience, they could remember the school experience itself as a negative one which may influence their responses. Additionally, those students who had a bad admissions experience but good academic experiences may be influenced to remember all experiences as being positive. Their responses may also be limited by their comfort level in voicing their opinions and by the ability of the facilitator to elicit responses that will answer the focus group questions.

A third limitation is the relatively small sample size for the focus groups. While care will be taken to ensure broad representation, the sample of 20 may not generalize to all students at CVTC or all technical college students.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter will discuss the results of this study. The first section will review the quantitative findings while the second section will discuss the qualitative findings. Within each section, results are organized by research questions.

Quantitative Findings

This section will discuss the quantitative data obtained from the college's student database system related to the Student Success Center (SSC) and will review the findings for research questions 1, 2 and 3.

Question One: Are there differences in the retention of students before versus after the implementation of the SSC?

A review of the data indicates that those students who enrolled at the college under study prior to the implementation of the SSC were retained at a higher rate than were the students in the after its implementation. Specifically, Table 4.1 indicates that pre-SSC, students were retained at a rate of 54.4% while the post group was retained at a rate of 50.4%.

Table 4.1

Persistence Rates Pre versus Post Student Success Centers (SSC)

Group	Rate of Persistence	Rate of Non Persistence		
Pre SSC (N=1829)	.544	.456		
Post SSC (N=1712)	.504	.496		

Question Two: Are there differences in students' grades pre versus post the implementation of the SSC?

The average grade point average was calculated to determine the average pre versus post grade point averages of those enrolled in the college pre versus post SSC. The mean grade point average for those enrolled three years prior to the SSC was 2.53 while the post average grade point average was 2.30 (see Table 4.2).

Pre versus Post Student Success Centers (SSC) Mean Grade Point Average

Table 4.2

Group	Mean Grade Point Average	
Pre SSC (N=1712)	2.53	
Post SSC (N=1829)	2.30	

Question Three: Are there differences in the retention of students by personal attributes, financial resources and intellectual disposition before the SSC versus post the SSC?

A logistic regression analysis was run to determine if differences in student persistence exist pre versus post Student Success Center (SSC). In the full model, results show no significant main effect difference in persistence pre versus post SSC groups (see Table 4.3). In addition, results below indicate no significant difference in persistence by gender, race, traditional versus non-traditional status, full-time versus part-time status, or level of remedial courses needed.

However, significant differences in persistence were found for those in certain majors, those who received Hope and other financial aid, the Pell Grant, and for those enrolled on Campus 2. Table 4.3 below indicates that those students enrolled on Campus 2 were

approximately one-third less likely to be retained than students at Campus 3. Results also showed that compared to students majoring in Computer Information Systems, students in the major of Industrial Control Systems (and holding all other variables in the equation constant) were significantly more likely to be retained, while those in Accounting and Early Childhood Education were significantly less likely to be retained. Also, those who received the Pell Grant were almost one and a half times more likely to be retained when compared to those who did not receive Pell. Furthermore, the largest differences seen in the logistic regression was on receipt of financial aid. Holding all other factors constant, those students who received the Hope grant and other financial aid support services were more than four times more likely to be retained than those in the referent group, students who received no financial aid

In conclusion, logistic regression results showed that the SSC had no significant main effect on the persistence of students after its implementation as compared to before the SSC. However, there were some factors that positively affected retention. In each instance, holding all other factors constant and comparing to their referent group, those students majoring in Industrial Control Systems, students receiving the Pell grant, and financial support in addition to the Hope grant were significantly more likely to persist, while those on Campus 2 were less likely to stay enrolled.

Table 4.3

Logistic Regression Analysis of Pre/Post Student Success Center by Variables

Term	Estimate	Odds Ratio	Std Error	ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Intercept	-2.5983812	0.07439391	0.2690639	93.26	<.0001
Pre/Post[Pre]	0.00860183	1.008638932	0.0475056	0.03	0.8563
Gender-Female	0.01818394	1.018350275	0.0634629	0.08	0.7745
Traditional	0.01674101	1.016881926	0.0475753	0.12	0.7249
Race- Black	-0.0579751	0.943673445	0.1282724	0.2	0.6513
Race- Other	0.24186006	1.273615951	0.1810367	1.78	0.1816
Major-Accounting	-0.5453382	0.579645714	0.183458	8.84	0.003*
Major- Air Conditioning	-0.2771414	0.757947316	0.2856352	0.94	0.3319
Major – Automated Manufacturing	0.5356206	1.708508214	0.6191501	0.75	0.387
Major- Auto Collision Repair	0.26886157	1.308473996	0.2168875	1.54	0.2151
Major – Business And Office Tech	-0.1492905	0.861318865	0.1478618	1.02	0.3127
Major – Criminal Justice	-0.0348744	0.965726704	0.2546873	0.02	0.8911
Major - Construction Management	-0.1184001	0.888340556	0.3002853	0.16	0.6934
Major - Carpentry	0.2666271	1.305553515	0.3555435	0.56	0.4533
Major - Drafting	-0.0744246	0.928277464	0.2790214	0.07	0.7897
Major- Electrical Control Systems	-0.2004019	0.818401771	0.5137011	0.15	0.6965
Major - Electronics	0.01105648	1.011117829	0.2743365	0	0.9679
Major – Industrial Control Systems	1.58478855	4.878259761	0.7399398	4.59	0.0322*
Major – Industrial Electrical	-0.2120665	0.808910903	0.179627	1.39	0.2378
Major – Industrial Mechanical Systems	0.19222334	1.211941162	0.6374708	0.09	0.763
Major – Marketing Management	-0.1952672	0.822614826	0.2289253	0.73	0.3937
Major – Management and Supervisory	0.23520262	1.265165091	0.2555915	0.85	0.3575
Major – Machine Tool	0.30360063	1.35472791	0.39923	0.58	0.447
Major – Early Childhood	-0.8586616	0.423728822	0.2425422	12.53	0.0004*
Major - Automotive Technology	-0.304806	0.73726639	0.2307223	1.75	0.1865
Major – Welding and Joining	-0.1932751	0.82425519	0.2451306	0.62	0.4304
Major – Electrical Construction/Maintenance	-0.1079435	0.897678314	0.4199604	0.07	0.7972
Time – Full-time	0.25546683	1.291064188	0.047486	28.94	<.0001
Aid - Hope/Other	1.41898663	4.13293013	0.4155137	11.66	0.0006*
Aid - OTHER	-1.0734593	0.341823998	0.3094023	12.04	0.0005
Aid - Hope	-0.1872404	0.829244362	0.1833149	1.04	0.3071
Low Inc/Pell Recipient	0.35646171	1.428266841	0.0578951	37.91	<.0001*
Grade Point Average [Pre]	1.24984293	3.489794772	0.0453239	760.43	<.0001
Campus[1]	0.08943212	1.0935531	0.08197	1.19	0.2753
Campus[2]	-0.3778458	0.685336171	0.1158213	10.64	0.0011*
Score – 3 Remedial Courses required	-0.311388	0.732429638	0.2640603	1.39	0.2383
Score – 2 Remedial Courses required	-0.0322119	0.968301377	0.1186463	0.07	0.786
Score – 1 Remedial Course required	0.15649263	1.169402144	0.1346806	1.35	0.2453

^{*} p <.05

Qualitative Findings

To examine research question four, and as a way to learn more about individual student experiences and perceptions of the SSC, focus group and telephone interviews were conducted. This section will discuss the findings of both the focus group sessions and the telephone interviews.

Focus Group Sessions

Twenty students participated in one of two focus groups. They included students diverse in age, enrolled in a variety of majors, and at varying points in their program of study. The majority of the focus group participants were white and female. Half (N=10) were traditional-aged students and half were non-traditional students, age 25 and above. Prior to the focus group session, each student signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the focus group (see Appendix B). All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed by the researcher to ensure the integrity and validity of the findings. Each focus group lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Focus Group One consisted of twelve students enrolled in an Introduction to Microcomputers course that met during the day. Nine of the students were white while three were black. Students in this group were half (N=6) traditional and half were non-traditional in age (N=6). Eight of the participants in Focus Group One were female while four were male.

In comparison, Focus Group Two was comprised of eight students enrolled in a Marketing course that met during the evening. Of these students, five were male and three were female. Six were white, one was black and one was Hispanic. The participants were half traditional (N=4) in aged, or less than 25 years old and half non-traditional (N=4) were age 25 or older in age.

The focus groups were conducted to determine student's experiences, topics addressed, and perceptions of the Student Success Center (SSC) at a technical college in the southeastern United States. This study reviewed the initial experiences of students in the SSC, their perceptions of first quarter enrollment processes and their recommendations on what SSC procedures could be implemented to make their early educational experiences more positive. Findings are presented as answers to the questions that were posed during the focus group sessions. A complete listing of the focus group interview questions is included in Appendix C. *Interview Question One: Were you working while enrolled in college?*

The majority of the 20 students participating in the focus group sessions (N=14) were employed for pay outside the home. In Focus Group One, six out of the 12 worked full or part time, in addition to attending college while all eight of the students in Focus Group Two worked full-time.

Interview Question Two: What was your first experience like when you came onto the campus of the college?

Students responding to this question described overall similar experiences when entering the college for the first time. Two predominant themes emerged concerning their emotional feelings and the professional treatment experienced in the SSC.

Theme One: Feelings When Entering the SSC and College

All of the students who participated in the focus groups enrolled through the Student Success Center (SSC) and were directed to the center to start the admissions process. Two students expressed uncertainty about how to enroll in the college and had feelings of discomfort when they first entered the college. When asked about their initial experience in the SSC, Ralph, a non-traditional-aged black student, was the first to respond. Ralph stated that he felt very lost

when he first walked into the college. He was directed to the SSC where staff there "guided me through the rest of the [course registration] process." Similarly, Crystal responded that she had an initial negative feeling about attending college because of her past academic experiences. She said that while in high school, other students believed that she would not be able to attend college and that fellow students, "thought they were smarter than me." She believed that she would not be accepted by students and faculty at the college and that her experiences would be similar to those experienced in high school. As was the case with Ralph, Crystal's statements indicated a feeling of being lost or unsure about what to expect, but she stated that the SSC staff made her feel comfortable about her college experience and provided her with the information she needed to make enrollment decisions.

Additionally, Christie, a non-traditional, female student stated that she didn't have time to experience fear about the admissions process. She reported:

They (staff members at SSC) didn't give me time to get scared. They said you can just come in and take the (placement) test. They helped me immediately. I didn't have time to get scared. It had been 30 years since I had been in school, so that was good.

While she did report an initial positive reception in the SSC, Christie did have a somewhat negative encounter with an SSC staff person. Upon entering the SSC, she reported that she was told that the college was for serious students who planned to attend full-time. She stated:

I think that because I am an older lady and they looked at me and said, you know this isn't just a place that you would come to take a class or two. This is something that you would come and do full-time. It wasn't something somebody may ask-- 'Could I come and take a class or two?' I don't think she should just look at me and extrapolate that because I was coming in at this age. It kind of offended me.

In summary, although one focus group participant shared a concern about a negative perception, all focus group participants stated that the SSC staff assisted them in overcoming initial discomfort in attending college and eliminated their feelings of being lost in the enrollment process.

Theme Two: First Impression of the SSC

The second theme that emerged was students' initial impression of the SSC. Kris, a traditional, white, male student, said that his first experience with the SSC was "nice" and "cut and dried." Nancy, a non-traditional, white, female, described her initial enrollment process as "easy" and the staff as "very professional." Another student said that her initial SSC experience was "peaceful."

In addition, some focus group participants had transferred from other colleges and upon learning this, the researcher asked them to compare their SSC experiences to the enrollment processes at their other institution. Nancy reported that her SSC experience was "more positive and more one-on-one." She stated that "I went to [another institution] eons ago, and it was a cattle call. We all went in an auditorium." Mitch reported that he actually applied first to a community college and went there to obtain admissions information. He was told by community college staff that the major he had chosen was actually taught as a cooperative program with the technical college. He would complete his program courses at the technical college and then transfer to the community college to take his academic courses. Mitch went to the college SSC to enroll in his program courses and was given information about the programs offered there. Mitch reported that:

So I said okay, I think I will check out [the technical college] because I didn't really know that much about it, and I thought it was all vocational stuff. I came over and got the course catalog and I said 'Oh wow, man. They offer a lot of other things besides auto

body painting.' And so I was real impressed.

John, a white, male, traditional-aged student and Wendy, a white, non-traditional female also transferred to this technical college from another institution. Both agreed that the SSC registration process was easier at the technical college and was more personal. Wendy stated:

It is accessible for people who work and who have other responsibilities in life than just school. And the registration for classes. They will help you. [The other college staff] don't ask the questions [the SSC staff] do. They don't put themselves out there to help you and help you understand to make sure you know what you are doing and make sure you are taking the classes you need to be taking.

John concurred stating that the SSC makes admissions "overall more convenient" and staff members were more "caring." Other students also agreed stating that the SSC staff has a nicer attitude and the Center a nicer atmosphere than what was experienced at other colleges.

In conclusion, based on focus group responses, the majority of students had positive first experiences in the SSC. This was further indicated as transfer students compared the enrollment processes at the technical college to those at other colleges and reported that the SSC staff and processes lead to a positive first impression not only of the centers but also of the college.

Interview Question Three: Describe your enrollment process.

Focus group participants were asked to discuss the enrollment services offered in the SSC and their perceptions of these services. Two themes emerged: 1) the enrollment processes were helpful and 2) more program information should be provided during the registration process.

Theme One: The Enrollment Processes were Helpful

Students responding to the question of "describe the enrollment process" mentioned the specific steps to admissions including testing, transfer review, and registration. Kris, a white, traditional-aged, male student reported that he had a very positive enrollment experience:

With the SSC, when I walked in, the dark-haired lady that works in the evenings came up and asked me what I needed, and put me on the [placement] tests on the computer and stuff and helped me with my transcripts. I didn't have anything left to do but come in, sign up for classes, and get my books.

Other students also mentioned the services provided in the center and described the process as easy. Nancy, a nontraditional, white, female, stated that she has referred friends to the SSC for services. She said:

Even if they were looking like, I mean I need to get an education, go down and look at their brochures. Take a brochure home with you. Look through them and decide. And they were really helpful. Everyone I sent said, "Oh yeah, I was really impressed with them." They seem to make a good impression [on people who visit the center].

Theme 2: More Program Information Should be Provided During the Registration Process

Although there appeared to be strong feelings of positive helpfulness from SSC staff members, several focus group participants mentioned they could benefit from additional SSC services, including more information on their program selection. For example, Kris, a traditional-aged, white male, stated that it would have been more helpful if his experience in the SSC had included more information about long-term educational options. In particular, he stated

that students would benefit in knowing about the transferability of the technical college's courses to community colleges or four-year institutions. He stated:

A lot of these students, especially some that I have talked to didn't even know [about transferability]. I know that me and John had this conversation outside one night and he didn't have a clue. That's a selling point for ya'll. That a selling point as far as classes here are more one on one...smaller. You are more apt to work with your working students. That's what got me in here. And your professors are more understanding that 90% of us work full-time.

The focus group participants further discussed transferability, and it became clear to the researcher that there was confusion about the ability to transfer the technical college's courses to other postsecondary institutions. This was an indication that for some students, this information is not explained during their initial enrollment through the SSC. One student indicated that if his program would not transfer to another college, he would not have taken the Algebra class in which he was currently enrolled. The lack of information about transferability of courses early in their educational experience could later result in student frustration and possible withdrawal.

In addition to lack of clarity about transfer courses, focus group comments indicated that students were also confused about the role of the SSC in the student registration process. Even though students are told during first quarter registration that the SSC staff only enroll first quarter and are assigned an advisor for future registration, some return to the SSC to sign up for later quarters. They are disappointed when they learn they must meet with their advisor to register. Kris expressed frustration over these procedures and stated that he went to the SSC to register for classes and

.... if you got a student wanting to enroll so you don't need to turn him away and tell him to go speak to his advisor because you're already a pre-enrolled student. That is one thing that I don't understand. If you are a SSC, is it just for new students or for all students?

Even though students experienced some difficulties with the SSC, when they were specifically asked how helpful the SSC advisors were in assisting students in mapping out educational plans, most focus group participants found the SSC services to be beneficial. The majority of SSC participants in Focus Group One reported that the services were very helpful, particularly since the centers have expanded hours of operation. Nancy, a white, non-traditional-aged student reported that "a lot of times you have questions about financial aid or something like that. You don't want to take time off from work to come here and ask how many hours do I have left." The ability for students to visit the SSC during expanded hours was a benefit for the focus group students, especially since 14 of the 20 worked full-time.

Interview Question Four: What processes do you think the SSC could implement to improve their services?

When asked this question, most students did not have a response. They expressed an overall appreciation for the services offered and did not have any suggestions to improve the SSC. Mitch, a non-traditional-aged white male, stated that he had been enrolled as a part-time student for several years and has seen an improvement in the services offered. He stated:

I will be the first person to say that as a SSC, ya'll have evolved. Ya'll have gotten better. Ya'll have changed over the years and have gotten better. And I have seen that because I have been here long enough but I mean where you were and where you are now, you are on two totally different plateaus. I only see you getting better over time.

Conclusion of the Focus Group Section

Two focus group sessions with 20 students provided information about their perceptions of the Student Success Centers (SSC). For some students, the SSC eliminated their initial fears about starting college for the first time and provided them with information needed to make intelligent enrollment decisions. Focus group participants described the SSC as helpful and the SSC staff as caring and informed. However, in some instances, additional information would be helpful to students, particularly information about transferability of courses and about SSC services that are available to students beyond their first quarter enrollment. Overall, the focus group sessions revealed that students enrolling through the centers experience a positive first impression and a beneficial experience.

Telephone Interview Sessions

Ten telephone interviews were conducted to further explore student perceptions of the Student Success Center (SSC). Ten students were selected for participation in the telephone interviews. Students who participated in the telephone interviews had enrolled in a program of study since the implementation of the SSC and met this study's criteria for non-persistence. That is, the student enrolled and left college before completing two quarters and enrolling in a third quarter within a one year period.

The majority of telephone interview participants, or six, was female and four were male. Of these, six were black and four were white. Additionally, these students were half traditional, (N-5), or less than 25 years old and half (N=5) were non-traditional, or aged 25 and older.

The majority of the participants (N=9) were employed while attending college. Three worked part-time and six were employed full-time, with four of the full-timers working 45-60 hours per week.

Telephone Interview Findings

The telephone interviews were guided by structured questions (Appendix E), although flexibility in questioning the interviewees was allowed to ensure that an understanding of responses was obtained. When necessary, additional questions were included to assist interviewees in exploring student perceptions about the Student Success Center (SSC).

Telephone Interview Question One: What was your program of study while enrolled?

The telephone interviewees were enrolled in a variety of programs that included industrial/trade, health and business. Three of the ten students did not remember their major, and this researcher determined their program by referring to the college's database system. For example when Eugene was asked what his major was at the time of enrollment, he responded, "I really don't know." When prompted for a response, Eugene thought he was majoring in computers but was actually shown in the college's student records database system (Banner) as majoring in the Management and Supervisory Development program. Raquel stated she thought she was majoring in the Licensed Practical Nursing program although she was not sure. Similarly Katie reported that she thought she began her enrollment as License Practical Nursing student, although she left as a Medical Office Assistant major. The lack of certainty about their major brings into question their commitment to their career goals. A review of the retention literature indicates that students who enroll without a clear commitment to their educational goals are more likely to depart early than are those who have a definite career objective (Tinto, 1993; Cope & Hannah, 1975). A partial reason for their early departure may be due to their lack of career goals.

Telephone Interview Question Two: Were you working while you were enrolled?

Nine students were working while attending college. These students worked from 25 to 60 hours per week, and their employment was indicated as a factor in their early departure. The only unemployed student, Tammy, was not working because her medical assistant clinical work required that she be in class approximately 40 hours per week. While work was mentioned as a conflict with college, Tammy advised that not working made remaining in college difficult. Tammy stated,

I was in the program full-time and I came in the morning and left in the afternoon. I really didn't have any income but my child support coming in....but in order for me to pay my bills, my child support wasn't really covering it and then my transportation messed up.

Her lack of employment made it difficult for her to attend school, particularly since she also was a single mom with four children. She reported that, because she was unemployed, she could not afford to pay for the expenses associated with attending college that included a \$95 certification exam required at the end of her program. In Tammy's case, her departure was the result of her needing to find employment to meet her financial obligations.

For five of the students, the balancing of work and attending school appeared to be a challenge. For example, Alicia found that her part-time work provided too little money to support her financially. Alicia stated that she had to increase her work hours, because the business at the restaurant where she worked slowed down, requiring her to work more hours to make the same amount of money. She states,

I was living on my own at the time, and I was working 20-25 hours per week. And I was waiting tables so that was kind of not steady work. At certain times of the year, business slows down for restaurants, and I wasn't making enough money to be able to

support myself living out on my own . I had to put school on hold so I could work close to 30-35 hours per week.

Alicia reports that this increase in work hours made it difficult for her to complete her coursework. When forced to make the decision about remaining in college or meeting her financial obligations by increasing her work hours, Alicia opted to focus on her employment.

Other students who worked approximately 40 hours per week included Raquel, Mark, Constance, and Donna, while Eugene, Kevin and Damon all reported working between 50 and 60 hours a week. Both Eugene and Kevin stated that their work hours unexpectedly changed once they were enrolled, which created a college/work conflict after they began their course. Eugene stated,

Being an industrial electrician, my job is very demanding. Even though I had my employers' consent to go to night school, there were some things going on that were beyond my control that demanded me to be there. It just overwhelmed me, and I got so far behind [in my courses] that I couldn't catch up.

Kevin also had a change in his work schedule that made it difficult for him to continue his carpentry day program. He stated, "I got moved to another shift so that conflicted with me going to class. From second shift to first. They didn't give me no warning. [They] told me that was the shift I had to go to."

Similarly, Mark's work schedule changed from a forty hour work week to rotating 12 hours shifts. Instead of working five eight hour days per week, he was required to work 12 hours days at 48 hours one week and 38 the next. When Mark registered for school, he was unaware that this change would occur and couldn't anticipate the subsequent inability to attend classes that conflicted with work.

Clearly, all students were impacted by work or lack thereof, and employment was perceived as a barrier to program completion. A review of the retention literature indicates that non-traditional students and students attending commuter institutions often leave college before completion because of financial obligations (Benshoff & Lewis, 1999; Tinto, 1993). Based on telephone interview comments, this seemed to be the case for the students, male or female. In all cases, however, the need for employment to support families and take care of financial obligations outweighed the desire to continue their education.

Interview Question Three: What was your first experience like at the college?

Based on responses, all telephone interviewees indicated that their initial experience at the college was positive. Student used terms such as "good" and "awesome" when describing their first visit. In particular, Natasha believes that faculty and staff were welcoming. She stated that "they [Center staff] were nice. A lot of them greeted you. You know they would help you to the best of their ability. Anything they could do, they would do it."

Katie agreed stating that the staff and faculty at the college were supportive. She reports, Everybody there makes you feel very, very welcome about being at the school. And they make you feel like they really want you there and that they will do anything there to keep you at that school. It's almost like our education really matters to you more than anything. And that means a lot. So it was very exciting.

Some students participating in the telephone interviews defined their first experience at the college in terms of what attending college meant to them. It was not necessarily how the faculty and staff made them feel but was instead how they and their families could benefit from college completion. Natasha, for example, states, "I mean it was a good experience. I mean knowing that I was going to do something to better myself and the life of my kids. And I was

taking a step to do that." Similarly, Tammy reports that attending college was a positive experience because of the importance it was to her and her family. She stated, "I am going to a college...the first one in my family to ever go to a college. I was excited."

In addition, Tammy reports that her excitement was further enhanced by the warm welcome that she received on her first visit to the college. She said, "They [faculty and staff] introduced me by their first name and I know Ms. Leann at the front desk. And when I come in, she always greets me and treats me well."

Overall, students expressed that their initial impression of the college staff and faculty was welcoming and supportive, which often created a level of excitement and comfort about college attendance.

Telephone Interview Question Three: Describe your enrollment process in the Student Success Center.

When discussing enrollment in the SSC, three themes emerged regarding the registration process. These themes included the ease of enrollment, the level of information received, and differences in what was remembered about the registration process.

Theme One: The enrollment process was easy.

All students in the telephone interviews stated that they thought the Student Success

Center (SSC) registration process was simple and beneficial to them. In particular, terms used to
describe the process included "helpful", "pleasant", and "easy." Donna described the process as
the following:

They [SSC staff] were very helpful to me. Every question....they were concerned about my situation. As far as a lot of things personal was going on. They were trying to

work with me around my condition you know to see if they can better...you know can make it better for me.

Natasha concurred stating,

It was easy. It wasn't hard at all. Like they check like what I need....like the entrance exam and what I wanted to do. If I had any questions, they answered it. I think they helped me choose classes that would fit around my schedule that would be easier for me to take. So it was pretty easy.

Another common statement about the SSC concerned the acknowledgement of students when they entered the center. Natasha states,

Like they greet you as soon as you walk in and let's say you were helping me and I was waiting on you, and you were with another student.....someone else would try to help me as well. They would ask. They were very nice and friendly.

Katie had a similar experience in the SSC and expressed appreciation for the initial acknowledgement of students by staff.

When you walk in the door, if they are in the middle of doing something they still acknowledge you and say that they will be with you in a moment and they will even take a break from what they are doing and go ahead and help you.

In addition to the welcoming feeling that she felt, Katie also commented that the expanded hours of operation increased the ease at which working students can obtain assistance. She stated that the increased accessibility of SSC staff is "miraculous." She further said,

I could go in there any time and even if I had questions about things that didn't' really relate to....that was just about classes.....you know you guys would do whatever you

could to help answer those question and that was awesome, even if it didn't' relate to anything you guys did.

Even though the expanded hours increased student access to the facility, two students mentioned that it is not always easy to receive immediate assistance in the SSC, especially during peak registration times. For example, Raquel reports, "The last time I was there, I waited about an hour to an hour and fifteen minutes. It was a busy day. It was like the day before classes started or something."

Katies agrees that,

During the times that it gets busy, even if it is a temporary thing, to get more...to get one or two more employees that are in there to sign people up. But, I think you guys do that....get a couple more people in there just because sometimes when you go in there, and there are a bunch of people in there, it can take a little time. But those are things that are going to be expected with things like that [student registration].

Even though Raquel and Katie expressed concerns about the long waits in the SSC, two students who had attended other colleges indicated that the registration processes in the SSC was much less complicated than what was experienced at those institutions. Although Raquel believed that wait for services in the SSC can be long, her experience at a community college in northwest Georgia prior to her enrollment at the college under study was less positive as compared to her SSC experiences. Raquel admits,

It wasn't so personable. Everyone sent you to [phone] extensions and [said] go to this office and that office. I spent like my very first day of class going to offices. The process was a lot more complicated and the people there weren't mean but they weren't

helpful. They just kind of assumed that you knew what to do. They didn't tell you and they made you feel like an idiot.

Natasha had similar enrollment issues at an Atlanta area private medical school. She asserts.

It [the registration process] was long. It was an all day process. Like I might have went at 12 and I didn't leave until seven. It takes so long. [The SSC registration process] was like an in and out process, especially like if you have somewhere you have to be.

In general, students who participated in the telephone interviews said that the SSC registration process was uncomplicated. Those students who expressed that there is sometimes a wait in the SSC registered at times right before the start of a quarter, which tends to be the busiest enrollment period. Students who interviewed during non-peak registration periods did not believe the center was crowded and that they had to wait for assistance. Furthermore, students who did not remember the registration process did still remember their SSC experience as positive and beneficial.

Theme Two: The SSC staff was informative about college programs, procedures and support programs.

All students believed that they received helpful information when they registered in the SSC for their first quarter registration. Students stated that they received valuable details needed to make program and enrollment decisions. Damon and Constance report that they received plenty of information related to starting their first quarter while Tammy and Donna received information related to campus support services that assisted them in removing barriers to program completion. For example, Tammy was introduced to a support program that provides

assistance to students who need financial help to purchase books. She said the program made college more affordable and stated,

When I need help with books, they [SSC staff] told me about [a program that provides] assistance. [The program coordinator] came and walked me to the building and showed me this is where you go and this is what you fill out to get help with books.

Donna also was referred to services to financially assist her with college expenses.

You got a lot of assistance from [the college]. The [program provided] a lot of help due to my situation as a single mother trying to better myself. I really got a lot of support from the school and from staff."

For both of these students, continuing college was financially difficult. Having been advised by the SSC staff about support programs removed some of the financial barriers associated with attending college; however, even though these services were received, they were not enough to prevent them from dropping out. These students did express that these services were helpful in allowing them to start college.

Theme Three: Differences in the Enrollment Process

All ten students expressed that their experience in the Student Success Center (SSC) was positive; however, not all students had the same remembrance of what they were required to do during enrollment. Tammy seemed to confuse her SSC experience with second quarter registration with her advisor. She reports that she was given a form by her advisor and remembers, "They got me settled down. [I] filled out the paper, and my advisor signed it. And that was it. It was wonderful."

In actuality, registration through the SSC requires discussion of an orientation packet and the completion of approximately eight forms. It also includes the selection of classes as well as

the viewing of a computer orientation presentation. The entire process takes approximately 30 to 45 minutes, which is a much longer process than Tammy describes. In addition, she reports that she received a school log book, which was unknown to the researcher.

Like Tammy, other students could remember some parts of the registration but no student could remember the majority of what was required. Kevin stated that he could not remember all that he was asked to do for registration, although what he reports was accurate. He recalled, "I remember I had to take the entrance test over. And, they sent me around to the financial aid department. I can't remember all that I had to do. It's been a while back."

Alicia, who enrolled in 2006, stated similarly,

I remember they just wanted to set up a time for me to take the entrance exam....the

Asset test or whatever it is called. Then they asked me what I was interested in taking
and that's pretty much all I remember because it has been so long ago.

There may be many reasons for the lack of remembrance of the specific requirements of the registration process. First, students sign up in the SSC their first quarter only and after that initial enrollment, they meet with their program advisors. There may be confusion about the two registrations processes, particularly since the students interviewed had been away from college for several years and may have forgotten the specific requirements of the registration process. Furthermore, their last registration was with their advisor and not completed in the SSC. Although their memories of what they did in the SSC varied, the students all agreed that their experiences in the center were positive and beneficial.

Telephone Interview Question Four: What led you to depart from college prior to the completion of your program?

The reasons for early departure varied from student to student, although employment and financial concerns seemed to be predominant. Of the students interviewed, eight left because of work issues and two left for health reasons. Two students mentioned course difficulties as reasons for departure while student database information indicated that two left as a result of poor academic performance, although they did not mention this as a reason for departure.

Raquel departed school early because of health issues that eventually led to surgery. Even though she listed health as the main reason, she eluded to other factors in addition to her health as contributors also, although she chose not to elaborate.

Like Raquel, Natasha departed for health reasons. She was working toward admission into a health program, which would require that she wait to be admitted into her program after completion of her academic courses. Since she was expecting a baby, she felt an urgency to earn her degree quickly and believed she could earn her degree faster at another college.

In addition to financial and work conflicts, issues related to course administration were mentioned by Eugene and Constance as contributors to their departure. Eugene stated that he was enrolled in on-line classes and had difficulty with the college's online computer system. While he was complimentary about the assistance he received, Eugene reported that by the time the problem was resolved, his work schedule had increased. The combination of these two factors resulted in his deciding to not continue his coursework. Eugene said,

We kept trying to set that up [computer access] and whatever the problems....either my computer or their computer.....it took about a month to get that eradicated and then I was behind. And so I was playing catch up as well. And they apologized. It wasn't one of those things where there was a quick fix. They were trying to resolve the problem, but

we just couldn't find a solution fast enough. So between work and that, I was already behind the gate.

Constance also experienced an academic problem that led to her departure. She stated that she was enrolled in an introductory computer course and believed that the pace of instruction moved too quickly for her to keep up. As a student with no prior computer experience, she fell behind in her course and opted to drop it to prevent a poor grade. She believed that she needed additional assistance that was not available to her as a new student.

In general, students expressed that their reasons for departure were non-academic, although two students could not have continued because of academic performance. However, the majority of students expressed that their reason for departure was not college related, although several students stated that if the college could pay their bills, they would have continued. When faced with a decision about work or college, the priority of those interviewed was to work to take care of their financial obligations. Their academic pursuits were secondary. *Telephone Interview Question Five: How connected did you feel to the college?*

In retention literature, significant attention is given to social integration and its impact on student retention (Tinto1993; Spady, 1970). In particular, those students who are socially connected to the institution, or who have developed a feeling of belonging to the college, are more apt to stay. The purpose of the SSC was to provide students with a positive start so that a connection could be developed early on with those enrolling for their first quarter. When students were asked about their level of connection to the SSC, their definition of connection varied from student to student. Students often referred to their relationships with other students as their connection to the institution. Raquel advised,

There were a lot of people enrolled in that program that were enrolled in my classes and were in a similar situation. [They were] single parents and working. I kind of didn't feel like I was in a class with a bunch of kids.

Alicia also states her connection was to other students and noted that the college felt like an extension of her high school. She advises, "I felt just fine there. I had classes with people I went to high school with. I mean it was perfectly fine when I went there. I had fun going."

Other students related their connection to faculty and staff. Tammy reported that faculty and staff were like family while Donna relates her connection to her personal goals, stating that, "I already felt connected whenever I started because that's where I was driven to pursue my goal. There wasn't nothing more that the school itself could do to make me feel welcome or make me feel appreciated." Donna seemed to have established her connection once she decided to attend the institution; she connected because of her decisions up front that the institution met her degree requirements.

Unlike the females, males elaborated less about their connection to the institution. They had a difficult time verbalizing their feelings of connectiveness. Kevin reported that he felt a connection to the college, but did not elaborate. Both he and Damon stated that they connected "pretty good." Mark, however, reported that he was enrolled for such a short time that he "didn't get a chance" to connect. This finding further substantiates the point that social integration is subjective and its interpretation differs depending on the student asked.

In considering the review of retention literature on social integration, a criticism of Tinto's model (1993) and that of others was that a universal definition of social integration often is used to determine its influence on student departure. However, this study indicates that to fully understand social connectivity, students' interpretation of this phenomenon must be

considered. More specific inquiry into their definition of social integration is necessary to truly determine an individual's level of integration as compared to others. That is, who is their connection with and how do they describe this connection. While the majority of students in this study were connected in some way to the institution, their connection varied and could be with faculty and staff, other students, and with their academic goal. Discussing all possible connections with each student interviewed would have been helpful in developing a total understanding of social integration.

Telephone Interview Question Six: Was there anything that the SSC staff could have done to prevent your departure?

In discussions of the reasons for student departure, students who participated in the telephone interviews indicated they left for reasons that were not college related. Overall, the factors reported included financial, health and academic reasons, and when asked if there were services that could have prevented their departure, students stated that the reasons were out of their control and that of the college. Raquel, for example, stated that "there was a lot of other stuff I was dealing with. Like outside of school." Donna concurred stating that, "At that particular time, it was not the school that had me in that predicament [working long hours and going to school full-time]. It was my job very much so that had me stressed out. Very much so."

Alicia was in a similar predicament with attempting to balance work and school. When asked if there was anything else the SSC could have done to prevent her departure, she said,

You know I am not sure because you know that would have been a lot on my plate to go to school full-time and work full-time. And being out on my own, I guess you kind...I

felt I had to figure something out. I was kind of in panic mode. I wasn't going to be able to pay my bills.

While other students indicated that there was not anything more that the SSC could have done, their reasons for departure provided possible evidence that more could assistance could have been provided. Constance, for one, stated that her reason for departure was because she believed she could not keep up in her computer class. Had she thought that the SSC staff could have provided assistance with this issue, she might have sought out solutions to her course difficulties besides dropping out. Katie also mentioned that she had academic issues with remaining. She reports that she enrolled in the psychology class not knowing that the course required outside Internet computer work. Had she known that she needed a computer, she might have made other decisions about her class selection. However, the SSC staff did not relate this information to her upon registration. She might have been able to remain in her course had she been able to access a computer outside of class.

In addition, students expressed that they were advised of special support services while enrolled, and Donna and Tammy took advantage of that assistance. However, access to these services was not enough to help them enough financially to remain in school. Other students with financial difficulties mentioned that they could have remained in school had the SSC provided financial assistance.

Overall, students noted that their departure was out of the college's control and that the SSC could not have done more to assist them in remaining in college. They report that their experience in the SSC was positive and that all that could be done to assist them was provided.

Students left with a good impression of the staff and services and with no recommendations on what could have been done to keep them enrolled. Students departed believing that there was no other option for them but to focus on their personal and financial difficulties.

Telephone Interview Question Seven: What recommendations can you make to better the SSC services?

When asked about the recommendation for improvement in the SSC, most students stated that the services they received were "alright" and that the processes were "okay." Kevin made no recommendations and stated that "everything was alright" and the people and atmosphere were "nice." Like Kevin, Natasha could think of no recommendation and when asked if improvements could be made stated,

I don't think so [there are any recommendations]. I think it went smoothly because when one person gets through helping someone else they move on to the next one. I don't think it needs any changes like right off hand. I think it is good how it went smoothly and everything. You made it an in and out process.

If recommendations were made, they were related to the need for financial assistance or to the long wait time that occurs in the SSC on some occasions. Financial recommendations included providing more assistance with college costs. Donna reports that she had difficulty purchasing all of her books because of how expensive they are and suggested,

Like if I was working in the SSC, I would try hard to get more money for us [students]....getting more money for our department [SSC]. I would work hard with the president of the school to see if we could get more funds.

In summary, students had very few recommendations about how the SSC could improve its services. Often, interviewees believed that their departure was because of circumstances

outside of the control of the SSC. The primary reasons for departure included financial constraints and the subsequent need to spend time in paid employment. In some instances, students reported reasons for leaving that did not necessarily relate to the SSC; other comments highlighted the fact that students could have benefited from additional program information when initially enrolling in the college, although participants ultimately believed it to be their responsibility to seek out and gain program knowledge.

Conclusion of the Telephone Interviews

Based on responses from the telephone interviews, overall experiences of students with the SSC were positive, and students left the SSC believing that they were provided with good information on which to start their program. When students did encounter problems with the college that made it difficult to complete their coursework, students realized these difficulties did not relate to their experiences in the SSC. All students defined their departure in terms of financial and personal issues over which the college had no control. Several students gave recommendations on changes that could better the SSC services; however, these suggestions did not seem to affect their positive perceptions of the SSC and the welcoming and helpful experiences they remember.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine if there were differences in the retention of students three years before the implementation of the Student Success Centers as compared to the three years after its creation. Additionally, this study looked at the impact of the SSC on retention by gender, race, non-traditional versus traditional status, full-time versus part-time status, major, placement test scores, and financial aid. Also analyzed was student grade point average before and after the SSC.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to examine the research questions. Pre and post SSC data was obtained from the college's database system to respond to the quantitative research questions, and log linear regression was used to analyze this data and to predict student persistence. The population for the quantitative part of the study consisted of two groups of students. The first group included 1,829 first quarter students enrolled in a diploma program during the three years prior to the implementation of the SSC. Individuals in this group were primarily male (1,030) while 799 were female. The second group included 1,712 first quarter students who enrolled in diploma programs during the first three years of the implementation of the SSC. Of this group, 638 were female and 1,074 were male. Random sampling was not conducted since the entire group of students in select majors was included in the study. The pre and post SSC groups were further divided into two groups which were persisters and non-persisters. Persistence was defined as the completion of two quarters and enrollment in a third within a one year period. These students were enrolled in three programs of

study that included Personal/Public Services, Business, or Trade/Industrial. Health programs offered at the college were not considered in this study because the wait list system used to admit students have made appear that students were not retained even though their departure was due to a retention issue.

Two focus groups consisting of currently enrolled college students and ten telephone interviews with student non-persisters were used to respond to the qualitative research questions.

This section is divided into three parts: Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Four research questions guided this study. The summary of these findings are based on the results of both the qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Research Question One

Are there differences in the retention of students before versus after the implementation of the SSC?

The quantitative analysis of the data obtained from the college's database systems indicated that the implementation of the Student Success Center (SSC) did not result in an increase in student retention. Prior to its creation, students were retained at a rate of 54.4% while the post group was retained at a rate of 50.4%.

Research Question Two

Are there differences in students' grades pre versus post the implementation of the SSC?

Analysis of the data indicated differences in student grade point averages pre versus post SSC. The mean grade point average for those enrolled three years prior to the SSC was 2.53 while the post average grade point average was 2.30.

Research Question Three:

Are there differences in the retention of students by personal attributes, financial resources and intellectual disposition before the SSC versus post the SSC?

Log linear regression analysis revealed no significant differences in persistence pre versus post SSC groups as well as no significant differences by gender, race, traditional versus non-traditional status, full-time versus part-time status, nor level of remedial courses needed.

However, significant differences in persistence were found for several variables including campus attended, student major and financial aid. Findings indicated that those enrolled on Campus 2 were less likely to persist when compared to Campus 3. Results also indicated that when compared to those students majoring in Computer Information Systems, students in Accounting and Early Childhood Education were significantly less likely to be retained. Conversely, those enrolled in Industrial Control Systems were more likely to be retained. Also, financial aid was found to significantly impact persistence, with those receiving Pell more likely to persist as compared to those who did not receive this assistance. Likewise, those who received the Hope Grant plus other aid were more apt to persist as compared to students who received no aid. Other aid can include financial assistance from College programs that is awarded to special population groups to offset their college expenses.

Research Question Four:

What are the perceptions of students about the SSC and its role in retaining students?

The students participating in the focus groups and telephone interviews spoke positively about their first enrollment experience and attributed it to the SSC processes. Students commented specifically at how the personal attention allowed time for questions and for an orientation process that was specifically tailored to their individual needs. Overall, students had

no recommendations for improvement of the SSC other than increased staffing during peak registration times.

The focus group and telephone interviews did illuminate the fact that additional program information would be helpful to students during their initial enrollment so that they can make more informed enrollment decisions. Although students indicated that it was their responsibility to seek out this information, providing this information to students during their enrollment in the SSC would be helpful and would ensure that students were aware of program requirements.

In addition, the students who had transferred to the college and had experienced arena style registration indicated the SSC processes were quicker and more helpful. In comparison to their other college experiences, students preferred enrollment through the SSC. An additional qualitative study with those students who transferred to the college from other institutions may further highlight the SSC procedures that students deem useful and those that could be improved.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, the results of this study indicated that financial aid is significantly related to student persistence. In particular, those students receiving financial assistance in addition to the Hope grant were more likely to persist when compared to those who received Hope only or no financial aid. The majority of students enrolled at the college receive the Hope Grant, which pays for all tuition and some fees. Students also received a book voucher that does not usually cover all book expenses. The Pell Grant is additional assistance received by students who qualify for it based on their level of income and the number living in their home. This grant is often used by students to offset expenses that are not paid for by Hope, which makes it easier for students to afford college attendance. Similarly, those who received Hope and other financial aid assistance were also

significantly more likely to persist. Like the Pell Grant, support programs offered at the college that pay for expenses above what Hope covers may make college more affordable. And students who participated in the telephone interviews noted that these services were helpful to their persistence. These students indicated that the additional financial support received made it easier for them to remain in college, particularly since many of these students are non-traditional and had family and personal obligations that made affording college difficult.

In addition, the data revealed that fewer numbers of students received Hope/Pell or Hope and other financial aid post-SSC as compared to the pre-SSC group, which may account for differences in persistence rates. Students who received Hope only or no financial aid may have found it difficult to remain in college. Also, since the implementation of the SSC, the Technical College System of Georgia has required that students attending these institutions pay a \$35 technology fee that is not covered for by the Hope grant. This additional expense, which was not required pre-SSC, may also have contributed to the lower persistence rates of the post group.

Existing research supports the impact of financial resources on student persistence in college. Kalsner (1996) found that financial difficulties impact a student's decision to remain enrolled and that financial hardships exist particularly for low income students. The Institute for College Access & Success (2009) reports that low income students often enroll in community colleges because they are less expensive. However, low income students often find that attending institutions is difficult for them to afford because they have fewer financial resources at their disposal. The amount of unmet financial need of low income students at community colleges is comparatively similar to that of students at four-year public institutions. While students may receive financial aid to assist with college costs, this often is not enough to cover all costs associated with attending college. This seems to be the case with the students

interviewed for this study. Even though they received financial aid, students reported that it often was not enough to make attending college affordable. However, the more financial aid received did increase the likelihood of student persistence.

Additionally, those students who worked while enrolled reported that their persistence was influenced by conflicts with their work. While students interviewed in this study used income from employment to supplement the costs of attending college, they also reported that working limited the time in which they could attend college and was in some cases the reason in which they had to depart before degree completion. These findings are consistent with Orzag, Orzag and Whitmore (2001) found that full-time workers must balance their work responsibilities and their academics, often making it difficult to remain enrolled.

We know that student grade point average impacts retention, with those with lower averages persisting less than those with higher averages (Bean, 1985; Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This study found lower grade point averages for the post SSC group compared to the pre SSC group. Students opting to leave college without completing their courses were often awarded a failing grade if they did not complete the required paperwork to withdraw. This may have resulted in the lower overall student grade point average post SSC. Students' post hoc recognition of the failing grade for incorrect withdrawal may have contributed to their decision to not re-enroll.

A final conclusion can be made concerning the value of the Student Success Centers to first quarter students. Although quantitative data indicate no overall persistence differences pre versus post Student Success Center (SSC), the students interviewed for this study indicate that the SSC provided them with a positive start to their educational experience. Students participating in the focus groups and telephone interviews stated that the enrollment process was

informative and effective. Additionally, students reported that, as compared to their other college enrollment experiences, the SSC provided personal services that were geared to their individual needs.

Recommendations

In reviewing the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made regarding future research opportunities. First, the quantitative findings indicate that the SSC had no significant influence on student persistence or grade point average pre versus post implementation. However, the lack of significant findings for this issue may be due to the small sample size and the limited years in which persistence was reviewed. The sample size may have made it difficult to detect an effect on persistence post SSC. Future studies may analyze the persistence of students during additional years instead of limiting the analysis to the first three years after it was in place.

Findings may be strengthened if the sample size were increased to include all degree-seeking and health students at the college. In the current study, health sciences majors were not included because they are required to wait for one to two years before starting their occupational courses. This wait is due primarily to the popularity of health programs. That is, there are a limited number of students admitted to health programs each admit term, and the number applying to these programs exceeds the number of slots available for admission. Students are placed on waiting lists for their health program and are admitted on a first-come-first served basis. Because heath sciences majors comprise a substantial proportion of degree students, the inclusion of these students may reveal additional findings.

Furthermore, the definition of persistence used for this study required the omission of these students. This study defined persistence as the completion of two quarters and enrollment

in a third quarter during a one year period. Future studies may redefine persistence to determine if other ways of looking at persistence may create significant results and that also can include those students in programs such as health.

Findings from the logistic regression analyses also suggest that those students who receive financial support in additional to Hope are more likely to persist. While the Hope grant pays for tuition and fees and provides a book voucher to help offset enrollment costs, it is often not enough to assist with all costs associated with college attendance. Additional support should make it easier for some students to remain in college. This is particularly true for those students who met the definition of low income by receiving the Pell grant. This group was shown to be nearly one and a half times more likely to persist than those who did not receive this aid. Further examination of the impact of financial aid may reveal the need for additional services to assist students in remaining enrolled.

While interesting and important findings were revealed in the regression analyses, a valuable richness of information was revealed in the focus groups and telephone interviews. Acknowledging that the sample of focus group and interview students was limited and may not generalize to all CVTC students, greater knowledge of students' perceptions about the College, need for financial support, and overall satisfaction with their college experience provide invaluable insights and can assist greatly in future policy and program changes. Comments made during the qualitative interviews provided evidence of how these current and former students interpreted their experience, how they manage the myriad roles they play each day, and what meaning they attribute to each of these experiences. The focus groups and interviews conducted for this study achieved an important overall purpose to achieve an understanding of how students make sense out of their lives related to college attendance.

To achieve and even deeper understanding of student perceptions and their relationship to persistence, future studies could also examine the impact of other SSC career counseling and testing. While many studies have been conducted that address career counseling of postsecondary students, few examine its impact on the persistence of technical college students.

Further examination of the impact of the SSC on enrollment could also provide information on the recruitment value of such a center. Some students, who may have not opted to attend college, could have decided to attend based primarily on their interactions with the SSC staff. A determination of the impact that the SSC had on student enrollment may be of value to postsecondary administrators attempting to attract more students to their institutions.

The findings also yielded information regarding the different ways in which students define their connection to the college. The qualitative research revealed that, while students value the early contact with SSC staff, they do not always define connection to the college in the same way. In some cases, students felt a part of the college through their interactions with staff and faculty while others defined their connection in terms of their overall college attendance. Further review of how students connect with the institution may reveal process that will assist students in remaining in college.

Opportunities also exist to expand the use of the focus groups to further examine the impact of the SSC on students' perceptions of the college experience. This study used students from two existing classes as focus group participants. Increasing the number of focus groups or conducting focus groups with other classes may have yielded different results and may be future opportunity for SSC examination.

In conclusion, the data presented herein show that the SSC provides students with a valuable first quarter enrollment experience but further study is recommended to determine how

specific services offered by the SSC impact persistence. Additional examination of SSC may yield other ways in which the SSC improves the college experience for beginning students.

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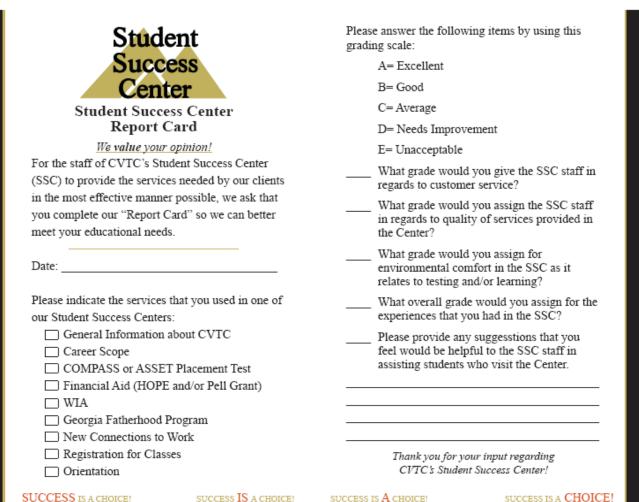
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APPENDIX A

REPORT CARD



APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

I,, agree to participate in a research study titled "Student Success Centers and
their Impact on Student Retention" conducted by Jan Whatley, the researcher, under the Direction of Karen
W. Webber, Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia (706-542-6831). While this study will
involve Coosa Valley Technical College (CVBTC) data and students, this study is not being conducted by
CVTC. I understand that my participation in voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part
without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.
The reason for this Focus Group is to determine the impact that the implementation of Student Success
Centers has had on student retention. If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the
following things:
1) Respond to questions about my enrollment at CVTC which should take approximately one hour
2) Some from the study may call me to clarify my information
3) Your responses will be kept confidential; responses will be compiled into a single report with no individual identified.
4) My information will be kept until the completion of this study and then will be destroyed.
No risk is expected as a result of my participation in this study. The benefits for me are that my responses

No risk is expected as a result of my participation in this study. The benefits for me are that my responses will be used to evaluate the services at CVTC. I will have an opportunity to state my opinions about enrollment services. Should I choose to attend CVTC in the future, I will benefit from the changes in processes that may occur as a result of my participation in this study. I will receive a Coosa Valley Technical College gift for participating in this research.

No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission. My first name only will be used to track my responses and will be de-identified during the research report.

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

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

Jan Whatley		Date
Name of Researcher Telephone: 706-295-6841	Signature	
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

Focus Group Questions

- 1. Please give your first name and tell us what your program of study was at CVTC?
- 2. Were you working while enrolled?
- 3. What was your first experience like at CVTC?
- 4. Describe your enrollment process at CVTC.
- 5. How connected did you feel to CVTC?
- 6. What changes would you recommend to improve our registration process at CVTC?

APPENDIX D

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

My name is Jan Whatley and I am a University of Georgia researcher doing a study on Coosa Valley Technical College's admissions process. My study is not being conducted by Coosa Valley Technical College but is being conducted as part of my doctoral course work at the University of Georgia.

I would like to ask you if you have time to answer a few questions about your enrollment experiences at Coosa Valley Technical College. This should take approximately ten to 15 minutes. The information you provide will be valuable not only to Coosa Valley Technical College but to other colleges that want to review their admissions procedures. Is now a good time for you to speak to me?

Responds No: Is there a better time for me to speak with you?

Doesn't Want to Participate: Thanks for your time, and if you should have questions about this matter, please feel free to contact me at (706) 295-6841.

Yes will participate: Thank you. Please know that your responses will be kept confidential and that only your first name will be used when reporting this data. Also, by responding to these questions, you are giving your consent to participate in my study.

APPENDIX E

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1. Please give your first name and tell us what your program of study was at CVTC?
- 2. Were you working while enrolled? If so, how many hours?
- 3. What was your first experience like at CVTC?
- 4. Describe your enrollment process at CVTC.
- 5. How connected did you feel to CVTC?
- 6. What led you to drop out of your program of study?
- 7. What would have made you feel more connected to CVTC as a student?
- 8. What changes would you recommend to improve our registration process at CVTC?