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Belonging: A Grounded Theory Approach to Retaining First-Year Students in Women's Colleges

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BELONGING:

A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH TO

RETAINING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN WOMEN'S COLLEGES

A Dissertation

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, Belonging: A Grounded Theory Approach to Retaining First-Year Students in Women's Colleges, has been approved by the Ed.D. Faculty of the University of Lynchburg in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ed.D. degree.

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Date

DEDICATION

The journey to achieve a doctorate degree is, at times, beyond overwhelming. On my most exhausting days, I continued to move forward simply because of my children and my desire to prove to them that, indeed, nothing is impossible. To Emma Grace and Douglas, I open my arms and simply say, “thank you” for believing in your mother. No words can ever adequately express my love for each of you…my pride and joy.

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Finally, to Dr. Sally Selden, my dissertation chair – my gratitude for your nurture, nourishment and "no-nonsense" approach cannot be expressed in the English language. I remain your humble pupil and devoted student. Thank you.

I am an educated woman.

I will be defined by how I give back what I have been given…

-MTK, 2020

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

The mother of a first semester college sophomore recently came to campus to meet with various administrators regarding her daughter's failure to persist. Her daughter earned below a 1.0 GPA the previous spring, accumulated hundreds of dollars in parking tickets, still failed to purchase a parking permit for her car, and owed over $12,000 in tuition. During conversations with the dean of students, the daughter would burst into tears and/or become openly accusatory of how the institution had caused her to fail – socially, mentally, and academically. The student insisted that the institution had rendered her unable to persist by changing the layout of the academic year (one 3-week term and one 12-week term, versus a 15-week semester), the retirement of the mental health professional whom she had been seeing the previous spring, and the restructuring of the curriculum (streamlining majors and reducing faculty). However, the semester in which she earned below a 1.0 GPA, she was provided consistent mental health counseling by the same, retired professional, and she had progressed through the same, basic curriculum structure in the fall semester of the previous year. Pursuant to her mother's departure, the institution received a detailed email (Appendix I) describing her daughter's challenges and instructions as to what the institution needed to provide to ensure her future success. At the student's request, she was granted a medical withdrawal the next day.

Similarly, the mother of a first-year student contacted the dean of students to convey that her daughter was exhibiting signs of anxiety and depression and talking about leaving after two months of school. During a conference between the dean and her daughter, the student was quick to point out that she was unprepared for how different college would be compared to high school. When the dean asked her to explain, the student stated that during high school she had literally been walked to each class during the day as part of her learning accommodations plan.

The dean enthusiastically pointed out that college was a place to discover her independence and stretch her wings. The student responded, “It’s too much.” After a holiday break, the dean accidentally ran into this particular student and was informed by the student that she had decided to stay pending approval of an emotional support animal. The student’s mother called the dean of students three times in the same morning to ask if the dean had arranged a meeting with her daughter. The daughter belonged to a sports team, was consistently surrounded by friends, and appeared to be holding her own academically. At the end of her first semester, the student was declared ineligible academically. Upon receiving notification of her standing, the student contacted the institution requesting an appeal of the decision. The institution formulated a plan for the student’s success which involved weekly meetings with the director of academic resources, the academic dean, and various advising faculty. The student responded to the institution’s outreach by stating, “there was no way she could meet all of the requirements to come back.”

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, a first-year college student was asked to stop by the dean of students’ office for a chat at the end of a semester. The student had received multiple midterm warning alerts at the beginning of the semester due to her absence from class. As the discussion with the dean began, the student’s voice became softer, and she became visibly more uncomfortable. “Why haven’t you been in class?” the dean asked. “Well, you see, I did go to a couple of classes and then I got sick,” replied the student. “Yes?” responded the dean. “Well, after I had missed two classes and didn’t respond when my professor reached out, I was embarrassed to go back. I got to class the next time – but I felt really uncomfortable and didn’t know what to say, so I just hid in the bathroom.” Weeks later, at the end of the semester, this

same student ran up to the dean of students one morning to give her a big hug. “Aren’t you proud of me?” the student asked. “I got up this morning.”

As the aforementioned vignettes portray, colleges and universities are increasingly enrolling first-year, full-time students who carry with them a plethora of needs that must be met in order to retain them. Those needs and expectations put colleges and universities at a disadvantage as they wrestle with retention issues heretofore unparalleled. The increasing demand for student services has become critically important as administrators grapple with the intricacies of strategic plans and budget constraints. In a 2018 publication by the Chronicle of Education entitled, “The New Generation of Students: How colleges can recruit, reach and serve Gen Z,” it is pointed out that the current generation of college student is focused on services. One author states that the new cohort of first-year students is interested in wellness initiatives, holistic wellness, stress management and, at John Hopkins University, massages (Seemiller, p. 36). In addition, administrators and student affairs professionals have identified students with unique dietary needs as well as food and housing insecurities. In fact, at Georgetown University, a special program called the “necessity fund” provides financial support for groceries, a winter coat, or a place to stay if a student’s living situation is untenable (Lipka, 2019, p. 49-50).

The issues laid in the laps of student affairs professionals are complex, daunting and, in some cases, insurmountable. Pertaining to new students, the efforts to provide success mechanisms often leave professionals exhausted and disheartened. The professional and ethical questions being asked by student affairs professionals continue to grow: What, indeed, is the ethical responsibility of the institution with regard to providing services that may cross the line between raising and educating? Where does the intersection of college preparedness, adolescent development, parental involvement, and institutional effectiveness lie? Is higher education

prepared to bring back the concept of *in loco parentis* (Merriam-Webster, 2019), establishing regulations for educators to assume parental responsibility for entering first-year students? Are students who persist in secondary educational settings and, indeed, thrive, primarily set up for failure once they enter college because services that most secondary high schools may provide are not available at the collegiate level? How can the assumption be allowed to continue that these same students magically mature, learn how to be resilient and are ready to succeed in college three months after graduating without those same support mechanisms? Specifically, are retention issues pertaining to women's colleges unique and what, if any, mechanisms exist to assist first-year women enrolled at women's colleges?

Given these crucial questions, the researcher examined existing seminal retention theories, the state of current programs designed to assist first-year, full-time female college students, and the real-world experiences of deans of students. Of critical importance was the acknowledgement of a gap in the research literature pertaining, specifically, to women's colleges. Interviews gave voice to female college students as they completed their first year as well as prospective first-year females about to matriculate to ascertain what first-year students needed to persist and/or what they expected to receive. Grounded theory research provided an opportunity for the emergence of contemporary retention theory as seen through the lens of both student affairs professionals and the students they serve.

Defining the Problem

Attending college is expensive and, for most families, a major investment. Given that most high school students are now applying to multiple colleges, even application fees can be daunting. Add to those fees travel costs, tuition, room, board, etc., and the overall prospect of affording a college education is equivalent to home buying. Unfortunately, after beginning the

journey of moving heaven and earth to make college even remotely affordable, many first-year, first-time college students fail to return for their second year. According to a 2018 *Hechinger Report* on Higher Education filed by Marcus,

> The proportion of high school graduates who go straight to college has increased from 63 percent in 2000 to 70 percent now, but the proportion of full-time, first time students who return for a second year, either full- or part-time – has improved only slightly at public four-year universities, where it is up by 2.6 percentage points since 2011…At private non-profit colleges, it's eked up by just 1.3 percentage points. And at private for-profit colleges and universities, more than 44 percent of students leave before finishing. (p. 4)

ReUp Education, a consulting firm, stated in the same 2018 *Hechinger Report* that over one million students a year are leaving colleges and universities (p. 4). Furthermore, *Inside Higher Ed* concurs, citing data gleaned from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center which tracks 96% of students enrolling in college for the first time: only 52.9% of students who entered college in 2009 persisted to graduation within six years (Chuck, 2015). Although women's colleges have made some gains in graduation rates (Women's College Coalition, 2014, p. 18), the gains do not seem to be enough to stave off the continuing fate of closure. The most recent report from the Women's College Coalition (2014) stated there were 46 women's colleges in existence. In the year 2019, that number had dropped to 37, according to the WCC website.

In his seminal research published in 1987, Tinto brought the retention conversation to the higher education forefront. He pointed out that students who have managed to scrape together the financial means to attend college and then do not graduate have simply not received a return on their investment. In the case of a college education, not graduating could lead to disastrous fiscal consequences. The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reported that

> For the 2016–17 academic year, the average annual price for undergraduate tuition, fees, room, and board was $17,237 at public institutions, $44,551 at private nonprofit institutions, and $25,431 at private for-profit institutions. Between 2006–07 and 2016–17, prices for undergraduate tuition, fees, room, and board at public institutions rose 31

> percent, and prices at private nonprofit institutions rose 24 percent, after adjustment for inflation.

Students who drop out often find themselves in enormous debt with no means to climb out of the hole and, because salary expectations are decidedly lower without a college degree, no means to repay student loans. Even in the best of circumstances, repayment of student loans can be overwhelming for those who persist to graduation. For those who do not, loans can be crippling. Students often do not understand the intricacies and downstream effects caused by the financial aid world. Additionally, first-year college students often do not understand that buyer's remorse can be costly. Simply deciding that enrolling in college may have been a mistake does not mean the institution or the Federal Government will be financially forgiving.

Institutionally speaking, particularly for small colleges and universities, the focus on student enrollment and retention has become a matter of survival – this seems to be even more blatantly true for women's colleges. Tinto (1987) stated, "primarily the smaller tuition-driven colleges, have teetered on the brink of financial collapse. Indeed, many have closed their doors in recent years with many more predicted to follow suit," (p. 2). In 2015, Moody's Investor Services estimated that the number of closure rates experienced by small colleges and universities would triple. Moody's also predicted the number of mergers between institutions would double (Woodhouse, para. 2). The increase in discounted tuition rates is problematic along with declining enrollment figures and decreasing retention statistics. Ruffalo Noel Levitz, an enrollment management firm, reported to *College Factual* that the cost to private colleges to recruit one student could be as high as $2,433 with costs closer to $457 for public colleges (2017). Obviously, colleges and universities have a healthy incentive to encourage retention. The question is, can they decrease attrition by meeting student demand for more programs and services as the cost for those services continues to rise?

The Federal government, too, has become involved in the high stakes game of student retention. In 2015, *Higher Ed Live* reported performance-based metrics on the rise with regard to the awarding of government-based funding. As reported, "states have shifted their focus to graduation rates as the key priority for determining government funding to institutions. More than 75% of states use a performance-based funding initiative, with some states basing 100% of their funding on graduation rates" (Sousa, 2019, para. 7). Additionally, Sousa wrote, "In order to determine just how much money can be saved by improving student retention, consider a sample scenario of an institution with 15,000 students. If this sample school were to improve their retention rate by even just one percent, they would save about 1.4 million dollars per year" (para. 9).

Recent changes in the political climate have brought about their own set of woes to higher education. Under a GOP proposal, The House of Representatives has presented legislation to reauthorize the *Higher Education Act*, or *The Prosper Act* as it is known. This legislation would mandate that colleges and universities return federal aid money if a student withdraws before a quarter of the term is over. *Inside Higher Ed* reported that this tactic "could leave them (colleges & universities) shouldering more of the costs for late-semester withdrawals and all of the costs when a student withdraws early in the semester" (Kreighbaum, 2018, para. 10). Jason Lewis (2017), the Minnesota Congressman who first introduced the legislation in 2017, opined, "By streamlining how colleges calculate the amount of aid earned, schools will be able to spend less time and resources on compliance. The bill shifts the primary burden of repaying unearned aid onto the colleges, giving them a strong incentive to promote student persistence and success" (para. 3). Whether colleges and universities have the incentive to enable students to persist to graduation is not the issue. The question is, can institutions meet the rising demands of what it takes to get them across the finish line?

Additionally, a critical piece of the retention conversation pertains to the declining number of students who are even interested in continuing their education beyond secondary schools. As reported by the National Student Clearinghouse in a 2018 *Hechinger Report*, there are now 2.9 million fewer college students than in 2011 (Krupnick, 2018). A similar *Hechinger Report* stated, "Students who leave are also costing colleges significant amounts of money in forgone tuition — $16.5 billion a year collectively, according to a review of 1,669 institutions by the Educational Policy Institute, or $13.3 million for the average public and nearly $10 million for the typical private college or university" (Marcus, 2018, para. 22). Student attrition is costly to both colleges and universities in danger of losing the battle of retaining students and teaching them to persist. It is devastating to the students who invest heavily and leave early with nothing but feelings of failure and student debt.

Interestingly, the *New England Journal of Higher Education* suggested in a 2011 article by Lawrence Butler, that one way to address the retention issue in higher education was to simply acknowledge that enrollment practices should be adjusted to only recruit students with the highest possibility of persisting. Changing the enrollment paradigm by looking into the retention crystal ball could be incredibly courageous and, ultimately, effective. It could also be disastrous.

Another way, perhaps, would be to examine and accept the truth of what most colleges and universities are undertaking as college students matriculate. Retention and its subsequent theory have been studied for years, but rarely, has serious study been given which included the voice of both student affairs professionals and contemporary first-year students. By examining the real-world experiences of both deans of students and first-year women enrolled in women's colleges, a deeper understanding was gleaned with regard to the underlying causes of declining

enrollment, harrowing retention rates, escalating financial costs, and declining graduation rates. The plight of women's colleges may be seen as a microcosm for co-educational institutions experiencing the same intrinsic difficulties on a different scale.

For the purpose of this research study, the deans of students employed by colleges and universities within the 37 members of the Women's College Coalition (WCC) were interviewed. Students about to complete their first year at an all-female liberal arts college in rural, central Virginia were also interviewed as well as first-year students about to matriculate. Identifying contemporary issues both cohorts face provided information necessary to foster emerging modern theory.

A delimitation of the study confined the participants to both students and deans of students within the WCC, therefore, resulting in certain concepts which may only be applicable to female, first-year college students. It is believed, however, that generalized theory emerged that is applicable to female co-educational first-year college students as well. The emergence of contemporary theory will benefit deans of students struggling to keep up with the demands of an unpredictable and highly individualized generation. In addition, this research study gave voice to first-year female college students, and will allow student affairs professionals the opportunity to design important programs and services needed to help them persist towards graduation.

Summary

Merriam-Webster defines the word *raise* as a transitive verb. Of the many definitions listed, the most appropriate ones for the purpose of this research study include, "to cause or help to rise to a standing position; to awaken, arouse or incite; to bring to maturity" (Merriam-Webster, 2018). What, then, are colleges and universities doing if not raising college students? Indeed, speaking plainly and pointedly about the state of higher education may benefit all

concerned and provide a pathway to ensure colleges and universities are providing what students actually need to persist towards graduation. Research methods explicitly designed to examine retention issues experienced by deans of students at women's colleges, as well as those experienced by first-year, full-time students enrolled at those colleges, provided important insights which can be applicable to co-educational institutions and, specifically, female students in general. By listening to the voices of student affairs professionals and intersecting them with the voices of first-year, female college students, grounded theory research offered an emerging framework for successful intervention methods in the efforts to increase retention.

CHAPTER 2 – REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

In his seminal work, *Leaving College Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, Tinto (1987, 1993) spoke to the fact that student attrition, and therefore student retention, have become an increasingly integral part of institutional strategic planning. Since Tinto's inaugural treatise on the *Student Integration Model* (1975), why college students leave (attrition) and what institutions can do to encourage them to stay (retention) have become a part of critical conversations regarding the fiscal health of colleges and universities. These discussions have birthed a plethora of research and program initiatives designed to solve retention problems as they pertain to students of co-educational colleges and universities, especially first-year, full-time students.

An attempt to identify studies that specifically pertained to the retention of women who attend women's colleges, however, showed a distinct gap in the literature. The very few studies found addressed women in the science, technology, engineering or math fields (STEM) or women belonging to affinity groups (e.g., minorities, transgender, first generation). Additionally, no longitudinal studies were identified that addressed either the broad or specific issues encountered by first-year, full-time female students across the continuum of matriculation to persistence towards graduation in women's colleges. With this in mind, the literature review examines existing retention theory in co-curricular settings beginning with the works of Tinto (1987, 1993) (*Leaving College* and *Completing College – Rethinking Institutional Action*) and also relies heavily upon Aljohani's 2016 study entitled, "A Comprehensive Review of the Major Studies and Theoretical Models of Student Retention in Higher Education." This study offers a comprehensive overview of the history of retention modeling. In addition, general longitudinal studies based on colleges and universities in Australia and Great Britain are included, and data

gleaned from studies including the Higher Education Research Institute 2016 American Freshman Survey, the National Research Center for the First-Year Experience, and Students in Transition from the University of South Carolina are referenced.

The articles included in the literature review were gleaned from sources using the terms "retention, first-year experience, high-impact practices, attrition, persistence and transition," and "anxiety, depression, suicide, resilience, social media, mental health, self-efficacy, attribution theory, parental attachment, and educational trends in primary and secondary educational settings." Whereas existing retention theory addressed first-year, full-time co-educational college students in a more generic, broadly sweeping way, contemporary college students demand specific and finely-tuned study using a multi-faceted lens. In an effort to engage in this level of stratification and to obtain a real-world picture of today's female first-year, full-time college student, articles from the *Journal of Counseling and Development, The Journal of Higher Education,* and the *Journal of Further Higher Education* were among those studied. Online resources included the *Chronicle of Higher Education, The American Psychological Association, The Hechinger Report, The National Association of Student Affairs Professionals* website, and *Higher Ed Live*. In addition to the Tinto texts previously referenced, works by Twenge (2017), and Seemiller and Grace (2016) were included.

Immersion into the available literature on the retention of college students identified a gap in the study of first-year, full-time female students enrolled in women's colleges. This identified gap exposed the immediate need for research in the field. By joining the real-world experiences and expectations of first-year, full-time female college students who attend women's colleges—both those who are about to complete their first year, newly enrolled students (who have not matriculated)—and working deans of students, grounded theory research was utilized to

explore the unique, dynamic intersection possible when evidence of current retention practice merges with the analysis of student expectation and immediate need.

Existing Theory and History

The effects of student attrition and retention are wide-reaching, both personally and institutionally, and multiple research studies have been devoted to both the problem and the efforts made to theorize the possible solutions. Beginning in the 1980s, a concerted effort was made to shift the conversation of student retention from a psychological point of view to a marriage of the psychological lens and the sociological perspective—from the proverbial question of what's wrong with the students to how can institutions partner with students to facilitate an increase in retention (Aljohani, 2016). It became clear, as research continued, that the focus of student retention was becoming the responsibility of institutions. Researchers were asking what, if any, means those institutions could employ to decrease attrition and increase retention. In his comprehensive 2016 article, Aljohani referenced several major retention studies including Tinto's *Institutional Departure Model* (1975, 1993), Bean's *Student Attrition Model* (1980, 1982), the *Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model* (Pascarella, 1980), Astin's *Student Involvement Model* (1984), and the *Student Retention Integrated Model* (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993). Lacking research on first-year, full-time female students who attend women's colleges, existing research on first-year, full-time co-educational students will be used to establish a foundation for theoretical suppositions. These models will be examined as they relate to co-educational institutions and college students in general.

In his ground-breaking work, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Retention,* Tinto's (1987, 1993) *Theory of Departure* sought to dissuade educators from normalizing the phenomena of attrition by stereotyping students who did not persist as "drop

outs" (p. 3). Tinto, instead, attempted to theorize the phenomenon of student attrition, and thus give colleges and universities a road map to assist in retaining undergraduates. Additionally, Tinto sought to change the perspective and to invite educators to see students and, thus their retention, as a complex system involving transition mechanisms, on the one hand, combined with an intentional institutional effort to engage students socially and intellectually (Tinto, 1993) on the other hand. Tinto (1993) wrote, "In the final analysis, the key to successful student retention lies with the institution, in its faculty and staff, not in any one formula or recipe" (p. 4). With regard to any institution fixating on retention, Tinto continued, "institutions and students would be better served if a concern for the education of students, (and) their social and intellectual growth, were the guiding principal of institutional action. When that goal is achieved, enhanced student retention will naturally follow" (p. 4). Tinto took an objective viewpoint of institutional effectiveness, recommending that gains in retention be based on the following principles: institutional commitment to the students, educational commitment, and social and intellectual commitment to the community.

As stated, Tinto's (1975) earliest work revolved around his creation of the *Student Integration Model* (SIM). This model, based on Durkheim's *Theory of Suicide* (1897), was intended to offer a longitudinal framework which would explain the interaction of every aspect of a student's decision to leave college (McCubbin, 2003). Relevant to Durkheim's theory is the assumption that students leave because they have not integrated into the college community in a meaningful way (McCubbin, 2003). Although it is generally accepted that Tinto's model is a critically important starting point (and has remained so since 1975), for conversations regarding student attrition and retention, it is not without criticism. Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, and Bracken (2000) questioned the appropriateness of SIM as it relates to student attrition and

suggested, based on their research, that student departure research should also involve questions of interactionist and ethnographic theory or cultural and social processes.

Bean's *Student Attrition Model* (1980) followed Tinto's 1975 work, but used Price's (1977) model of turnover in work organizations as its basis. Contrary to Tinto's work, Bean (1980) considered a student's "pre-matriculation characteristics" (p. 157) and asked how they might be influential as a student interacted with the organization (college community). Bean tested the causal model of student attrition in 1977 at a major co-educational Midwestern university using questionnaires distributed to approximately 2,500 new first-year students. With a return rate of about 66%, 98% of the returned questionnaires were usable (Bean, 1980). Women, by and large, expressed dissatisfaction with issues which today could be characterized as those of "belonging" to the campus community (Bean, 1980). Even though Bean determined by way of his research in 1977 that attrition determinants were somewhat different for men and women, there still persists a gap in the current research pertaining to first-year, full-time attrition at women's colleges.

Cabrera et al. (1992) also questioned Tinto's lack of consideration regarding students' "(shaping of) perceptions, commitments, and preferences" (p. 144) or the external factors which could contribute to student attrition, suggesting that the two theories (Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1975) might be combined in an effort to understand predictors of persistence (p. 123). Doing so would incorporate both the composition of the individual student in conjunction with the institution itself and its academic and social community.

Capitalizing on Tinto's hypothesis that interactions with faculty outside of the classroom in predominantly informal settings could be beneficial in increasing student retention (Tinto, 1987, 1993), Pascarella (1980) is credited with creation of the *Student-Faculty Informal Contact*

Model. In working with Terenzini (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979), Pascarella conducted a research study using first-year students at Syracuse University during 1975-1976. Using 528 surveys of the sample population, researchers again found somewhat different measurable metrics between men and women first-year students. Male students tended to report informal contact with faculty members as important from a much more concrete perspective. Specifically, men used informal contacts to discuss future career plans and course offerings. Females, on the other hand, processed these informal contacts in a much more intrinsic way, reporting these interactions as a means to discuss campus issues and socializing informally with faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979, p. 217). Again, issues of being connected to a community appear to be important to female first-year college students.

In 1984, Astin penned the *Student Involvement Model* based upon the theory that student persistence and, therefore, retention is based in part on behalf of the student herself and how much psychological and physical energy she is willing to commit to the collegiate experience (p. 518). Parallel in importance to Tinto's *Theory of Departure Model* (Tinto, 1987, 1993), the *Student Involvement Model* theorizes that every influencing factor deemed as a positive mechanism for student retention correlates with student involvement (Astin, 1984, p. 523). As Astin states, "the act of dropping out can be viewed as the ultimate act of noninvolvement" (p. 542).

In 1997, Milem and Berger sought to explore empirically the relationship between Tinto's *Theory of Departure* and Astin's *Theory of Student Involvement*. Milem and Berger collected data at three different points over a one-year period between 1995-1996 at a private, residential university located in the southeastern United States (p. 392) from first-year, full-time students. The resulting longitudinal study gleaned data from 718 students. Clear findings from

this study suggested that there is, indeed, a partnership to be found intersecting Tinto's theory based on institutional engagement (on behalf of the institution) and Astin's theory based on student involvement (on behalf of the student). Milem and Berger found that an important element of student retention is identifying where the crossroads of student involvement and student perception of support from the institution lies, keeping in mind the transition point where first-year students begin to feel a sense of acclimation into the fabric of the institution (p. 398).

The Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera et al., 1992) also sees an opportunity to integrate and expand upon Tinto's work by adding Bean's *Student Attrition Model* to it. Asserting that Tinto's theory, simplified, is a comment on the lack of a strong affiliation between students and institutions, Cabrera et al. combines this thought with behavioral intention and external influences (Bean, 1980), and thus arrives at a new theory altogether. In this study, researchers attempted to glean data on approximately 2,500 first-year, full-time students at a large co-educational southern institution between 1988-1989. Useable data resulted from 466 surveys. Findings suggested that a more comprehensive model of student persistence could be found by combining the models of both Tinto and Bean resulting in a more "complex interplay among individual, environmental, and institutional factors" (Cabrera et al., 1992, p. 135).

Twenty years later, Tinto appears to have agreed with the foundations of the work by Cabrera et al., and in 2012 his work continued in *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*. In this text, Tinto (2012) expanded his beliefs about institutional responsibility by stating, "student attrition was as much a reflection of the academic and social environments of an institution – and therefore of the institutional actions that established those environments – as was the character of the students enrolled in the institution" (p. vii). The work maintains that institutions contractually enter into a moral obligation to provide students with an environment

ripe for success (Tinto, 2012) and presents a framework for institutional decision-making in an effort to produce those desired results. In their criticism of Tinto's updated work, Tierney and Sablan (2014) acknowledge Tinto's genius with regard to retention theory but fault his inability to address still emerging issues in higher education.

Tinto's focus does change somewhat in this text as he tries to identify what the student entering college needed and what the university had an obligation to provide. While now pointing out that each student brings a unique set of psycho/social underpinnings, Tinto (2012) hypothesized that "student departure serve(d) as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of institutional life" (p. 5).

In reference to other existing models of retention, Tinto (2012) believed they were overly focused on the failure of the individual student to adjust and/or transition to the collegiate landscape. He maintained there was no psychological profile which divided those who stayed from those who did not. Tinto urged institutions not to "blame the victim" but to look within themselves to design social and intellectual programs aimed at engaging students, and thus retaining them (p. vii). The primary goal of his text continued to focus on changes that the institution could enact that would encourage students to acclimate and persist. Even in his efforts to update retention theory, Tinto still placed major responsibility on the institution itself for engaging and retaining students.

Speaking at a National Academic Advising Association conference in Denver, Colorado several years later, Tinto continued to herald institutional change, stating four conditions that must be addressed in order to take retention seriously: information/advice, support, involvement, and learning (Tinto, 1999). In contrast, in 2016, Tinto wrote an essay for *Inside Higher Ed*, entitled "*How to Improve Student Persistence and Completion*." In this essay, he changed the

entire landscape of retention theory by stating, “For years, our prevailing view of student retention has been shaped by theories that view student retention through the lens of institutional action and ask what institutions can do to retain their students. Students, however, do not seek to be retained. They seek to persist” (Tinto, 2016, para. 1). In this speech, Tinto appears to begin seeing contemporary college students from a different lens by stating that institutions may indeed be somewhat limited in their ability to shape student motivation. His speech continued, encouraging higher education, as a whole, to begin to see students’ ability to persist as a combination of their self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived value of the curriculum (Tinto, 2016). The key to addressing persistence (and, by default, retain college students) seems to be found in the sincere and intentional effort to see students as more than consumers. When considering the aforementioned historical span of retention theory, early theorists agree that student success combines student experience (before and during college), intention, and energy spent towards success with institutional provision for both academic and social environments for success.

Contemporary Issues in Higher Education

Mental health. International findings by the World Health Organization documented that more than one third of first-year students (in eight industrialized countries) were experiencing symptoms similar to those experienced by individuals with diagnosed mental health disorders. In reporting these findings, the American Psychological Association (2018) illuminated the compelling argument that colleges and universities must address the mental health needs of students. Previously, the 2016 American Freshman Survey reported that 21.9% of incoming first-year college students self-identified as having at least one disability or psychological disorder. Subsequently in 2017, the Higher Education Research Institute surveyed 137,456 freshmen at

184 colleges and universities finding that less than half of entering first-year students consider their own, personal mental health to be above average when compared to their peer group (HERI, 2017). This anomaly stood out as a first for the American Freshman Survey. Twenge (2017) reported that the number of teenage girls who attempted suicide between 2009-2015 increased by 43%. The number of college students who considered suicide rose by 60% between 2011 and 2016 (Twenge, 2017, p. 110). In a 2018 article, Twenge stated that mental health issues such as depression and self-harm began to show up in teenagers at about the same time smartphones became routine household products. The author continued by pointing out that current recommendations are to allow teenagers about two hours or less a day in smartphone time (Twenge, 2018). In 2018, Common Sense Media reported that of students who use a smartphone, the average use time for teens was nine hours (Anderson, 2018).

In the spring of 2018, Time.com reported findings from the American College Health Association that in the previous year (2017), 40% of college students were experiencing debilitating depression while 61% of those surveyed (63,000 at 92 schools) battled overwhelming anxiety. These figures arguably include some overlap; however, four years earlier, Henriques (2014) referred to the state of college students suffering mental health maladies as an epidemic and described the current situation as a "crisis in higher education" (para. 1). Health centers at the nation's larger colleges and universities are resorting to creative solutions. In the fall of 2017, Time.com reported that UCLA offered online depression screenings free of charge, and Virginia Tech had opened counseling clinics aimed at reaching students where they spend the most time – one being at a local Starbucks. In addition, Pennsylvania State University set aside close to $700,000 in funding for counseling and psychological services (Time.com, 2018). The three universities listed, however, are among the largest in the nation. Speaking to the

mental health crisis of college students, The New York Times featured the following articles, "When There is a Mental Health Crisis in Your Dorm," "Feeling Suicidal, Students Turned to Their College. They Were Told to Go Home," and "His College Knew of His Despair. His Parents Didn't, Until It Was Too Late," (NYTimes, 2018). Suicide, depression, and anxiety have ceased to be topics for discussion between mental health counselors and clients only.

A national survey conducted in 1995 determined that the dropout rate for students with mental health disorders was 86% (Kessler, Foster, Saunders, & Stang, 1995). Even as Tinto's theories of student retention were beginning to be debated and embraced, hordes of students were leaving college campuses with mental health issues simply because college campuses were, arguably, not prepared to address the issue in the 1990s. A 2013 research study by Hartley, entitled, "Investigating the Relationship of Resilience to Academic Persistence in College Students with Mental Health Issues," determined that a resilience framework specifically designed for students with mental health issues was worthy of exploration regarding academic persistence. As pertains to studies on female students, a study conducted on Spanish college-aged women found elevated levels of psychological distress (Vázquez, Otero, & Díaz, 2012). The study also made note of the fact that in spite of the fact that the majority of college students are women and that women statistically suffer higher rates of mental disorders, few studies have focused solely on female college-aged women (Vásquez et al., 2012, p. 220). Finally, an opinion published by *The Ithacan*, an online news source from Ithaca College, summarized the retention dilemma well by stating, "Making students wait to speak to a counselor only worsens their mental state. The decision to then leave the college becomes a natural response to not having one's mental–health needs met by their institution" (2017).

Helicopter parenting. In addition to mental health concerns, contemporary college students (and their faculty and administrators) have to navigate a new development—helicopter parents. Phone-tracking apps give parents access to the whereabouts of their college-aged children 24/7, and as Twenge (2017) reports, most children seem to acquiesce to that access. Helicopter parenting is parenting that is "high on warmth/support, high on control, and low on granting autonomy… and appears to be driven by parental separation anxiety" (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012, p. 1178). Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012) made special mention of the fact that use of the term "helicopter parenting" is not intended to be a new label for over-involved parenting; rather, the term comments on the parent/child relationship as it continues to be portrayed in pop culture. Examples of this relationship can be found in parents who refuse to leave once their children have arrived at college going so far as to attend classes with them for the first week, negotiate roommate disputes, and arrange class schedules (Gabriel, 2010). In 2004, Marano writing for *Psychology Today*, opined, "Parents are going to ludicrous lengths to take the bumps out of life for their children. However, parental hyper-concern has the net effect of making kids more fragile; that may be why they're breaking down in record numbers (para. 1)."

In the study engineered by Padilla-Walker and Nelson (2012), researchers compiled data working with 438 undergraduate students (320 women, 118 men) and at least one of their parents (376 mothers, 303 fathers). Of the participants, 39% were first-year students (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2012, p. 1180). Findings indicated that helicopter parenting in emerging adults was akin to the parenting approach one would expect of that exhibited over younger children and not at all consistent with the type of parenting style one would associate with college-aged students (p. 1178). Researchers also determined that college-aged adults with over solicitous parents

"may take less of a proactive, personally invested approach to the important tasks of emerging adulthood such as pursuing an education/career" (p. 1187). It was also established that helicopter parents hinder the process of children becoming autonomous with students experiencing lower levels of self-worth and identity development, and these children often exhibit a lack of desire to engage in school participation (p. 1180).

Similarly, results of a research study conducted by Kouros, Pruitt, Ekas, Kiriaki and Sunderland (2017) revealed that "higher levels of helicopter parenting predicted lower levels of well-being for females" (p. 939). In this particular study, researchers examined what, if any, gender-related differences helicopter parenting had on autonomy support on college students' mental health and well-being. The sample group consisted of 118 undergraduate students between the ages of 18-25 from two mid-sized, private universities in the Southwest. As stated, results of the study found that helicopter parenting was associated with lower levels of well-being for females, and, conversely, support for autonomy was associated with fewer feelings of general dissatisfaction and less social anxiety for males (p. 944). Costa, Soenens, Gugliandolo, Cuzzocrea, and Larcan (2015) reached similar conclusions regarding helicopter parenting and its association with lower levels of well-being for females.

A natural part of the maturation process is the journey to self-reliance and autonomy. No research could be identified that pointed to statistics on the percentage of contemporary parents who engage in what could be termed "helicoptering." A New York Times Article entitled, "Students, Welcome to College; Parents Go Home," insinuates the number is on the rise (Gabriel, 2010). Additionally, a plethora of evidence exists pertaining to the increase of anxiety and mental health issues among college-aged students, and research examined concluded there was a correlation between helicopter parenting and well-being (Kouros et al., 2017). These types

of overly-involved parents are particularly problematic in almost every facet of the lives of residential college students. Specifically, for those students who do not wish to grant colleges and universities permission to speak with their parents in accordance with the Federal Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA), helicopter parents can become a nightmare of demands and litigation threats, leaving anxious children in their wake.

Summary

A thorough examination of the existing literature on retention practice and theory in higher education revealed a distinct gap in the research on first-year, full-time women attending women's colleges. Why do women choose women's colleges and is that choice indicative of a unique set of issues which could be important to retaining them? Do issues of mental health and helicopter parenting, peculiar to contemporary college students, also factor into attrition concerns at women's colleges? Grounded theory research into the real-world experiences of deans of students at women's colleges coupled with listening to the voices of first-year, full-time students revealed pathways for change and improvement in programming for the first-year experience, thus, allowing student affairs professionals to effect change and create environments for students to persist.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

This study was intended to fill a gap in the literature on the retention of first-year, full-time female students enrolled in women's colleges. Study of the more traditional retention methods and programs in co-educational institutions revealed how colleges and universities put forth Herculean efforts to retain first-year students with those efforts yielding minimal results. This research study gave voice to both student affairs professionals and first-year female college students. The data gleaned from this research may be used to determine which programs could be effective in retaining first-year female students as well as which new programs could be created to increase retention, and thus increase student persistence to graduation.

Research Design

The qualitative design of this research provided a holistic picture of issues pertaining to the retention of first-year, full-time female college students. Researching the issues through the lens of student affairs professionals gave voice to the problems that student affairs professionals face on a daily basis, what mechanisms they may be employing to solve those problems, and/or what frustrations they may experience because they cannot solve them. Simultaneously, giving voice to the experiences and expectations of recent and prospective first-year, full-time female college students allowed the researcher to identify effective programs, and ascertain what challenges students may face that are not being addressed. A channel was, thus, provided for new theory to emerge at the intersection of the voices of student affairs professionals and first-year students.

Grounded Theory (Creswell, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) seeks to transcend descriptive analysis—moving toward the genesis of an emerging theory or

framework for further research. Arguably, retention theory has been emerging with the advent of each new cohort of first-year college students over the past two decades. Twenty-five years ago, seminal retention theory was formulated by Tinto in 1993, with a revised version presented in 2012. Even with the revision, retention theory may not address the plethora of issues contemporary college students carry with them before they matriculate, as well as those they face upon matriculation. Further, retention theory has not focused explicitly on college students choosing single-sexed educational environments. Colleges and universities are often left trying to devise success mechanisms without the benefit of understanding what students actually need to be successful. Combined with the declining maturity of current students, there is a need for revised and updated theory based on contemporary trends and demographics.

Human Subjects Protection

The researcher holds a current Certificate of Completion from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research after successful completion of the NIH Web-based training course, "Protecting Human Research Participants" (Certification Number: 2430944). The researcher received approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Lynchburg for "Minimal Risk Research." Both student affairs professionals and students interviewed were provided with agreements to protect confidentiality and intended use statements to inform them of this study's purpose. Respondents rights were protected as per the mandates of the IRB. Respondents were also provided with resources for future counseling services should they be deemed necessary. All participants were given a statement pertaining to the confidentiality of the research process and findings. Participants were not identified in the final compilation of the research.

Population and Sampling

Interviews were conducted with deans of students from the Women's College Coalition (Appendix II) as well as first-year, full-time female college students who were about to complete their first year at a women's college in rural Virginia. In addition, enrolled first-year, full-time female students at a women's college in rural Virginia who had not yet matriculated were interviewed in order to ascertain a better understanding of what experiences they anticipated from college. Using the constant comparison method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), second interviews were conducted in comparison to the first, third interviews were conducted in comparison to the second and first, etc. The researcher continually sorted through the data utilizing the four individual stages of the constant comparison method: comparing incidents and forming categories of data; integrating categories; delimiting the theory; writing new theory. By continuing to analyze and code the information, new theory emerged using raw data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kolb, 2012). Interviews continued until saturation of new information had been reached.

The Women's College Coalition (WCC), founded in 1972, is an association of women's colleges and universities. Included in the Coalition are institutions that are two- and four-year, public and private, religiously affiliated and secular. The member institutions of the WCC represent a cross section of institutions and are located in 16 states and Ontario, Canada. This cross section of institutions will vary in enrollment and the number of staff employed in Student Affairs, thus increasing the validity of the findings by providing a rich and diverse sample from which to draw data. The researcher was specifically interested in identifying the needs (as perceived by student affairs professionals) of first-year, full-time female college students in comparison to self-reported needs by the students themselves.

This study interviewed deans of students in the Women's College Coalition. Student Affairs professionals are on the front line of daily interaction with students. They may be more acutely aware of students' needs, social expectations, and academic lives as well as their needs for health and well-being. The deans of students were asked guided interview questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

The sample also included interviews with first year, full-time students at a women's college. Participants at one women's college were randomly selected. Two separate groups were interviewed – those who were anticipating their first year and those who were completing their first year. By including both pre-matriculation students and students at the end of their first year, the researcher obtained in-depth data pertaining to both ends of the first-year experience. Research pertaining to students was conducted at a women's college in rural Virginia.

Instrumentation

A series of guided interview questions were used to glean pertinent information specific to this qualitative, grounded theory study. To further ensure the integrity of the research, the following four criteria were addressed:

Credibility – The research resonated with the participants as a true portrayal of their contribution to the work. Participants were given an opportunity to read the final research results and offer opinions as to its validity and importance in the field.

Transferability – The research results can be generalizable to other settings. The researcher kept in mind the relatively small sample available from the Women's College Coalition as compared to the number of entering college first-year students nationwide. Research results are transferable, to a certain extent, to other institutions including those with co-ed populations and pertain to the first-year student population in general.

Dependability – The researcher kept in mind the ever-changing context of the research itself. During the time frame of the writing of this dissertation, research continued. Retention in higher education, specifically retention of first-year students, is organic – constantly changing and evolving as subsequent generations of college-aged students are recruited and enrolled.

Confirmability –Others were able to substantiate the research results. Colleagues from local institutions were asked to comment on the findings and relate them to their own higher educational institutions in order to corroborate the findings.

Trustworthiness of the findings were ensured by member checking: research participants were asked to validate the researcher's findings by reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews.

Data Collection

On-site, personal interviews, Zoom calls and/or email exchanges were conducted with deans of students by the researcher. Interviews were conducted until saturation had been reached. The director of institutional research at a small, women's college in central Virginia contacted first-year students currently enrolled (Class of 2022) and those who were to be enrolled in the forthcoming academic year (Class of 2023) to inform them of the research study. All students were notified of the parameters of the research study including the means by which the researcher would obtain demographic information. Students were also informed of the possibility of follow-up research that may have been conducted before February 1, 2020 in order to compare responses to actual attrition decisions. First-year students were assigned a random number using a random number generator and sorted accordingly in chronological order. Participant selection began using the random numbers at the top of the list and proceeded until at least 25 students had agreed to be interviewed or saturation had been reached pursuant to interviews being conducted.

No demographic information was used for selection purposes. Interviews with student participants was conducted by an individual not associated with higher education.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following the *Constant Comparison Method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the second interview was coded with the first interview in mind, etc. As such, the researcher accomplished four tasks: (1) reported information was compared and delineated as applicable to emerging categories, (2) categories and their components were integrated, (3) boundaries of theory were determined, and (4) new theory was written (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). Throughout the four stages of the constant comparative method, the researcher continuously sorted through the data collection, analyzed and coded the information, and reinforced theory generation through the process of theoretical sampling. The benefit of using this method was that the research began with raw data and through constant comparisons, a substantive theory emerged (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding of responses to research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) included the use of open, axial, and selective methods – examining raw data to develop similarities and establish categories, relating findings to one another and selection of the most important codes. Colaizzi's (1978) method was utilized to further analyze the findings by reading and re-reading all transcripts to acquire general content, extracting significant statements or phrases, validating exhaustive description from participants, and incorporating any new information gleaned from participants before completion.

Construction of Theoretical Framework

A hierarchy was developed using small codes and key concepts drawn from the data, after which a theoretical framework was derived from the concepts.

Limitations

Because qualitative research is based on inductive reasoning, the truth of the conclusions reached are probable but may not be certain. The findings of this research study may not be applicable to certain co-ed populations.

Researcher as Instrument

As a current dean of students and researcher for this proposed work of study, the perspective of data interpretation was unique, as well as challenging. Refraining from second guessing and/or projecting prejudicial determinations on raw data was critical. The researcher endeavored to listen and transcribe interviews without interjecting or leading participants. In order to increase validity and remove the possibility of discomfort by the student participants, the researcher engaged the services of an individual not associated with higher education to conduct interviews with students and paid that individual an agreed upon wage.

Representative Sampling

Because all participants in the student sampling were from the same women's college in rural Virginia, a limitation of this study was that these students may not be representative of all first-year, full-time students at other women's colleges.

Summary

There is compelling data to substantiate the timeliness of this research study. Colleges and universities across the United States are struggling to keep up with the needs of contemporary college students. By engaging in a grounded theory research study, qualitative data emerged to assist student affairs professionals in the planning and execution of programming designed to increase student retention and persistence towards graduation. Using the Constant Comparison Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and heightened measures of trustworthiness

(Colaizzi, 1978), the researcher provided cogent research gleaned from the voices of current student affairs professionals and first-year, full-time female college students. This research provides critical access into the real-world experiences of both student affairs professionals and the students they serve, and allowed both to express greater satisfaction toward pathways of success. It added information to the extremely small pool of study on first-year, full-time female college students who have chosen to attend women's colleges.

CHAPTER 4 – DATA COLLECTION

Across the nation, first-year, full-time college students are enrolling at institutions of higher education with a plethora of psychological, sociological, and emotional needs that must be met in order to retain them. Chapter 1 explains this qualitative research study: the researcher interviewed first-year, full-time women enrolled at a women's college in central Virginia who were about to complete their first year (Participant Group I) and first-year, full-time women who were enrolled but had not yet matriculated at a women's college in central Virginia (Participant Group II) in an effort to compare and contrast their expectations and/or disappointments regarding their first-year collegiate experience. Both Participant Groups were asked questions to ascertain what, if any, factors might have influenced their decision to attend a women's college. Research questions also attempted to parse out the reasons why those students decided to leave or stay after their first year, and if they decided to leave, what might have changed their minds.

Additionally, deans of students at several women's colleges were interviewed (Participant Group III) to give voice to their perspectives on retaining first-year, full-time female college students and their respective musings on the issues facing women's colleges in general in the current landscape.

Researcher as Instrument

The Director of Institutional Research at a women's college in central Virginia was asked to identify the appropriate participants for each research group. Additionally, a research assistant not associated with higher education was employed by the researcher to conduct qualitative interviews from both student participant groups.

Data Collection

All students were notified of the research's parameters, including the means by which the researcher would obtain demographic information, if necessary. Students were also informed of the possibility of follow-up research that could be conducted before February 1, 2020 in order to compare responses to actual attrition decisions. First-year students were assigned a random number using a random number generator and sorted accordingly in sequential order. Interviews began using the random numbers at the top of the list and proceeded until at least 25 students had agreed to be interviewed or saturation had been reached. No demographic information was used for selection purposes.

Participant Group I included first-year, full-time students on the verge of completing their first year at a women's college in central Virginia in the spring of 2019. A sample group of 72 students was identified who were first-year, full-time members of the Class of 2022. The sample group was contacted and asked to give permission to allow their contact information (email address) to be given to an outside third party. Of those students contacted, 34 responded (47%), with 28 (38%) respondents agreeing to participate. Twelve interviews were successfully recorded and completed in person from the resulting participant group, with one interview accidentally being deleted during the transcription process.

During the summer of 2019, the Director of Institutional Research identified those students meeting the criteria for Participant Group II—first-year, full-time students enrolled but not matriculated. One hundred three students were contacted and asked their permission to release their contact information (email address) to a third-party interviewer. Of the 103 students identified, 36 responded (35%). Of the respondents, 32 agreed to the disclosure of their email addresses to a third party and to be interviewed (31%). Of those 32 affirmative responses, 13

completed interviews. After completion of the interviews with Participant Group I, the research assistant was diagnosed with a medical condition that prohibited her from transcribing interviews with students enrolled but yet to matriculate during fall 2019. These interviews, thus, were transcribed using an online site (rev.com).

Participant Group III consisted of current deans of students at six women's colleges. During the summer of 2019, the researcher traveled to three out of the six women's colleges to conduct interviews in person. The remaining three interviews were conducted on the telephone and recorded at the time of the interview. At present, 36 women's colleges are listed on the 2019 Women's College Coalition website. Of those 36, however, two are reportedly experiencing trouble pertaining to accreditation requirements by their accrediting agency (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges), and two are now offering co-educational undergraduate majors for adult male students. Saturation was reached after the sixth interview resulted in clear similarities in the information gleaned with no new themes emerging from the participants in the sample group (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data Analysis

Using the *Constant Comparison Method* of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), second interviews were conducted in comparison to the first, third interviews were conducted in comparison to the second and first, etc. During the four individual stages of the constant comparison method, the researcher continuously sorted through the data in order to identify emerging themes.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following the *Constant Comparison Method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the second interview was coded with the first interview in mind, etc. As such, the researcher (1) compared information reported and delineated it as

applicable to emerging categories, (2) integrated categories and their components, (3) determined boundaries of theory, and (4) allowed new theory to emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). Coding of responses to research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) included the use of open, axial and selective methods (examining raw data to develop similarities and establishing categories), relating findings to one another and selecting the most important codes. Colaizzi's (1978) method was utilized to further analyze the findings by reading and re-reading all transcripts to acquire general content, extracting significant statements or phrases, validating the exhaustive description from participants and incorporating any new information gleaned from participants.

Research Questions – Participant Group I

Research questions were designed to investigate five specific areas of interest: rationale for choosing a women's college, expectations and disappointments (where students felt a sense of failure in their own performance or that of the institution), challenges they faced and their ability or inability to overcome those challenges, services and scholarship (based on student need and whether or not those needs were met) and whether or not the institution succeeded in creating an overall sense of belonging. Additionally, students were queried as to how often they communicated with their parent or guardian in an effort to examine interdependence.

Table 4.1

Participant Group I – Reasons for College Choice Selection

Why Did You Choose a Women's College	Reason for Choosing Your College
"Did not plan on attending a women's college."	Campus beauty, small classes, focus on academics, experiential learning
"Never a factor."	Riding program, traditions
"Not much reason to choose a women's college."	Smaller environment, more personal experience, distance from home, computer science major
"Did not play a role in my decision; no explanation."	Riding program, small size, very personal, designing my own major
"Did not think about it being a women's college."	Campus beauty, small size, remote location
"Did not plan to choose a women's college."	Size of the campus (acreage = 3250)
"Looking at women's colleges not part of the original plan."	No one was at the college fair table of the women's college versus the popularity of a larger university's table near by

Table 4.1 records the answers of those who answered questions pertaining to why they chose a women's college. Seven indicated that their decision to attend a women's college was not driven by the fact it was a women's college. Recurring themes that did influence their decision to attend the college included campus beauty, small class size and the equestrian program.

Participants were then asked to address whether or not their first year of college had met their expectations and, if not, what disappointments they had encountered. The majority of respondents stated that to some degree or another their first year of college had, overall, been an

enjoyable experience. Common ideas emerging from this line of questioning included academic achievement (or lack thereof), ability or inability to acclimate socially, adjustment from high school to college, curriculum issues and not being able to study the major they had been led to believe they could study, the introduction of a new core curriculum, dissatisfaction with dining services, and the feeling of belonging to a supportive community. Additionally, one student expressed dismay at the lack of clarity regarding the departure of the academic dean. She stated, "I have learned from my Dad that finding new positions of power like that in a college that you want to be successful can be a very hard thing to do. I wish they were more clear on that."

Conversely, students expressed being pleasantly surprised at the level of (positive) involvement by faculty and alumnae, the commitment of students to achieve their individual goals, how much free time they had and how much they had grown individually during their first year at college. One student surmised, "Overall, I'd say that I have been successful. I think that I've changed a lot throughout this year. Starting out I was really shy – I didn't talk to a lot of people – I kept to myself. (Now) I'm familiar with these people. I can have conversations with them and not be scared. My grades are pretty good too!"

Students identified specific challenges they felt they had overcome and those they had not. Table 4.2 indicates these responses. One particularly memorable student responded, "My mom died so that was obviously a challenge. Actually, the process of having a dying mother was a lot harder than having a dead mother. People were really there for me. Sometimes, I would get like so nervous that I couldn't move, so that's something I had to really work at – especially last semester – and it was something that really took a lot of strength to get through."

Table 4.2

Specific Challenges Faced – Overcome or Not Overcome

Challenges Overcome	Challenges Not Overcome
Roommate situations, childish behavior, "I learned to stand up for myself."	Procrastination
Interpersonal relationships with roommates, "I did not quit or ask to switch roommates."	Being comfortable in such a small school, being in a women's college, not having a moment to myself, "There's always people trying to come into your room or knock on your door!"
"Used to be a person who backs out – I learned to overcome – to handle things on my own."	
Getting over the first semester, asking for help.	Work ethic/time-management
How to stand up for myself (instead of relying on mom), how to be my own advocate, to take charge and address people that needed to be addressed	Public speaking
Asking for help	"I'm still shy and I keep to myself a lot…still"
Doing things	
Adjusting to a set schedule, having to focus on certain things at certain times	
Time management	

As depicted in Table 4.2, themes emerged regarding interpersonal skills, self-advocacy, and time management. Most students interviewed reported experiencing an increase in their ability to self-advocate and/or "stick up for themselves." Additionally, learning how to navigate interpersonal situations and hone the skill sets required to live successfully in a residential setting were areas where students experienced growth.

Table 4.3

Services Used and Services Desired

Services Used	Services Not Offered that Could Have Been Helpful
Academic Resources Center	More frequent onsite medical services
Academic Advising	Mechanism to communicate dietary needs
Medical Services/Academic Advising	On-Campus Infirmary
Counseling Services	Communicate what is available more
Subject mentoring/tutoring	More social activities for international students – on and off campus
Academic Resources Center – Writing tutors	More study groups with peer mentors (especially in STEM subjects) Mid-Semester progress reports
Disability Services	Information on Financial Aid
Medical Services	On-Campus Medical Services More priority services for transfer services
Academic advising	

Participants were also queried with regard to the types of services they utilized as first-year students. One participant commented, “I don’t know if it’s a type of service – but going into college I didn’t know what to do. I was supposed to automatically know how to do whatever they would tell us what to do and I had no idea – didn’t know anything about financial aid or anything like that, so I was all new to this.” Table 4.3 exhibits those services the students were able to take advantage of and also reports services that were not offered but could have been helpful to new students.

A majority of students found the Academic Resources Center helpful and, when coupled with peer academic mentoring and subject tutoring, considered it a major component of services

important to first-year students. Students were also asked to comment on the level of satisfaction regarding academic advising with one student stating she was not given all of the information she needed regarding registration for classes in the subsequent spring semester. Two students stated advising was “ok” and the rest reported they were generally pleased. Additionally, on-site medical services are deemed to be critically important to new students. In general, successfully communicating to students what services are and are not available emerged as an important theme. Scholarship was also identified as an important theme as two students identified that the reason they chose their current institution was primarily because of the amount of scholarship assistance they were awarded. One student received full scholarship assistance, with another student reporting, “I applied to a bunch of colleges and chose the one that I could afford.”

Finally, students in Participant Group I were asked to define whether or not they felt a sense of belonging to the institution where they had chosen to spend their first year of college. Subsequently, they were asked whether or not they would have done anything differently in hindsight. One student commented, “It got off to a rough start because I was coming to an entirely new place and not having anyone, plus some rough things happening in my family life – but, by the time I got to the second semester, this is really just where I belong right now.” Nine interviewees reported that the sense of belonging occurred in a definitive, almost immediate way. Two students reported that, although they did not experience a sense of belonging in an instantaneous way, within a few months they had enjoyed the same feeling of connectedness to the community. A singular theme emerged for all students: they reported that there was an individual or individuals who were instrumental in helping them to achieve feelings of belonging. Their responses indicated the importance of mentors and mentoring programs.

Reflecting on whether or not they would have done anything differently if they could do their first year over, student responses in general were unanimous that participants would not have done anything differently. A few themes, however, emerged pertaining to students choosing to relax more, enjoy their first year more, participate in social activities more (including clubs and organizations) and, conversely, being more academically minded. One student mentioned that she would have gotten a job in order to have more money for "textbooks and stuff." Most participants seemed to have developed a sense of wisdom regarding some of their choices, with one student remarking that she would, "Fix the mistakes I made – study more instead of going to sleep and saying 'screw this'; working things out with my roommate because we had issues that I wasn't even aware of and (I would have) handled disagreements with my friends more maturely."

In order to gauge retention concerns, students in Participant Group I were asked whether or not they planned to return the following academic year and to indicate their rationale if they were not planning to return. Only two respondents indicated they intended to transfer with one citing financial concerns as the reason and the other responding that the college she chose to attend did not have the major she intended to study. She commented, "If the school had the major that I wanted or at least had a way to help me study the major I wanted, that would have been helpful to probably keep me here…if I had people around me that were more willing to work with me or help me discover what my other options would be…"

Finally, students in Participant Group I were asked how often they communicated with their parent or guardian during their first year of college. The majority of students reported that they communicated frequently with their parent or guardian ranging from once a day to up to

three times per day. One student commented that sometimes her Mom would call her twice per day.

Research Questions – Participant Group II

Questions asked of Participant Group II (first-year, full-time students who had enrolled but not matriculated) were also specifically designed to investigate their rationale for choosing a women's college, overall expectations of what their college experience might entail, services they were expecting to find in the college they chose (as well as services they needed to be successful), and self-awareness regarding their strengths or weaknesses as a matriculating first-year student. Finally, questions were designed to gauge how frequently they communicated with their parent or guardian currently and how much they expected to communicate once they had matriculated.

Of the 13 respondents interviewed, all expressed a level of excitement at their impending matriculation as first-year, full-time college students with two students particularly looking forward to their independence. As in the first participant group, the vast majority of students interviewed (9) did not choose the college they planned on attending because it is a women's college. Of the students who chose the college with the intention of attending a women's college, two reported they did so because of the hope that they would experience more of an open and welcomed dialogue as female students at a women's college. One drew attention to the fact that a number of women in Congress are women's college graduates, and one student simply stated she was looking for something different and unusual. Thematically, then, issues of finding voice and being able to exercise that voice, as well as women's colleges being a catalyst for future success emerged.

In addition to experiencing a general feeling of excitement, students in Participant Group II responded that they were expecting their first few weeks in college to be overwhelming, hectic and stressful. First-year, full-time college students who are enrolled at a women's college but have not matriculated shared concerns regarding the expectation of an environment that is beyond their "control," predicting new situations to be so stress-inducing that the outcome could have negative ramifications on their mental and emotional wellbeing. At the same time, students indicated experiencing an overarching theme of excitement and anticipation. Most clearly, they had an understanding that their college experience would be different than their high school experience and were positive about the potential to make new friends.

Table 4.4

Participant Group II – Reasons for College Choice Selection

Why Did You Choose a Women's College	Reasons for Choosing the College You Chose
"Wasn't in the original plan; had no preference."	Riding Program
"No intention – just so happened to be a women's college."	Size of School (Small)
"Did not play a role in the decision. Being a women's college was almost a detraction."	Geography (Southern, East Coast)
"I never really put a lot of thought to that."	Unique Academic Opportunities
"I wasn't searching for it – a women's college in particular…I was a little nervous about it."	Affordability
"It just came with the territory."	Persistent Outreach (Staff and Alumnae)
"I've actually never asked myself that question before."	Warmth of the Campus Community
"Wasn't looking for a women's college."	Connection to Faculty
"Historically speaking, I don't get along with girls very well. (When I visited) it didn't feel weird and so it just stopped being a factor for me."	Hands on Activities
	Beauty of the Campus
	Socratic Learning Environment
	Traditions
	5-Year Master's in Teaching Program

Similar to the reasons students in Participant Group I chose the college they attended, Table 4.4 illustrates why students in Participant Group II chose the college they planned to matriculate to in the fall of 2019.

As depicted in Table 4.4, underlying themes identified in these choices point to the importance of the institution's natural landscape, elements unique to the specific institution (equine programs, academic programs, learning environments and traditions), affordability, and an overall sense that the institution will be one that fosters a sense of belonging and connectivity to the community as a whole.

Students were quick to point out the services they were expecting to find as they became a part of the college community and were also clear in communicating which services they planned to use (Table 4.5). All 13 of the students interviewed shared the common belief that services would be available. As for using the services they knew would be available, one student commented, "Not going in expecting to need anything. I feel like I know it's there if I do need it. Never had any support other than just 'dealing with it.'" Additionally, all students interviewed expected themselves to be successful in college and, in response to the question, "What do you need to be successful in college?" participants listed the following as requirements needed for their success: sleep, time management skills, a good support system, not procrastinating, taking interesting classes, self-care, a good breakfast, help with organization, emotional support, tutoring, supportive friends and teachers.

Table 4.5

Services You Expect to Find and/or Use in College

Services You Expect to Find in College	Services You Expect to Use in College
"Standard Support" – emotional, academic	Academic accommodations, emotional accommodations, academic counseling
Tutoring and career guidance	Tutoring for science; counseling
Accommodations services, academic resources center, writing support	Writing center; medical/mental health; health care
No idea (but) academic accommodations	Tutoring; Talking to Professors; Self-proctoring exams
Academic counselor	Academic counselling; tutoring
Math tutoring	Math tutoring
Academic Advising	Time management; help with my schedule
Faculty Mentor – expecting more personal connections than institutional systems	No expectations
Emotional support, mentoring, tutoring	All of them
Counseling	Academic and emotional counseling; career counseling towards the end
Academic Advising; Church group	Tutoring – both being tutored and tutoring others
"Open" counseling – academic, emotional, social	Social, academic, emotional counseling
Tutoring and "stuff"; mental health support	Tutoring; mental health support

Subsequently, students were asked to describe themselves as students. As depicted in Figure 4.1, interviewees predominantly described themselves as successful, organized and busy, but they were extremely focused on issues of time and the amount of time needed to accomplish the work they needed to complete. Time management appeared as a prominent theme with some

students admitting issues with procrastination and laziness. Students interviewed, however, were extremely open about these issues and were confident in their ability to overcome them. One student stated, "(I am) incredibly lazy. It's an everyday battle. I find school very challenging, but I know what works for me and how to make myself academically successful. I consider myself a very savvy student."

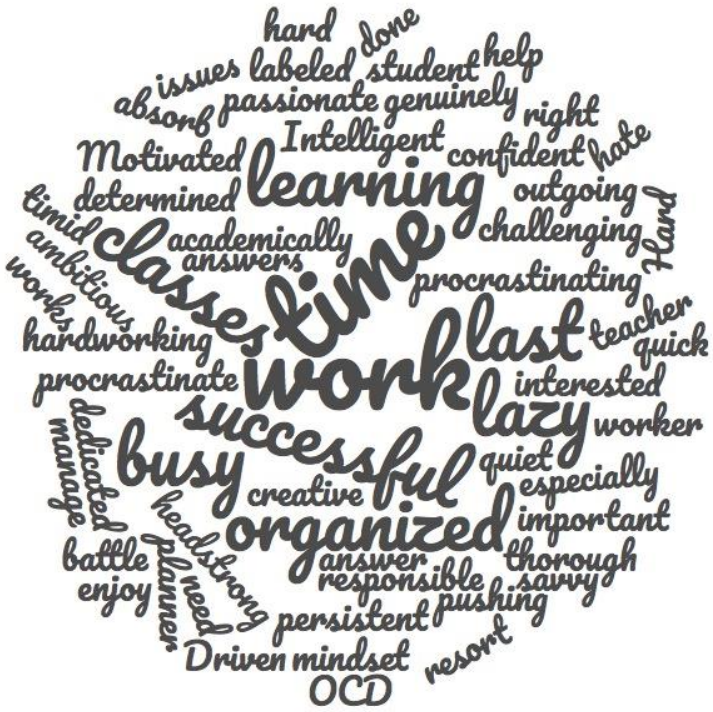

Figure 4.1: Self-Descriptions of Students in Participant Group II

In addition to describing how they perceived themselves as students, participants were also asked what they intended to study. All students interviewed were able to state definitively what they planned to major in with subjects ranging from psychology to neuroscience. Several

students listed more than one field. The institution where all participants were enrolled does not allow students to declare their major fields of study until the spring of their sophomore year.

Table 4.6

Participant Group II – Frequency of Parent or Guardian Communication

How Many Times a Day Do You Talk Now?	How Many Times a Day Do You Expect to Talk?
Twice per day	Every other day or every two days
Daily, whenever I change location	Same
Mom – every week; week and a half Dad – once every two weeks	Same
Dad – twice a day	Dad – once a day – at least 2-3 times per week
0 – 1 times because I live with them	Every day – FaceTime every other day; texting good morning or talking with my brothers; staying connected
Not at all really, because I'm always at home	At first (at least) regularly – on the weekend
Not too often because of their work schedule, but we have a group chat – we text fairly often	Once a day
A lot – 30 second conversations	One good conversation a day
Every single day – 17 times a day	A little less – three or four times a day at least
Once	Once or maybe twice
Once a day	In the beginning, a lot more – an hour or two at least once a week
Not really – I live at home. If I am away, usually text 3-4 times a day	At first, very often – 3-4 times a day texting; calling maybe once a week
Once or twice a day – quick stuff	Probably not as much. Just text and then come home on the weekend. I'm only an hour away

Lastly, students interviewed in Participant Group II were asked how many times a day they currently talk to their parents or guardians and how many times these students anticipated talking with their parents or guardians after matriculation. The majority of students regularly talk with their parents or guardians during the day with the exception being two students who

reported they lived at home so did not speak with them on the phone regularly (see Table 4.6). The majority of students, however, did report they spoke with their parents on the phone at least once per day, with one student reporting multiples phone calls for brief periods of time. Communication emerged as a major theme, however, with students also engaging in text messaging frequently. One student stated that she called her Dad "between doing different things or if I wanted to do something 'cause he just likes to know where I am – usually in the morning when I get up and then usually on his way home from work and other times in between." Another theme that emerged was that of independence (or lack thereof) with students who reported that they spoke with a parent twice a day also stating that they believed they were independent. As one student commented regarding how much she expects to communicate once she has matriculated, "I'm more on the independent side. I'll probably call my mom like every other day or every two days. You know, she would probably miss me more than I missed her."

Research Questions – Participant Group III

Participant Group III was comprised of deans of students at six women's colleges. Student affairs professionals are on the front line of daily interaction with students, and thus may be more aware than other administrators of students' needs in their social and academic lives as well as their needs for health and well-being. Giving voice to those individuals directly responsible for the day-to-day care and success of first-year, full-time students introduces a unique lens into the complex issues facing 18-year-old women and the challenges faced by those charged to guide them successfully over their collegiate careers.

Of the six deans of students interviewed, all were women and all but one had between 10-15 years of experience in student affairs. One participant interviewed had been in her position as dean of students for 20 years at the same institution. The youngest participant had been in her

position as dean of First-Year Students for under five years, but she came into the position with six years of experience in student affairs at another institution. When asked if first-year, full-time college students had changed within the last 5-10 years, all emphatically answered, "Yes!" Participants were then asked to describe how students had changed in the given time period and whether or not the college-readiness of first-year, full-time students entering women's colleges had changed over the past 10 years. In order to reflect the rich qualitative data collected accurately, answers to these questions were recorded thematically and separated into the categories of demographics (including college readiness), intrapersonal skills, and interpersonal skills. Finally, deans of students were queried regarding what, if any, retention methods their institutions employed in order to cauterize the increasing number of first-year, full-time female college students who fail to persist from their first to second year of college. In addition, public information regarding each institution was examined in an effort to ascertain any similarities in factors that could affect retention.

Demographics. A majority of deans of students commented on the fact that institutions had intentionally diversified student populations over the past 5-10 years, making note of the fact that private educations were increasingly becoming accessible to many students from lower socioeconomic income levels. One dean commented that private colleges are becoming a "gateway" for students who are socioeconomically challenged. Another dean noted that out of an incoming class of 150 students, 60 had an estimated family contribution of zero. Another participant pointed to the fact that she is observing an issue between students who have cultural capital versus those who do not – a phenomena more prevalent among first generation students. This dean stated, "Low income/undocumented folks who have grown up with a different socioeconomic experience come with a different set of trauma. Not knowing if your family is

going to be deported, not knowing if this is the semester you are not going to be able to make the money work to come to college – how are you going to live this college experience in the same way as your friend who is spending the summer in France with their grandparents?"

She continued to muse about the difficulties first-generation students face in not knowing the "hidden curriculum" or language of college, "Students show up and do not know things outside of the basic public high school (curriculum), i.e., What is an advisor? What are office hours? What is a syllabus?" She continued saying, the "language of college is the biggest barrier. As we work with students financially to make private college available, we miss the boat making sure they know the language of college."

Continuing the theme of demographic differences, one dean pointed to the fact that some first-generation students come from families who are skeptical of higher education as a whole. Many students face challenges in convincing family members that they belong in college and need to stay in the face of financial hardship. Others cling to the reality that a college education for one child may be the only way forward for a disadvantaged family. A dean shared the following account of one of her most resilient students, "I'm thinking of a kid whose mom is dying of breast cancer. When her mother dies, my student will become the guardian of her little brother." Another story involved a student who was a presidential scholar at a particular institution, implying that her award package had been significantly high. This particular dean discovered that her student was sending home the stipend earned from this scholarship in order to feed her family. When the dean of students confronted the student in question, she said, "How are you buying toothpaste and deodorant? If you want your family out of this situation, you have to be successful (in college) and you can't be successful without meeting your basic human needs. You have to do it differently, because if you are worried about buying textbooks because

you are sending your stipend home – how are you going to be successful?" The dean reported that the student replied, "I can usually get an hour at the library with a textbook."

Additionally, institutions are seeking to enroll an increased number of international students. This shift in demographics caused an issue with one institution regarding the closing of residence halls over holidays and scheduled breaks in the academic calendar. Students who did not have the resources to return home or had nowhere to go over those breaks were often shuffled to a specific residence hall for the duration of the time period (temporarily staying in someone else's room) but were unable to access food due to the closure of the dining hall. "Last year, we just paid to have the dining hall open," stated the dean of students, "Now we just keep all the residence halls open over the breaks and you just need to tell us (you are staying in your room)." This institution hires resident advisors specifically to work through the breaks. The dean added that a number of international students work in residence life for this very reason.

College readiness. In addition to financial and cultural challenges, deans of students commented on the college readiness of students matriculating to their institutions immediately after high school. All but one dean confirmed that the college readiness of students had declined with several commenting that students do not have access within the K-12 system to what they need to be successful in college. The one dean who refrained to categorize students as not ready for college did, however, comment that at her institution efforts had been made to develop a stronger writing center and a quantitative skills center as a support/tutoring center – recognizing change. From an institutional viewpoint, this particular dean works at one of the best women's colleges in the country, and therefore, considers the students they are able to recruit to be among the brightest young women of college age. She noted that these students, "catch up pretty quickly if they are behind." Other deans intimated that students are not necessarily as ready as they have

been historically on the first day of college and included in this line of response the fact that being ready for college does not simply mean being ready for the academic classroom. One dean in particular drew attention to the fact that institutions themselves may not be ready for the current generation of college-aged students – shifting the paradigm from "them to us."

One participating dean made mention of the fact that high school grades may not be the only marker needed to determine readiness. High school grades are often determined by what kind of classes students are taking including advanced placement, college preparatory, technical, etc. Readiness to this particular dean should be inclusive of wellness, personal development, mental health, and physical health.

Lastly, one participant relayed information regarding the admissions standards at her institution, stating, "(name of institution) realized its academic standards had changed about 10 years ago – accepting students who were not meeting the admissions standards (or conditional admits). The institution realized it was not meeting the needs of the students in or out of the classroom." The dean continued to describe the total turnover in senior administrators, overhaul of the first-year seminar course, development of a leadership course, and the move of their career services department to academic affairs. She continued, "Out of 155 students enrolled for the Class of 2022, 40 did not meet the former admissions standards. We lost 30% of that class. This year we did not accept conditional admits and aimed for a class of closer to 130. The faculty are committed to looking at a summer bridge program and to trying to build the incoming class back up to 150."

Intrapersonal skills. According to a definition used by administrators at Rostrata Public School in Willetton, Australia (2018),

> Intra-personal skills are internal skills, perceptions and attitudes that occur within a person's own mind. Skills that individuals use to work through real world situations.

> Skills that allow individuals to respond using awareness, thought, and intentional strategy in order to gain positive outcomes. Examples of intra-personal skills include such things as self-esteem, open mindedness, being aware of your own thinking, the ability to learn, being able to understand and manage your own emotions, self-confidence, self-discipline, self-motivation, being able to overcome boredom, being patient, being a self-starter, being able to take initiative, working independently, being persistent, having a positive attitude, and being a good manager of time.

This definition aptly encapsulates the issues probed by deans of students as they answered questions regarding first-year, full-time female college students and their ability (or lack thereof) to access intrapersonal skills needed to be successful in college.

Overwhelmingly, deans of students interviewed in Participant Group III agreed that issues of anxiety, stress, depression and mental health had increased and were continuing to rise. Conversely, one dean also commented that, specifically with health seeking behaviors, "The ability to vocalize that you need help is absolutely on the decline." She continued, "Students are now much more ready to hide than to seek out help immediately." This dean related a story from her last position regarding a mother who flew to the United States from her home outside of the country because she had not heard from her daughter. Student affairs professional staff assisted the mother in gaining entrance to her daughter's room only to find the student "hiding under her bed."

Parallel to students' struggles to achieve higher levels of command regarding intrapersonal skills is their relationship with their parents and, consequently, their parents' involvement with the institutions charged to educate their students. Arguably, students who have not had the opportunity to practice intrapersonal skills will not be able to access them in a new environment. One dean commenting on the increase of parental involvement, correlated that involvement to the rise in the number of first-generation students stating that, "If you strip away the knowledge of college from the PhD parent, the questions would be the same: Is my child

safe, fed and do they have a place to sleep…who is taking care of my baby?" The dean went on to comment that PhD parents "know" their child is safe. Another dean noted that some institutions consider parents to be "partners" while others consider them to be "over-active." She also added that parent behaviors have changed in that parents are increasingly becoming involved with institutions and have high expectations regarding the basic needs of their children (e.g., roommate conflicts, residence hall needs).

Another participant noted that parents and students consider their relationship with each other and with the institution to be more collaborative with an increase in students seeing their parents as "allies, friends, or confidantes." Another dean related that parents and students are now a "package" deal and that she found herself increasingly holding "parent conferences." She went on to comment that "in terms of (their) students learning life skills – parents are doing their children a disservice by overprotecting them. Parents of this generation tend to cocoon their students from having to experience the things we had to experience – it ends up altering their development. Coping skills are not there. We have to be more diligent in teaching them." This same participant also noted that her institution does not have a "family" weekend simply because parents "come already." Finally, a dean remarked that those parents who have "managed their child's life continue to do so – those who have not – don't know what they're supposed to do."

Continuing the conversation regarding the prevalence of anxiety and depression, one dean related a personal story about her own children stating that "My daughter reports that she does not ever remember walking into school without wondering if 'today is the day I'm going to get shot.'" She went on to remark that her daughter, born after 9/11, has "(grown) up in a country where lockdown drills and mass killings in schools are a prevalent experience in her life." Participants also commented on the rise in emotional support animals, observing that students

appear to be more reliant on their parents. The increase in students openly and willingly disclosing issues they experience indicates a shift in terms of privacy considerations.

The ability to process information also affects intrapersonal skills as one dean remarked that, with the advent of online tools (Google, Yahoo, Siri, etc.), a student's ability to problem solve has shifted. Students now simply "ask" an online source for information rather than engaging in the process of thinking through situations or problems. She elaborated, "Students ask what to do and how to do it (and then) come to college and in the classroom and other places and are expected to know how – when (before) all they had to do was ask a question and they were told." She continued, "My bigger question is – how can higher education help? How do we help them transition? This is how they are living their lives (so) how do we take the environment inside and outside the classroom and say 'let's learn how to process these things' and help them develop the skill sets."

Interpersonal skills. All participants remarked on the struggle of first-year, full-time female college students to engage in face-to-face relationships. One dean commented that the expansion of students' lives on social media has caused a deficit in their ability to connect and understand each other. She went on to say that "Research indicates that as society has changed, we have an increase in anxiety and depression along with a lack of a sense of belonging. (Students) try to connect with a computer screen – but it's a computer screen!" This dean continued that students have huge lives on social media that represent their "best lives." She continued, "As students experience roommates (for perhaps the first time), they have not had the practice needed to form relationships, to know how to read body language – yet they need to implement all of the skill sets to form successful relationships all at once…they don't know what they don't know – they need opportunities to practice."

Conflict resolution is a concept integrally related to the theme of interpersonal skills that emerged as deans also remarked that students and support staff alike needed more training in how to avoid conflict and understand issues of civility and respect. For example, a participant mentioned that students are weaker regarding the ability to live independently, and something as simple as asking a neighbor to turn down their music can dissolve into a call to an authority figure or a nasty text message. She stated that students' "entire social structure has been around someone bringing them to soccer (or ballet) – 'this is your friend for this hour.' Every social interaction has been manufactured for them or prescribed. They don't know how to sit down with people they don't know in the dining hall."

As peer-to-peer conflict rises and students' ability to problem-solve within healthy friendships falls, judicial structures are seeing higher numbers of cases involving disputes. A dean of students related meeting with one student who told her that her altercation with another student exemplified the fact that "my only option to resolve a conflict in the past was to fight – and if it happens again, I will respond in the same way." Some institutions are exploring the concept of restorative justice, engaging students in small groups to begin to help them understand and appreciate differences. This dean also agreed that social media has changed how students relate to one another.

In further exploring the topic of college readiness in the context of interpersonal skills, social readiness appeared as a cause for concern. A dean stated that her office "had to increase the number of dispute mediations/conflict mediations they have facilitated." She is also engaged in obtaining additional training for her resident life staff and believes students need more support regarding learning how to engage each other with civility and respect. Another dean reported that her institution had experienced a 20% increase in what she deemed as "aggressive behavior."

She reported having to change her residence life programming model to address personal conflict and wrestle with the questions of what is aggressive behavior? And what is not? Eventually, this dean became very uncomfortable in the middle of conflict situations, called in the institution's student honor council and "gave it back to the students." Poignantly, she reflected on how social media has completely changed how students relate to each other and how they do not.

Retention. While all but one institution maintained formal structures of retention (staff position or programming methods), the next set of questions asked those in Participant Group III what, if any, methods their institutions had engaged in to increase retention rates or what they believed attributed to the institution's ability (or inability) to successfully retain first-year, full-time female students. Table 4.7 depicts the methods utilized by institutions to address the issue of retention and the retention rates for those institutions as reported in 2016 by the Integrated Postsecondary Educating Data System (IPEDS).

Table 4.7

Retention Methods and Retention Rate (2016 IPEDS)

Implementation Plan/Method	2016 Retention Rate of Institution (IPEDS)
Institution A: • Synergy and coordination of services; academic affairs, residence life, enrollment team and wellness center exchange information about students who may be high risks for attrition – before student matriculates • Four counselors • Full-time nurse practitioner and a registered nurse • Insurance administrator and a front-desk staff person • Online medical service and 24-hour helpline • Retention committee mines the data provided from a student satisfaction survey • Intentionality in listening to students and providing feedback • Enhanced advising model: Every student has a "team" with four team members • Summit experience – intersection of global learning and leadership development	87%

Implementation Plan/Method	2016 Retention Rate of Institution (IPEDS)
Institution B: • New programming for Pell Grant and first-generation students • ETP (students of color) – special mentoring program for the entire academic year • ISOP – students return early and engage in mentoring • Intrusive advising/advising teams including athletics, faculty and student affairs • Purchasing of retention/emergency software	77%
Institution C: • Midterm Academic or Personal Warning forms • Academic advising: two "professional" advisors • Strengthening academic advising • Educating the entire campus on the philosophy of enrollment ("all hands on deck") • Studying the concept of "belonging" • Focus on "recruiting parents" • Freshmen Action Support Team	80%
Institution D: • Identity-based entry: i.e., first generation orientation program (day and a half – not optional) • Small cohort/groups for orientation • First Gen Out Loud – Narrative project writing their own story about how they got to college • Employ two psychiatrists; six full-time counselors (determined that 40% of the student population needed access to mental health counseling) • Endowed funds for emergency support • Medical health services – use doctoral fellows/clinicians • Selectivity	93%
Institution E: • Focus on diversity and inclusion • Focus on inclusive excellence • Faculty retreat led by student affairs	95%
Institution F: • Parent programming (parent partnering) • Revamped first-year seminar course to include more work on "self" and community • Leadership lab (addressing a decline in student leadership in clubs, etc.) • Self-efficacy/social change model • Changes in orientation – getting back to the basics	67%

In addition to asking about current retention methods, the deans of students were also asked to comment on what methods they believed their institutions needed to consider in the

future. Responses included increased intentionality in tracking post-graduate success as related to career attainment, adopting an intrusive advising model, enhancing and connecting students to resource information, increasing opportunities for social connectivity, cultivating a sense of belonging early (orientation), addressing outreach to parents of first-generation students, contacting students who have left the institution, addressing students of Hispanic descent regarding issues of loneliness, intentionality in recruiting faculty and staff to mirror what students look like and renovating residence halls. One dean commented on the fact that she felt her institution was always in the process of "reinventing" itself while another dean in particular admitted that her institution contained some residence hall rooms that she would not allow her own daughter to live in.

Additionally, deans of students were asked why they believed students failed to be retained from their first to second year of college. Below are issues identified as affecting attrition:

- Social issues (including loneliness)
- Academic preparedness
- Lack of persistence (frustration with the "hidden curriculum")
- Sense of isolation versus a sense of belonging
- Mental health/medical issues
- Problems with institutional "fit"
- Finances
- Size of institution (some students decide they want a larger institution)
- Single sex vs. co-ed (some students decide they do not want a women's college)
- Family demands
- Hunger
- Transportation concerns (commuter students)
- Work obligations
- Stigma associated with disabilities support
- Students who have transferred more than three times
- Students who enter college directly from in-patient care facilities

Participants were also asked whether or not they employed any type of technology in order to assist in retention efforts. Half of the deans of students interviewed reported using some sort of predictive analytics tool. One institution employed a third-party vendor to analyze enrollment data to "shape the incoming class." One dean stated that her institution had also increased their "high touch" initiatives. Three institutions stated they did not utilize technology with one stating that her institution was "lousy" at using technology. Two of the three institutions that do not employ technology ranked the highest in retention rates with the third ranked at the bottom.

Table 4.8

Participant Group III – Institution Admissions Requirements, Acceptance Rates, Retention Rates, and Endowment Figures

Institution	Admissions Requirements	Acceptance Rate	Retention Rate	Endowment
A	SAT/ACT scores, evaluative interview OR analytical or critical graded writing sample	64.7%	87%	$217 million
B	SAT and/or ACT; Letter of recommendation	59.9%	77%	$186 million
C	SAT and/or ACT; Letter of recommendation; Writing sample	60.8%	80%	$116 million
D	SAT/ACT optional; Guidance recommendation; Teacher recommendation; Essay; Personal interview (highly recommended)	37.2%	93%	$1.87 billion
E	Two essays; Two teacher evaluations; SAT or ACT; Guidance counselor or school report; Interview (recommended)	28.6% *100% of calculated need is met for all admitted students*	95%	$2.1 billion
F	SAT or ACT; Letter of recommendation	37.6%	67%	$60 million

Table 4.8 displays information made publicly available regarding the admissions requirements, acceptance rates, and any other pertinent information that figure into an institutions' ability to retain first-year, full-time female college students. All institutions listed require high school transcripts for admission.

As noted, the two institutions experiencing the highest retention rates similarly report the highest endowment figures, lowest acceptance rates, and the highest number of requirements for admission indicating a more selective decision-making process regarding institutional fit and the ability to support those students who are admitted financially.

In an effort to gauge the sense of connectivity that first-year, full-time female students experienced (or would be able to experience) to the campus, deans of students were asked to describe how warm their campus environment felt. They were also asked to describe how their specific institutions went about engaging students in that experience. A majority of respondents stated that their institutions ranged from "pretty" warm to "extremely." One dean of students stated that 87% of students at her institution reported that they felt connected to the community within the first year. Another dean commented, "caring about each other is a part of our ethos and culture." Contrarily, a dean of students with one of the highest-ranking retention rates noted that her institution does not feel warm and that students are too busy and too engaged in their phones to say "hello." Similarly, a dean at another institution with high retention rates noted that students had an innate sense of competitiveness on her campus due to the fact that first-year students are intermingled with upper class women in almost every situation from living spaces to academic classrooms, fostering a sense of intimidation for first-year students. Conversely, the dean of students at the institution with the lowest retention rate stated that her president "knows students by their first names."

Most deans of students were currently engaged in, at least, conversations about the strength or weakness of the sense of belonging on their campuses. One dean reported the presence of robust programming designed to increase the level of connectivity including a Center for Student Involvement, Center for Leadership and Service, and the mandate that all resident advisors meet with each of their hall residents individually before the six-week mark of the semester. Other programming efforts included enhanced orientation themes, intentional training of student leadership and clarity regarding community expectations that "this is who we are – this is what we do not tolerate." As one dean extolled, "Own it, talk about it, teach it." The two institutions with the highest retention rates both reported that their students struggled with a sense of belonging and both agreed that their institutions considered this endeavor a "work in progress."

Deans of students were asked to convey their deepest concerns by simply answering the question "what keeps you up at night?" While the sentiments conveyed were all different in one way or another, all expressed concerns for student safety. One dean spoke of the jarring effect the death of a student can have on a community while also expressing concern regarding what she felt was the "wavering support of higher education in our society as a whole. We are not doing our jobs." She stated, "we have been complacent trying to 'value add' – not just career and money – (we should be talking about) the greater good of an educated society that makes us a better democracy…let's talk about purpose." Another dean noted that she was directly involved with the institution's incident response team and incident management. She spoke about threats to her campus and keeping her students safe in the wake of domestic violence situations. The dean of students at one of the institutions with the highest retention rate mentioned suicide and drug overdose, saying, "Out of 2,400 students, 40% are in counseling with 15% actively

expressing suicidal ideation. This is where we are trending at women's colleges." The dean at the next highest level of retention stated she struggled with "the students I can't get ahold of – especially if I know a little bit about their story." She continued by stating that she would only stay awake one night before marching into the residence hall. "Sometimes stepping out is successful," she said, "not so that I can sleep at night, so that they can sleep at night too." The dean of students at the institution experiencing the lowest retention rate simply uttered, "A year ago I would have said that sincere concern for the wellbeing of my students (kept me awake). I would pray 'Dear God, please do not let something happen to that student tonight.' Now, I pray that I can try to figure out how to help my staff find balance between their work life and their personal life. I just stopped texting after 5:00PM on the weekends."

Summary

Participants in both groups I and II were asked specifically designed research questions in order to gauge the following: rationale for choosing a women's college and expectations and/or disappointments regarding their experience or anticipated experience as a first-year college student at a women's college. Participant Group I was asked to describe challenges they faced and their ability (or lack thereof) to overcome those challenges. Participant Group II was asked questions in an effort to measure their self-awareness regarding their own strengths and weaknesses and how they believed they would perform during their first year. Both groups were asked to describe services they expected would be provided, services they would need to be successful, or services needed but did not have access to during their first year. Both groups were also asked questions regarding the frequency with which they communicated with their parent or guardian or the frequency with which they expected to communicate during their first year.

Participant Group I was asked whether or not the institution had succeeded in creating an overall sense of belonging from the student's perspective for the college community as a whole.

Participant Group III was comprised of deans of students at women's colleges. Deans were first asked if first-year, full-time college students had changed within the last 5-10 years with all emphatically responding in the affirmative. Participants were then asked to describe how students had changed in the given time period and additionally whether or not the college readiness of first-year, full-time students entering women's colleges had changed. Answers to these questions were recorded thematically and separated into the categories of demographics (including college readiness), intrapersonal skills, and interpersonal skills. Finally, specifically designed research questions were asked to gauge what, if any, retention methods their institutions employed in order to cauterize the increasing number of first-year, full-time female college students who fail to persist from their first to second year of college. In addition, public information regarding each institution was examined in an effort to ascertain any similarities in factors that could affect retention.

The concluding chapter will present issues pertinent to the experiences of first-year, full-time female college students attending women's colleges and how those issues might affect retention. This chapter will also draw upon the lived experiences of deans of students as they attempt to cultivate the success of their students and give important perspective to the intersections they traverse with their students in an effort to increase retention at their institutions.

CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an overall summary of the study and findings made from the research presented in Chapter 4. In addition, this chapter will provide an opportunity for the emergence of contemporary retention theory as it pertains to the retention of first-year, full-time female students in women's colleges. The researcher will examine the focal point where the deans of students' real-world experiences intersects with the students they serve and how that nexus may or may not point to disparities. Women's colleges might address those disparities in an effort to increase retention rates.

Summary of the Study

The expense of attending college can be astronomical. It can also be prohibitive to many who would attend but cannot afford the enormous financial investment necessary to matriculate. For those who do, persisting until graduation can prove to be daunting as research has shown that just over half of students who entered college in 2009 managed to graduate within six years (Chuck, 2015). Even though women's colleges fair somewhat better than co-educational institutions regarding graduation rates (Women's College Coalition, 2014), the number of women's colleges continues to plummet. The conversation about retention is not only critical to the survival of women's colleges, but applicable to the survival of small colleges and universities in general.

Retention theorists have debated for decades regarding the factors needed to retain students. Strategies have been built upon those factors with most being applicable to students enrolled in colleges and universities over two decades ago. Even as students have changed drastically from one generation to the next, very few if any actual theories have emerged that keep step with the complex demands and expectations of contemporary college students. This

research study examined the a) real-world experiences of deans of students at women's colleges, b) the lived experiences of first-year female students about to complete their first year of college, and c) the aspirations and expectations of those students enrolled but not yet matriculated. Indeed, the slow decline of women's colleges may be seen as a microcosm for co-educational institutions experiencing the same issues regarding retention on a different scale. By listening to the voices of deans of students at women's colleges and examining the focal point where those voices intersect with those of first-year, full-time female college students, this qualitative study provided a pathway for an emerging framework for intervention in the efforts to increase retention at women's colleges.

Major Findings

Since the onset of retention theory and Tinto's seminal *Student Integration Model* (1975), conversations regarding student retention have been broad even as Tinto (1993) asserted that "the key to successful student retention lies with the institution, in its faculty and staff, not in any one formula or recipe" (p. 4). Tinto believed that students leave because they have not integrated into the college community in a meaningful way (McCubbin, 2003). If true, contemporary retention theory should account for individuality addressing the needs of accepted students from an institutional framework before they matriculate; yet, subsequent retention theory has failed to do so. This research study lends itself to the emergence of a *Holistic Systems Approach to Retention,* and thus considers the student from a holistic perspective taking into account individual needs and expectations before matriculation, assessing those needs and systematically building a framework for student success within the institution (Figure 5.1).

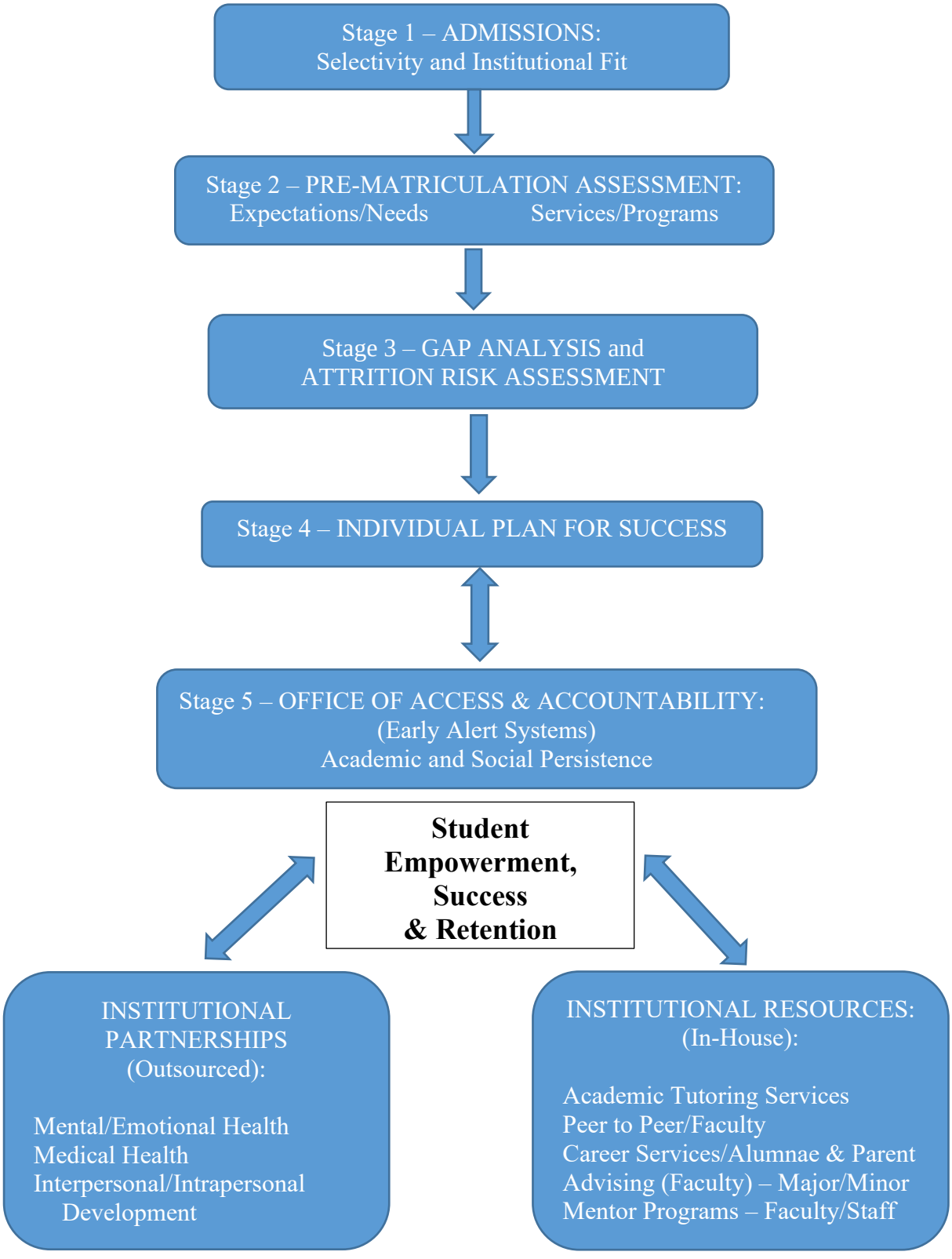

Figure 5.1: Holistic Systems Approach to Retention

Previous retention theory research has focused on co-educational institutions, leaving a gap in the literature regarding women's colleges. Both Bean's research on the *Student Attrition Model* (1977, 1980) and Pascarella's study on the *Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model* (1980), however, suggested that female students expressed issues that could be assigned specifically to gender. As their research showed, over four decades ago, female students were communicating the need to feel connected to a community with regard to their college choice and were processing informal interactions with faculty members in a more intrinsic way. As exemplified in Figure 5.1, a *Holistic Systems Approach to Retention* (HSAR) suggests the beginning of a conversation to address these differences and individualize student success plans in a meaningful way in order to increase retention rates for first-year, full-time students at women's colleges.

To begin with, the HSAR considers institutional fit (Stage 1). As this research showed, the women's colleges that rank highest for retention rates also maintained the most stringent admissions requirements, and thus experienced a higher level of scrutiny with regard to the applicant pool. This study's research data also showed that the vast majority of students in Participant Groups I and II did not choose to attend a women's college simply because the institution was a women's college. The importance of attractions unique to the college experience and/or auxiliary programs specific to individual institutions emerged as the overriding reason students chose to attend. Institutional fit is, therefore, a key element with regard to retention and whether or not the institution can provide what applicants are seeking or whether or not the student may be a good fit for the institution's community. Underlying themes related to the reason students chose the institution they were attending or planned to attend pointed to the natural landscape or beauty of the campus, elements unique to the institution

(equestrian program, small class size, academic programs, and traditions), geographic location, and the sense of a more personalized experience. Although the themes that emerged from questioning both participant groups regarding expectations were different, both groups expressed a sense of excitement in anticipation of their first year with the belief that it would be an overall positive experience or the sense that their first year had been an enjoyable, and thus a positive experience.

Capitalizing on this sense of excitement, the second stage in the HSAR model of student retention involves pre-matriculation assessment. This mechanism for assessment includes financial aid counseling, major/minor counseling, placement tests, family interdependence and social readiness evaluation. Utilizing this assessment stage pre-matriculation allows institutions to glean as much information as possible about each individual student before they are exposed to the rigors of either academic work or social acclimation, thus allowing the institution to create ways of diminishing barriers to student success before they begin. Determining what barriers students may encounter pre-matriculation can be critical in establishing pathways for success. In parallel to the development of Stage 2 in the HSAR model, Table 5.1 exemplifies the questions intended to probe into what, if any, experiences students in Participant Group I found to be disappointing or affirming and how those answers resulted in parallel concerns expressed by students in Participant Group II regarding what they needed in order to be successful.

Table 5.1

Participant Groups I and II – Success Needs Comparisons

Participant Group I Disappointments, Challenges or Affirmations	Participant Group II Needs to be Successful
Academic Achievement Work ethic Time management Procrastination	Classes I am interested in Help with organization Tutoring Time management Not procrastinating
Social Acclimation	Supportive friends Emotional support
Belonging to a supportive community	Good support system – friends and teachers

Most students in Participant Group I seemed to have developed a sense of wisdom regarding some of their choices and their success (or lack thereof) in their social and/or academic endeavors. Students in Participant Group II, although quick to list their issues with time management, procrastination and laziness, were also enthusiastic regarding their ability to be successful and appeared confident in their ability to succeed in a college setting.

In addition to expressing confidence in their ability to overcome challenges that might be presented, students in Participant Group II were quick to point out the services they expected to be available to them once they had matriculated. Those services listed were similar to those services used by students interviewed in Participant Group I: counseling, subject tutoring, mentoring, academic advising, and services offered by the academic resources center. Additionally, in hindsight students in Participant Group I mentioned medical and disabilities services, dietary/dining services and more intentional organization to study groups indicative of services that students may have realized they needed once on campus. Students in Participant Group I also stated they needed more information about financial aid and an onsite infirmary.

Students in Participant Group I expressed disappointment in curriculum issues or in not being allowed to study their intended academic subject with one student choosing to leave the institution in pursuit of an academic program designed to further her career interests. All students interviewed in Participant Group II stated which subjects they intended to study with several stating more than one subject. Identifying which subjects students intended to focus on during their course of study during Stage 2 of the HSAR model allows for the application of placement tests to determine suitability and/or predictions of academic success (or lack thereof). The ability to identify student expectations and the potential for challenges before matriculation may lead to placement in subjects that will lead to academic success, and thus increase retention rates. Pre-matriculation assessments also allow for meaningful conversations with international students, first generation and/or students who may be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Research showed that deans of students were particularly concerned with their institution's ability (or lack thereof) to provide services unique to affinity groups.

This study's research also concluded that the majority of students interviewed in both participant groups had frequent communication by phone or text with a parent and/or guardian each day indicating a strong sense of interdependence. Stage 2 of the HSAR will assess both family interdependence levels and an overall sense of social readiness. These assessments will allow for the development of individualized programs for both interpersonal and intrapersonal development. Using institutional partnerships and, subsequently outsourcing those resources, will enable institutions to increase the number of programming opportunities that can be made available to first-year, full-time female students and then bill student insurance carriers for associated costs. Even the most rural of women's colleges is located in close proximity to both community mental health and medical services, thereby providing an opportunity for institutions

to reserve resources for academic expenditures as well as decrease insurance liabilities across the board. Stage 2 may also identify an opportunity to invite families into conversations regarding student success, building a bridge between the institution and the parent or guardian. Data showed that contemporary college-aged students daily engage in frequent conversation with their families. Efforts may be more effective that partner with parents rather than efforts that sever ties. According to research, neither the student nor the parent was ready to sever.

Once Stage 2 of the HSAR model has been fulfilled on an individual basis, assessments are forwarded to the recommendations panel (Stages 3 and 4). Based on the data gleaned from the pre-matriculation assessments, a recommendations panel comprised of the academic dean, dean of students, director of the Office of Access and Accountability, and outside applicable personnel (behavioral health and/or medical staff) can ascertain what, if any, gaps exist between student expectations and/or needs and the services and programs the institution provides. Determining whether or not the institution has the capability to meet those needs and expectations internally and/or outsource them will be a determining factor in identifying a student's risk of attrition. Additionally, the recommendations panel will devise an individual plan for success for each student based on assessments gleaned and recommendations for success pathways, keeping in mind the importance of relationship building and connection to community that female students seek. Individual plans for success will then be routed to the Office of Access and Accountability for implementation and oversight (Stage 5).

Astin (1984) proposed, in his *Theory of Student Involvement*, that retention is based in part on behalf of the student herself and how much psychological and physical energy she is willing to commit to the collegiate experience (p. 518). The *Student Involvement Model* further theorizes that every influencing factor deemed as a positive mechanism for student retention

correlates with involvement (p. 523). In the HSAR model, the Office of Access and Accountability engages each individual student with her plan for success, and in fact, requires her participation for successful implementation. As research showed, 40% of college students are experiencing debilitating depression, and 61% reported battling overwhelming anxiety (American College Health Association, 2017). In addition, Vasquez (2012) reported that "(even though) women statistically suffer higher rates of mental disorders, few studies have focused solely on college-aged women" (p. 220). Requiring first-year, full-time female college students in women's colleges to be a part of their own success plans is a means of increasing retention. In fact, Tinto (2016) appears to have revised his musings on student retention by including "self-efficacy" as an important component of student persistence. Partnering with outside mental health and/or medical health organizations is a critical component of retention efforts as they apply to contemporary college students. Providing access to mental health services and normalizing issues of anxiety and depression can empower students as they are expected to manage those issues by keeping appointments and engaging in productive therapeutic mechanisms. Indeed, as Milam and Berger (1997) theorized, there is a clear connection between the intersection of institutional engagement (Tinto) and student involvement (Astin). The HSAR model of student retention seeks to implement this nexus in a meaningful way, empowering students to be responsible for their own success and growth with institutional guidance and outsourced partnerships.

Deans of students interviewed in Participant Group III indicated the existence of a chasm between the real-world experience of student affairs professionals and the perceived experience of first-year, full-time college females at women's colleges. All participants agreed that first-year, full-time female college students had changed within the last 5-10 years. Retention theory,

however, has remained somewhat static for the past four decades with theorists trading philosophies as to who is responsible for student attrition – the student or the institution. Even as Tinto's work continues to be recognized as truly groundbreaking, Tierney and Sablan (2014) raised criticism for his inability to address emerging issues in higher education. The perspective of deans of students provided a new lens for consideration as emerging themes on the contemporary landscape included demographics (an increase in diversified student populations, socioeconomic challenges, first generation and international student populations), college readiness (including a decline in academic and social skills), intrapersonal skills (an increase in mental health issues and interdependent parental relationships), and a lack of interpersonal skills. The HSAR model acknowledges this chasm and recognizes the barriers students experience as individuals. Therefore, the Office of Access and Accountability (Stage 5) will involve students in the crafting of success plans, using assessment data and student engagement. Conversations regarding student success will be reciprocal between the Office of Access and Accountability and the recommendations panel. These two segments of the student success and retention pipeline seek to recognize student growth organically with accomplishment and acclimation to the institution unfolding naturally and redirection occurring when necessary.

Deans were asked to comment on whether or not their institutions successfully cultivated a sense of belonging in their first-year students. While most believed their institutions were fairly successful in doing so, two deans commented that their institutions were not successful in invoking a sense of belonging in first-year students. These two deans also served at the two institutions with the highest retention rates, contradicting Tinto's (2016) supposition that a sense of belonging is critical to student retention. These two institutions were also found to share the highest endowment figures, lowest acceptance rates, and the most requirements for admission.

The majority of students interviewed in Participant Group I expressed a desire to stay at the institution where they were currently enrolled. Most experienced an overwhelming sense of belonging to the institution they chose to attend, and some reported the feeling to be almost instantaneous. Most were in general pleased with their first year. Students in Participant Group II also expressed a sense of excitement about the year ahead and seemed positive with regard to their feelings of becoming a part of the institution's community. Although student attributes may differ from institution to institution, a sense of belonging did not appear to be lacking anywhere except the institutions experiencing the highest retention rates.

Conclusions

Since Tinto's (1975) inaugural treatise on the *Student Integration Model*, why college students leave (attrition) and what institutions can do to encourage them to stay (retention) have become a part of critical conversations regarding the fiscal health of colleges and universities. These conversations and subsequent studies have birthed a plethora of research and program initiatives specifically designed to solve retention problems as they pertain to students of co-educational colleges and universities. Research, however, has led to broad-based theories even as researchers have admittedly recognized the importance of students obtaining a level of self-efficacy and empowerment regarding their own success.

An attempt to identify studies that specifically pertained to the retention of women who attend women's colleges showed a distinct gap in the literature. Additionally, no longitudinal studies were identified that addressed either the broad or specific issues encountered by first-year, full-time female students across the continuum of matriculation to persistence towards graduation in women's colleges. Furthermore, an examination of the literature pertaining to the retention of first-year college students in either co-educational institutions or single-sexed

institutions did not include the perspective of student affairs professionals, specifically deans of students. Thus, research on first-year, full-time female students attending or enrolled at women's colleges coupled with the perspective of deans of students at women's colleges provides findings that contribute to the current knowledge base on the retention of college students and in particular first-year, full-time female students who are attending or preparing to attend women's colleges. The study of contemporary college students demands specific and finely tuned research using a multi-faceted lens capable of distilling complex issues. Over the past four decades, existing theory has recommended that the focus of retention steer away from questions such as: what's wrong with the students and why are they leaving. Instead, theory explored questions such as: what's wrong with institutions of higher learning and how can they partner with students to provide what they need to stay. The *Holistic Systems Approach to Retention* (HSAR) seeks to intersect the journey of first-year, full-time students at women's colleges with the real-world experiences of deans of students, creating a nexus where both conversations merge into a success plan that benefits the institution and holds students accountable for their own success.

The deans of students look upon the two student participant groups and see them from a different perspective. At first glance, the students interviewed were excited, displaying youth and naiveté with most indicating either a new-found wisdom regarding their college journey (Participant Group I) or a tangible sense of excitement and eager anticipation (Participant Group II). All students interviewed were keenly aware of either the services they needed to be successful or clearly able to articulate what services they could have used in order to be more successful. All students interviewed, however, conveyed an expectation that their college of choice would provide services and that they would, in fact, be all encompassing of the students' needs. In addition, students in Participant Group II believed they would be successful to the point

of considering themselves “savvy” even in the face of laziness and procrastination. The deans of students contradicted this assessment, describing incoming first-year, full-time students very differently. They focused upon major issues confronting educators entangled in philosophical questions that must be addressed regarding contemporary issues in higher education. Examination of the student participant groups’ interviews versus the interviews with deans of students pointed to a great divide in perspective. Commentary suggested a lack of independence on behalf of the students who were currently enrolled or on the cusp of matriculating.

While student participants reported feelings of confidence in their abilities to navigate the college landscape, deans of students pointed to the rise of mental health issues, increase in parental involvement, decline in the ability to problem solve, and overall decline in college readiness. Additionally, deans readily pointed to the evident disparity of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—their ability to acclimate, understand the language of college, and overcome an inherent cultural divide. Furthermore, deans of students were quick to discuss the struggles of first-year, full-time female college students as they failed to manage interpersonal relationships in a meaningful way and their inability to live independently without the oversight of authority figures. Using the HSAR model to identify and assess students’ needs before matriculation allows institutions to prepare a framework for student success by creating programming designed to address individual needs and expectations. Services can be outsourced that would be otherwise costly and impossible to staff in consideration of the overwhelming needs students bring to campus.

Implications for Action

Communications and marketing professionals employed at women’s colleges might find useful the findings of this study regarding the choice of first-year, full-time female students to

attend single-sex institutions. According to this research, the vast majority of students in both Participant Group I (female students completing their first year) and Participant Group II (female students enrolled but yet to matriculate) did not choose to attend a women's college based on the nature of the institution's population. In other words, young women are not choosing to attend women's colleges because they are women's colleges. Female students are choosing to attend women's colleges because of unique characteristics specific to the institution (natural landscape, riding program, experiential learning, class size, etc.).

Student affairs professionals may benefit from research findings that show there may be a correlation between retention rates, acceptance rates, admission requirements, and endowment funds which may be available for scholarship assistance. In addition, the majority of students interviewed expressed either a cultivated sense of belonging to their chosen institution or the belief that they would feel connected once they had matriculated. Deans of students, however, reported that the two institutions in this study that experience the highest retention rates did not believe their institutions were particularly good at making students feel as if they belonged or were an integral part of the campus community. Thus, funds spent (particularly in orientation programs) in order to encourage a sense of belonging might be better spent elsewhere.

As detailed by the *Holistic Systems Approach to Retention* (HSAR), institutions should consider increasing the requirements for admission, utilizing intentional assessment tools designed to create a much more meaningful student profile, creating a specific recommendations panel, creating individualized plans for success, and lastly, creating an office designed to implement and oversee student access to resources and student accountability.

Recommendations for Further Research

Sample groups in this research study were small, and even though Participant Group III achieved saturation early, additional research should seek to expand the number of participants included in all the participant groups. By its design, this study focused on women's colleges with both the student participant groups, and coincidentally, the deans of students all being female. It might be helpful to expand the study to co-educational institutions or all-male colleges in an effort to compare findings with different sample populations, thus increasing validity. Additionally, future research should examine more closely the concept of independence, and what, if any, efforts colleges and universities that utilize the HSAR model could make to cultivate a stronger sense of self-reliance in first-year students, thus increasing retention. Findings that parental involvement is high and may be detrimental to the development of independence in first-year students might also prove as grounds for future study.

Research showed that first-year, full-time female college students have high expectations regarding the variety of services they believe they need in order to be successful. Deans of students concurred with these findings, but expressed concern regarding the rate at which the need for many services is growing, namely mental health, conflict mediation training, support centers (academic and non-academic), etc. Given the burden of costs associated with the expansion of services to meet almost certain demand, future research warrants an examination of whether institutions are better served by partnering with local professional organizations or devoting resources to building comprehensive health and wellness centers as a part of the campus community. Quantitative studies scrutinizing the effectiveness of services that may be outsourced and the cost benefit to the institution choosing to pursue these types of partnerships

could be useful as institutions seek ways to provide students with excellent care and quality service and eliminate the cost burden associated.

Concluding Remarks

Women's colleges continue to remain in peril. First-year, full-time female students are no longer choosing to attend single-sex institutions simply because they expect to experience a heightened sense of empowerment or academic prowess by enrolling in an institution devoted to whatever advantage may have historically once been true. First-year, full-time female college students are enrolling in colleges and universities that are not equipped to handle the multitude of expectations students bring with them and the demand for services they consider to be routine. This research study exposed a chasm of difference between the two student population groups and the perspective expressed by deans of students. Students remain excited about their first year in college and expect themselves to be successful. Deans of students struggle with how to meet those expectations within the classroom setting while also attending to the very real issues that provide barriers for success developmentally. As one dean poignantly stated, "The question becomes how do you stop attending to the human in front of you and change the system?"

Emerging HSAR theory grapples with this and other questions that address who students are – not who institutions wish them to be. Even as researchers reveal that contemporary college students are not independent in the traditional sense nor are their parents ready for them to be as independent as collegiate residential living requires, the HSAR model for student retention builds a framework that encourages self-efficacy and empowerment. This research study indicates that the frequency of parental communication alone signals that first-year, full-time students are actively engaged on a daily basis with their parents or guardians. Research also implies that there is an expectation that colleges and universities assume, to a certain extent, a

sense of surrogacy in the provision of services and oversight students need to grow and be successful. As institutions scramble to address the needs of first-year, full-time college students, this sense of surrogacy is not realistic given the issues most institutions face with regard to budgetary and staffing constraints–nor is it humanly sustainable. In order to increase retention rates at women's colleges specifically, institutions must address the fact that students do indeed come with a plethora of psychological, sociological, and emotional needs. Building an institutional framework (HSAR) for success addresses the individual needs of students, makes provisions for students to access necessary services (both within the institution and those that can be outsourced), and requires students to assume responsibility for growth and success. Additionally, institutions must capitalize on parent/student relationships and intentionally bring parents into the conversation. Existing retention theory does not address the current landscape. Instead of exhaustively working to separate parents or guardians from the students who still seem to need their input, efforts should be made to include them and perhaps manage to make them a part of the solution.

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Appendix I

Team Approach to Student's Recovery

Mother of Student
Wed, Oct 17, 1:37 PM (4 days ago)

To begin,
According to my meeting with XXXX, the option for medical withdrawal for this semester is time sensitive. While I feel this is an acceptable option, my daughter has not been receptive to this opportunity. I believe the pressure "to stay with her class" is strong and that she deems the withdrawal equivalent to a failure. I hope to keep this option part of the dialog until no longer viable.

Thanks to all of you for the time and attention that you have given to my daughter and to addressing her immediate academic and personal situations, which are, of course, interrelated. In this email I am outlining the team players (and my perception of roles), the basic challenges and complications, and an attached chart of what we have accomplished, set in motion, and still need to address. If any of you need privacy release forms for sharing or dialoging on these matters, please advise and I will work to secure that from her.

My Daughter's Support Team

- Dean of Students
  - Will meet periodically with her, oversee campus social involvement, and communicate with Mom regarding financial and college requirements, especially additional parking related violations (please)
- Director of Academic Advising and Accessibility Services Coordinator
  - Providing academic assistance with syllabi, calendars, online resources, and overseeing Academic Accommodations with Professors
- Mental Health Professional
  - Wellness sessions, preferably on campus. Also making referral for Case Management services with Horizon
- Case Manager through Mental Health Services – TBD
  - Assist with organizing multiple appointments, due dates, prescriptions, paperwork, mail, emails, and integration of daily life functions with academic demands. Other issues as deemed appropriate within program guidelines.
- ADHD/Executive Function Life Coach – TBD
  - Guidance with self-regulation strategies specific to ADHD and Executive Function Disorder
- Mom
  - Will try to review personal calendar for all events/due dates. Communicate with parties when needed. Give support where suggested and needed.

Basic Challenges & Complications related to Executive Function Disorder

While my daughter can often do these functions, they take a disproportionate amount of mental and emotional energy for her to navigate, compared to neuro-typicals. These peripheral functions often overshadowing the more important issue or task that they precede or are associated with. For example, it is not course content, but rather the enveloping tasks required to get to the content and show proficiency with the content with which she struggles. When presented with multiple complications at once, she easily gets frustrated, often becoming paralyzed in her ability to deal with the bigger issue. She avoids, ignores, or even shuts down completely when overwhelmed on multiple fronts, which is, I believe, where she has been for most of the past 6 months.

1 Time: My daughter has an impaired sense of time, which is a typical disorder for ADHD's. She has trouble estimating time, scheduling or planning for "buffer time" around events, maintaining focus on time urgency in critical situations, and judging time requirements for given activities. Additionally, she struggles with times that are a little before or a little after the hour. For example, 10:50 seems closer to 10:00 than to 11:00 to her. It requires extra mental focus for her to navigate these time related issues and when confused, she easily shuts down, ignores, or becomes frustrated with the event/issue associated with the time in question.

2 Numbers: Percentages, estimating, rounding, money/billing/budgeting. Making these abstract concepts visual (pie chart) or tactile (money in an envelope) helps.

3 Managing complex, multi-step task: Needs tools for breaking down large, complex tasks into smaller, more manageable steps. Examples: Financial aid, research projects, long reading assignments, application processes, car care problems, insurance and billing problems.

4 Activation and finalizing: Struggles getting started with tasks, even when scheduled on her calendar or "to do" list. Doesn't always spend necessary time and energy to complete, polish, or finalize tasks (which can make a huge difference in academic grades).

5 Transitions and changes: Has an impaired ability to tolerate frustrations from changes in schedules, daily routines, locations, or contact people. For example, the change from the 3-week to the 12-week session was problematic for my daughter, as have been the changes in printing procedures on campus, the changes in health care on campus, and the multiple academic advisors she's had in 3 yrs. at [institution]. Continuity is a beautiful tool for my daughter and, when possible, should be supported.

6 Balancing Daily Life: Social events, tap clubs, hygiene, laundry, medication management, personal appointments, car care. Hoping that Case Manager will be able to assist with these navigating these issues. Mom is also tuning in closer to these details (now that release forms are in place).

7 Mental Health and Wellness:

- "…two-thirds of children with ADHD have at least one other coexisting problem, such as depression or anxiety." (Dendy, linked below)
- Mental Health Professional will be working with my daughter on these matters, but I want to emphasize for all how much *mental and emotional stress*

> these disorders place on her daily. Not only are these stresses disruptive to nearly every daily task, they are exhausting for her. Self-care is so important for relieving these stresses, so I would like to identify an "accountability partner" who can help my daughter make time for self-care, including healthy sleep habits, conscious nutrition, exercise, relaxation (yoga/meditation), etc.

In conclusion:
While continued academic eligibility and graduation are specific, immediate goals, long-range goals are self-regulation, life strategies, and good mental and physical health. My daughter is kindhearted, courageous, compassionate, motivated, and has a sweet, gentle spirit. Giving support to her navigation of the above challenges will allow her strengths to flourish and bring her the success and joy she deserves. Thanks to all of you for your contributions toward all of these goals and toward my daughter's success moving forward.

Resources:
1. ADHD, Executive Function and School Success, by Chris A. Zeigler Dendy, M.S. (Linked Here)
2. Executive Function Strategies: Brainy Ideas for College Students, By Sarah McCarren, RN, MSN, CPNP, January 04, 2018, (Linked Here)
3. ADHD Coaching for College Students, Nikki Kinzer's website, (Linked Here)

From a mother's heart filled with hope and MUCH appreciation,

—*Mom*

Appendix II

Participant Group I: Research Questions First-Years/End of First Year

1. Did you enjoy your first year in college?
2. Describe your experience at the college you chose?
3. Why did you choose the college you are now attending?
4. Why a women's college?
5. Were you looking for something in particular that you felt a women's college could offer?
6. Do you consider yourself to have been successful during your first year at college?
7. Were you challenged academically?
8. Were you pleased with advising?
9. Did you experience a sense of belonging or connectedness to the College?
10. Were there particular people that helped you feel connected or that you belonged?
11. Have you used any services made available to you (counseling, medical, advising, etc.)?
12. Are there services the college does not provide, but that would be helpful?
13. Did anything disappoint you?
14. Did anything frustrate you?
15. Did anything surprise you?
16. What challenges did you encounter that you learned to overcome?
17. What challenges did you encounter that you do not think you were able to overcome?
18. What services would have helped you that were not offered?
19. Would you do anything differently if you could do your first year over?
20. Do you plan to return next year?
21. What could have convinced you to stay? (if answer to #17 is "no")
22. Do you plan to transfer – if so – where and what do you expect to be different?
23. Do you have friends who are planning to leave – why are they leaving?
24. How many times a day did you talk with your parent or guardian during your first year?
25. Did you feel academically prepared for your first year in college?

Participant Group II: Research Questions First-Years/Enrolled (non-matriculated):

1. Are you looking forward to your first semester in college?
2. Why did you choose the college you are now attending?
3. Why a women's college?
4. Were you looking for something in particular that you felt a women's college could offer?
5. Describe what you think your first few weeks will be like in college?
6. Did you enjoy your senior year in high school? Why or why not?
7. What services did your high school offer that you may have taken advantage of – academic, social, emotional?
8. What kind of services do you expect to find in college?
9. What do you think advising will be about?
10. Do you expect to be successful in college?

11. What are your academic interests?
12. What do you need to be successful in college?
13. Would you consider yourself a good student? Why or why not?
14. How many times a day do you talk to your parent or guardian?
15. How many times a day do you expect to talk to your parent or guardian once you are at college?

Participant Group III: Research Questions Deans of Students

1. How long have you served in your role as dean of students?
2. Have incoming first-year, full-time college students changed in the past 5 years? If so, how?
3. How have your retention numbers for first-year, full-time students looked over the past 5 years? Percentages?
4. What initiatives has your institution begun to address retention for first-year, full-time students? Have those initiatives been successful?
5. Do you believe your institution cares for students in a holistic way? How is this exemplified?
6. What initiatives do you think your institution needs to implement?
7. Do you expect your first-year, full-time students to be successful?
8. Why do you think an increasing number of students drop out or transfer?
9. What experiences have you had using technology to increase retention rates?
10. How does your institution react with students deemed to be “at risk”?
11. How “warm” is your campus?
12. Does your institution have a structure for retention (i.e., Director of Retention, etc.)?
13. Do you have an exit interview process?
14. As dean of students, what keeps you awake at night?