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SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PERSISTENCE AMONG UNIVERSITY TRANSFER STUDENTS ATTENDING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PERSISTENCE AMONG UNIVERSITY TRANSFER
STUDENTS ATTENDING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE:
A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
Stanley Vinson Burdette
August 2009

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of social support in relation to the persistence of community college students enrolled in a university transfer program at a single institution. Student persistence rates in community colleges are low in comparison to other sectors of higher education. To explain community college student persistence, past researchers relied on theories of student retention that were developed from data collected in traditional four-year colleges and universities. Although the dominant theories of student retention emphasized social integration and involvement, the role of social support as related to persistence in community colleges was not adequately explored. The purpose of this study was to explore the role of social support as related to community college student experiences and persistence. The following primary research question was posed: What explains students' perceptions of social support as related to their postsecondary education at a two-year or community college? Secondary research questions covered the types and functions of support, reliance on existing and new support relationships, instructional approaches and support, influences on the formation of social support relationships, and explanations for support behaviors of students. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with university transfer students enrolled in a community college. Other data sources included demographic information, student characteristics, and a card sort activity on factors related to persistence. Participants provided rich data regarding social support in relation to their experiences and persistence. Findings indicated that motivation to succeed and enacted social support were the most important contributors to persistence. Grounded in

analysis of the data collected, a theoretical model entitled Students Utilizing Community College Enacted Social Support (SUCCESS) was developed. The SUCCESS model depicts the prominence of enacted social support as contributing to the persistence of community college students. The implications of the study's findings for theory, practice, and policy are discussed. Recommendations are provided for additional research related to the role of social support and community college persistence.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Carla S. Burdette, and our four children (Anna Elizabeth, Jonathan Vinson, Catherine Alice, and Olivia Rose). Their support is exemplary; their potential is amazing.

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Studying social support heightened my awareness of assistance from others. I thank Dr. Frankie Keels Williams for her discerning guidance and support as my doctoral advisor and committee chair. I also appreciate the interest, guidance, and support provided by the other members of my doctoral advisory committee: Dr. Bea Bailey, Dr. Tony Cawthon, and Dr. Marie Nix. Several individuals shared their expertise during the research process. I thank Karen C. Bryson, Dr. Norman Hoyle, Dr. Chris Marino, and Dr. Russ Marion for their insights.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of a community college education are well documented. Students who persist and attain an associate's degree usually earn 20-30% more than typical high school graduates (Bailey, Kienzl, & Marcotte, 2004). Other benefits of a community college education include improved health and increased civic participation (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). Research studies revealed that community college students experienced gains in reading comprehension, mathematical ability, and critical thinking equal to students attending four-year institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Through open access, community colleges provide a means of extending the benefits of postsecondary education to many who would not have access otherwise (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of community colleges is the effort to make higher education accessible to as many students as possible (Vaughan, 2005). Open access provides opportunities for individual mobility (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). For example, after completing course work at a community college, many students transfer to selective institutions that would not have accepted them directly out of high school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, open access extends postsecondary educational opportunities to broad segments of the population (Griffith & Conner, 1994).

Open access has provided tremendous growth in the number and diversity of community college students. According to Cohen and Brawer (2003), community college student enrollment dramatically increased "from just over five hundred thousand in 1960 to more than 2 million by 1970, 4 million by 1980, and nearly 5.5 million by the end of

the 1990s” (p. 37). Community colleges account for approximately 44% of the undergraduate enrollment in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2008).

Community college students represent approximately half of minority students and 46% of first-time freshmen in higher education in the United States (AACC, 2008). Students attending community colleges are more likely to be from families of lower socioeconomic status and are less likely to be academically prepared than their counterparts entering four-year institutions (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009).

In comparison to students attending traditional colleges and universities, community college students are typically older, are more likely to attend part-time, and are more likely to live off campus (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). In spite of the different characteristics of community college students, most research on persistence in community colleges was based on theories related to traditional colleges and universities. According to Wild and Ebbers (2002), the primary models utilized in studying college student retention were academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and student involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984). Because those theories emerged from research on traditional colleges and universities, they are not well suited to community colleges (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

In spite of the access to and the benefits of attending a community college, public community colleges in the United States have the lowest rates of student persistence within higher education (Bradburn, 2002). Although approximately three-quarters of first-time students starting at a four-year college persist to the second year, only about

half of first-time students starting at a community college persist to the second year (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). Of the first-time postsecondary students enrolling in a community college in 1995, only 36% had attained a credential within six years (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). Overall, persistence among the estimated 6.5 million community college students is low in comparison to other sectors of higher education (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). For decades, Pascarella (1997, 2006) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) issued a call for increased research regarding community colleges. For example, Pascarella (2006) advocated that additional research on community colleges is needed to “extend and expand inquiry on previously ignored students and institutions” (p. 513).

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned earlier, community colleges have the lowest rates of student persistence among all sectors of higher education (Bradburn, 2002). Too many students exit community colleges each year before they attain their goals and experience the benefits of postsecondary education.

Dominant theories of student retention used to help explain persistence emphasize social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and student involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984) as positively influencing student persistence. Those theories of academic and social integration as well as student involvement emerged from studies conducted in traditional university settings (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Although those theories were applied with mixed results in the community college setting (Bers & Smith, 1991; Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Karp & Hughes, 2008; Tinto & Russo, 1994), the theories themselves were not

grounded in data specific to community college students (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). The importance of the role of social support (Hays & Oxley, 1986; Lafrenier & Ledgerwood, 1997; Somera & Ellis, 1996) as related to community college student persistence has not been adequately explored. Missing in the research literature is a theory of the role of social support (Thompson, 2008) as related to student persistence among community college students (Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and explicate through a grounded theory approach the role of social support as related to the persistence of community college students at one institution. More specifically, the primary objective was to ascertain community college students' perceptions and explanations of the types and functions of social support as related to persistence in community colleges. Data from students provided the basis for constructing a theory that explicates the role of social support as related to community college students and their persistence.

Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study was What explains students' perceptions of social support as related to their postsecondary education at a two-year or community college? Secondary research questions included the following:

1. What are the types and functions of social support among community college students?
2. Do students rely mainly on social support relationships created while attending college or relationships that existed prior to entering college?

3. What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support?
4. What influences the formation of social support relationships?
5. What explains the social support behaviors of community college students?

The secondary research questions were designed to address specific aspects of the primary research question.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions or classifications were used in the study to help provide meaning and clarification.

Community college was defined as “any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 5).

Enacted social support was defined as a subset of the broader construct of social support (Goldsmith, 2004). Enacted social support was understood as “what individuals say and do to help one another” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 13). Enacted social support included emotional support, informational support, and tangible support (Goldsmith, 2004).

In-vivo codes were defined as “concepts using the actual words of research participants rather than being named by the analyst” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 65).

Integration was defined as “the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the

formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or subgroups of it” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54).

Persistence was defined as “maintenance of continued enrollment for two or more semesters, specifically from Fall term to Spring term and/or completion of a degree/certificate or transfer to a four-year college” (Crawford, 1999, p. 13).

Social support was defined as “an umbrella term for a variety of pathways linking involvement in social relationships to well-being” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 12). As a construct, social support includes social networks, perceived social support, and enacted social support (Goldsmith, 2004). Emphasis in the present study was on enacted social support.

Substantive theory was used to distinguish theory “developed for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) from formal theory. Substantive theory can be “used to explain and manage problems” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) within a specific area of inquiry.

The term *theory* was used to denote “a set of well-developed categories (themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some phenomenon” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 55).

University transfer students were those enrolled in the institutional setting with a declared major of associate in arts or associate in science. The intent of the university transfer students was to earn academic credit at the community college that would be transferable to a four-year college or university and would be applicable in their selected baccalaureate major (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Design and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to generate a grounded theory at the substantive level related to social support and community college student persistence. The grounded theory method and procedures utilized in this study were those based on the work of Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) provided procedural guidelines for those interested in developing theory at the substantive level. The researchers defined grounded theory as “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Central to the methodology posited by Strauss and Corbin was the notion of concepts and themes that emerged from data analysis. Strauss and Corbin suggested constant comparison of data and concepts throughout the analytical steps of description, conceptual ordering, and development of theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The grounded theory methodology was utilized to obtain data from students regarding the role of social support as related to their persistence. Participants provided demographic information and other characteristics, participated in an interview, and completed a card sort activity. Data analysis occurred throughout the project and provided the basis for an emergent theory on social support and persistence among community college students. The institutional setting for this study was a comprehensive public community college in the southeastern section of the United States with a population of approximately 5730 students. The participants in the study were university transfer students enrolled at the institution.

Conceptual Framework for the Study

The conceptual framework for the study included the topic of persistence, the research questions, the setting, the data sources, and the methodology. A visual depiction of the conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1 on the following page.

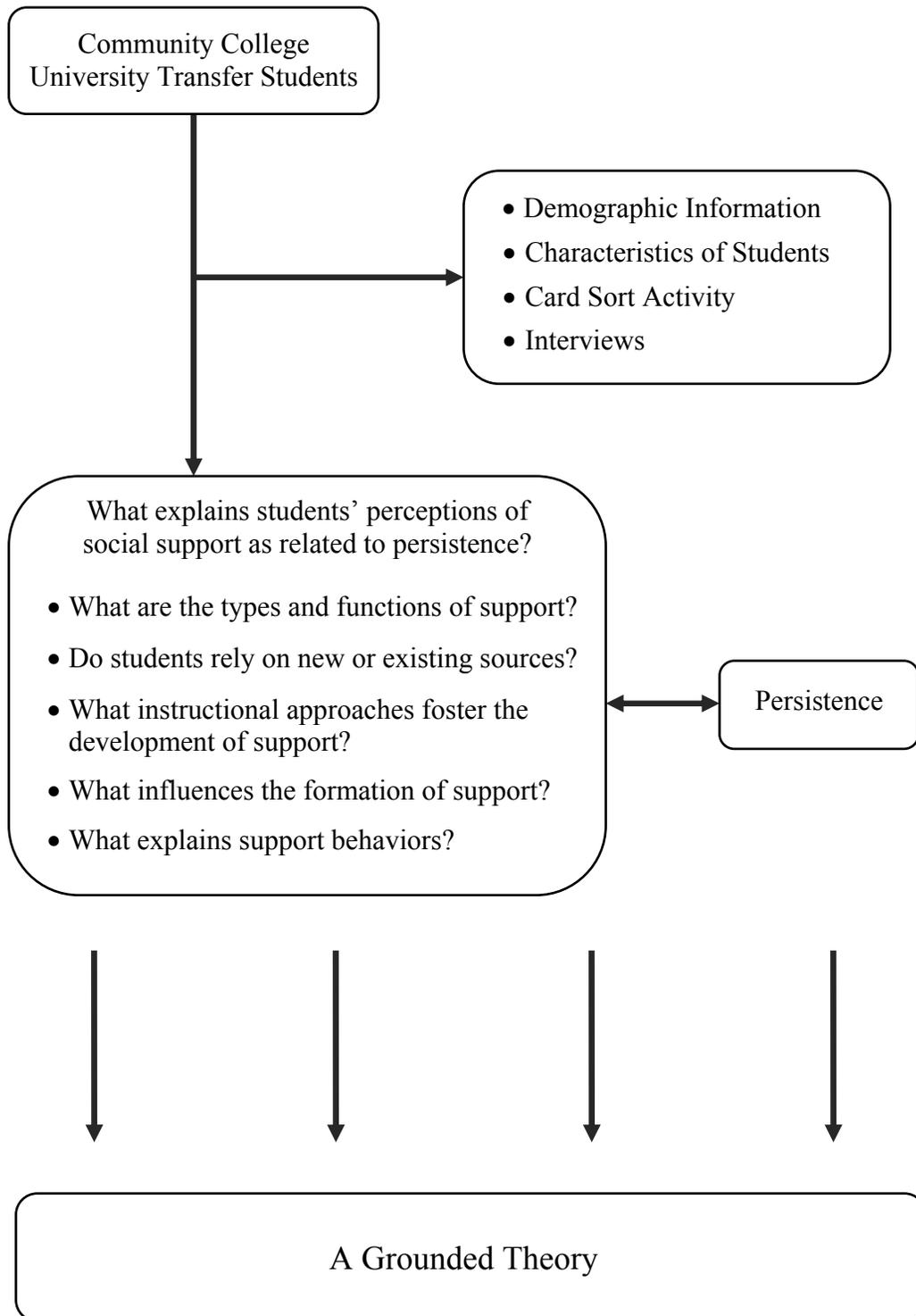


Figure 1. The conceptual framework for the study.

As indicated in Figure 1, the participants in the study were community college students in university transfer programs. Multiple data sources relevant to the participants in the study were selected to answer the research questions. Each research question was related to the role of social support and persistence. The grounded theory emerged from analysis of data regarding the role of social support as related to persistence.

Delimitations

The present study was delimited to a grounded theory approach and was conducted at a single community college with multiple campuses. Criteria for participation in the study were designed to obtain purposeful sampling and included the following:

1. Students' majors were associate in arts or associate in science (university transfer).
2. Students were enrolled in their second or subsequent semester.
3. Students were enrolled full-time (12 credit hours minimum).
4. Students had earned at least a 2.0 grade point average (GPA).

Excluded from the study were students in non-transfer majors and students participating in special programs offered at the institution.

Significance of the Study

A continually increasing number of students are taking advantage of the accessibility of community colleges without experiencing attainment of their academic goals. Due to the paucity of theoretical research specific to community colleges, researchers must often rely on theories grounded in the experiences of traditional,

residential four-year colleges and universities. This study sought to extend the body of research on community college student persistence through the construction of a theoretical model that identifies and explicates a possible key component of student persistence: social support as related to persistence. The results of this study led to a framework for conceptualizing the role of social dimensions of community college student persistence.

In terms of scholarship, knowledge generated from this study fills an existing gap in the extant literature and provides a basis for additional research. Community college administrators and policy analysts will find the results from this study helpful as they seek a better understanding of community college students' experiences as related to persistence in college. Because this study was conducted in a community college setting and was based on data from students, the findings are relevant for decision makers at that institution.

Organization of the Study

Chapter II contains a review of the literature related to social support and persistence. Dominant theories of student retention are discussed as well as the role of social aspects of retention within those theories. The literature related to social support and persistence is categorized, analyzed, and summarized in relation to the study.

Chapter III presents the study's research design and methodology. An overview of grounded theory is provided. The specific grounded theory approach and procedures utilized in the study are discussed, and methodological decisions are explained.

Chapter IV includes participants' demographic and other characteristics, data analysis results, and the interpretation of findings. Emergent concepts and themes are discussed in detail with supporting excerpts from interview data. Following the interpretation of findings, the emergent theoretical model is presented.

The discussion of the grounded theory and recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter V. Findings from the study are linked to existing research. The significance of the study is discussed within the context of research on community colleges and student persistence.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the literature related to the present study. The literature review raised the researcher's awareness of areas that needed additional exploration. The literature review also increased the researcher's sensitivity to concepts related to the study. This chapter covers theories of student retention, social aspects of persistence as an exploratory framework, and the strands of research related to social aspects of persistence.

Background Information

In general, theories of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and student involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984) emerged out of research conducted on traditional, residential college and university campuses (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Bailey and Alfonso (2005) observed in a summary of research on persistence and completion rates that most research was related to four-year institutions. In their review of postsecondary research, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) stated that their work was "based almost exclusively on samples of traditional college students who were age 18 to 22, who attended four-year institutions full-time, and who lived on campus" (p. 632). Later, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted some gains in the amount of research on community colleges, stating that "the impact of community colleges on students is no longer an 'empirical black hole'" (p. 631). They also stated, however, that more research on community college students was needed (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A review by

Townsend, Donaldson, and Wilson (2005) found that between 1990 and 2003 only eight percent of 2,321 articles in five key higher education journals mentioned community colleges.

Theories of Student Retention

For decades researchers have recognized the importance of social aspects of students' experiences as related to student retention. The theoretical origin for a sociological model of retention can be traced to Spady (1970, 1971). Spady's model was based on the work of Durkheim, who "found that suicidal tendencies increased in people who were not integrated socially and normatively into their existing social system" (as cited in Summers, 2003, p. 66). The parallel that Spady drew from Durkheim's work was that college student attrition was similar, though not as drastic as suicide (Summers, 2003).

Building on the work of Spady, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) posited the theory of academic and social integration. Tinto's theory of retention focuses on "interaction between the student and the academic and social systems of the college" (Wild & Ebbers, 2002, p. 507). According to Tinto's theory, lack of integration is manifested either through students' perceptions of incongruence with the college or through isolation in which little or no interaction occurs for the student (Tinto, 1987). Tinto's theory of academic and social integration has been applied most often in university settings, among commuter students (Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983) and in a few instances in community college settings (Bers & Smith, 1991; Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Tinto & Russo, 1994). The results from most studies validated the correlation between increased

academic and social integration and higher levels of achievement and persistence (Nora, 2001).

Another dominant model of retention is Astin's (1977, 1984) developmental theory of student involvement. Astin (1984) defined involvement as the "quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 298). Astin theorized that students with more social involvement are more likely to persist. Student involvement might include interaction with peers or faculty in or out of the classroom. According to the theory, students' involvement in the classroom, out-of-class on projects, and through participation in school-sponsored activities positively influences persistence in college (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Research on involvement revealed lower levels of student involvement in community colleges in comparison to four-year institutions (Coley, 2000; Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar, & Fillpot, 2000; Maxwell, 2000). Cohen and Brawer (2003) explained that the non-residential status of most community college campuses complicates wider involvement and participation among students.

A third retention model, though less dominant, was developed by Bean and Metzner (1985). The conceptual model developed by Bean and Metzner (1985) was in response to concerns that nontraditional students did not have as much opportunity to become socially integrated into the institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In Bean and Metzner's (1985) model four sets of variables are important: (a) academic performance, (b) intent to leave, (c) background and defining variables, and (d) environmental variables. The model also included compensatory interaction effects between academic

and environmental variables as well as academic outcomes and psychological outcomes (Bean & Metzner, 1985). A relevant component of the model proposed by Bean and Metzner (1985) was the acknowledgement that the external environment exerts greater influence on the persistence of nontraditional students in comparison to traditional students.

According to Bean and Metzner (1985), the level of social integration and involvement for nontraditional students is less influential in persistence than it is for traditional students. For example, nontraditional students typically work off campus and commute whereas traditional students are more likely to work and live on campus. The model of student attrition proposed by Bean and Metzner (1985) attempted to address the differences of nontraditional students and suggested that “social variables from the outside environment are expected to be of greater importance than college social integration variables” (p. 530). Other researchers have referred to the social variables exerting influence from outside the college environment as pull factors that affect students’ transition and adjustment to college (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Persistence and Social Influences

The dominant theories of student retention indicated the vital role of social influences as a key element affecting persistence. The theories of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and student involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984) emphasized the role of social influences and interactions that are primarily internal to the college or university campus. Those theories emphasized internal social influences and

interactions, given the traditional residential students forming the research samples. On the other hand, the model proposed by Bean and Metzner (1985) emphasized the role of social influences and interactions that are primarily part of the external environment. The emphasis on external social factors was based on the nontraditional commuter status of the students who are the focus of the model. A study by Napoli and Wortman (1998) reinforced the notion of internal and external social influences varying in effect on persistence according to students' status as residents or commuters. Napoli and Wortman (1998) concluded that community college students experience social influences that are both college-based and external to the college (i.e., friends, work, and family). Additionally, Nora and Cabrera (1996) recognized environmental pull factors (i.e., family and work responsibilities, distance of commute, etc.) that influence commuter students.

Social influences on persistence are important aspects of the major theories of college student retention. The dominant theories of retention, academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and student involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984), emphasized social influences from within the college environment. Though not as dominant, the retention model developed by Bean and Metzner (1985) highlighted social influences external to the college environment as significant factors in the persistence of nontraditional college students. Reviews of existing theories of retention and their treatment of social influences on persistence provided sensitizing concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Patton, 2002) for the present study.

Strands of Research Related to Social Aspects of Persistence

The dominant theories of postsecondary student retention suggested that social influences are an important aspect of student persistence (Astin, 1977, 1984; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). The relevant literature reviewed on social aspects of college student retention included the following strands: (a) collaborative learning (Cross, 1998; O'Banion, 1997; Tinto, 1997), (b) social networks (Hays & Oxley, 1986; Maxwell, 2000; Karp & Hughes, 2008), and (c) social support (Goldsmith, 2004; House & Kahn, 1985; Somera & Ellis, 1996; Thompson, 2008).

Collaborative Learning

One strand of research that emphasized the social aspects of student persistence is collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is often achieved through the implementation of learning communities. Emerging in the 1990s, the implementation of learning communities resulted in restructuring the curriculum by creating linkages across courses and among the students involved (Minkler, 2002). Cross (1998) defined learning communities as “groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning” (p. 4). Tinto (1997) commented that regardless of differences in how they are implemented, learning communities emphasize shared learning and connected learning. The learning communities movement in higher education exemplifies the attempt to foster students’ academic and social integration as well as to increase their involvement. The alternative phrases used to describe learning communities include cooperative learning, collaborative learning, and team learning (Tinto, 1997). Those alternative

descriptors reveal the emphasis on students' social interaction and involvement found in discourse on learning communities.

A number of presentations, articles, and book chapters touted the advantages and educational benefits of learning communities (Hill, 1985; Cross, 1998; O'Banion, 1997). Tinto and Goodsell-Love (1993) reported that participants in a learning community in a community college setting experienced increased comfort levels in their learning environment due to the "high level of social, emotional, and academic peer support that emerged from classroom activities" (p. 18). Longitudinal research on learning communities in two community colleges revealed that participation in learning communities resulted in higher academic achievement and a lower attrition rate in comparison to stand-alone courses (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1994). Results from a mixed methods study on learning communities (coordinated studies) at Seattle Central Community College indicated the importance to students of establishing a community of peers that provided social support (Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Relationships with supportive peers were reported as a contributor to increased persistence rates among participants in learning communities (Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Russo, 1994). In a review of research on learning communities, Minkler (2002) shared findings from multiple studies indicating that community college student participants persisted at higher rates. Reports of increased persistence were typically accompanied by qualitative data indicating the benefits of increased social support as the result of participating in learning communities (Minkler, 2002).

Due to the observed reciprocal benefit of academic and social enhancement as a result of collaborative learning, Tinto (1997) called for more in-depth social mapping and network analysis to deepen understanding of social aspects of persistence. As Maxwell (1998) indicated, researchers often aggregated multiple social relationship measures to create an index that does not pinpoint the specific roles of social support. Research on collaborative learning indicated that social support is a vital link in persistence. Unspecified, however, were the specific types and functions of social support that emerged as the result of broader social interaction.

Social Networks

Another strand of research within the framework of social integration and involvement is the study of social networks among college students. Specific studies have focused on peer relations (Barnett & Harris, 1984; Maxwell, 2000), social network roles and functions (Hays & Oxley, 1986; Karp & Hughes, 2008; Krause, 2007; Zoellner, 2005), and students' social development (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Of the studies cited above, only two (Maxwell, 2000; Karp & Hughes, 2008) were conducted in a community college setting.

The results of Maxwell's quantitative study suggested that the social structures existing at community colleges need more exploration, especially as related to academic courses and students' academic goals. Although Maxwell's (2000) study refuted research suggesting that the role of social integration was minimal on community college campuses, his study was not designed to answer Tinto's (1997) call for in-depth social mapping and network analysis. Notably, the qualitative study by Karp and Hughes (2008)

was based on in-depth interviews of students at two community colleges in the northeastern United States. They concluded that community college students become integrated into their environments through informational networks that are usually classroom-based and are more functional than social. The researchers' results were drawn from students attending urban community colleges, and the focus of the study was on social integration as opposed to social support.

Social Support

A third strand of research emphasizing social aspects of the college student retention is related to social support. Social support is a broad construct used across a number of fields of study and conceptualized in a variety of ways. According to Goldsmith (2004), social support is linked positively with health, recovery from illness, personal relationships, social adjustment, prevention of worker stress, improved morale among teachers, and student achievement. Tinto (2002) stated that “students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support” (p. 5).

Conceptualizations of social support vary, and the literature review indicated that the construct was not applied consistently. Weiss (1974) identified six functions of personal relationships: (a) attachment, (b) social integration, (c) opportunity for nurturance, (d) reassurance of worth, (e) sense of reliable alliance, and (f) the obtaining of guidance. House (1981) presented types of social support as emotional, instrumental, informative, or self-evaluative. House and Kahn (1985) drew a distinction between social integration (structural aspects of relationships) and social support (functional aspects of

relationships, including perceived and actual support). Noting the nuances in various definitions of social support, Goldsmith (2004) referred to social support as “an umbrella term for a variety of pathways linking involvement in social relationships to well-being” (p. 12).

A number of researchers explored the positive role of social support as related to college students. These covered the role of social support in student health (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005); the transition to college (Somera & Ellis, 1996; Lafrenier & Ledgerwood, 1997; Bell, 2006); academic achievement (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004); and stress (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005). Findings from the studies confirmed the positive role of encouragement and support from significant others as contributing factors to students’ transition and adjustment to college (Nora, 2001). Summarizing a number of studies conducted on two- and four-year institutions, Nora (2001) concluded that support from significant others eased the transition to college, helped students adjust, influenced academic and social experiences, affected students’ level of goal commitment, and positively influenced students’ plans to remain enrolled. Other studies examined how students communicate social support. Mortenson (2006) investigated cultural differences in communication regarding social support among Chinese and American students. Mortenson (2006) found that American and Chinese students shared similar concepts of social support but reported that American students were more inclined to communicate the need for social support.

Thompson (2008) conducted a grounded theory study on how university freshman communicate academic support. Thompson’s research study is noteworthy for two

reasons: (a) it was based on grounded theory methodology, and (b) it was the first study focused on the communication of academic support among university freshmen.

Thompson utilized the methodological procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

As a qualitative study focused specifically on in-depth exploration of social interaction and support, Thompson's (2008) study was in contrast to the majority of the extant literature. The research by Thompson served as an exemplar of the type of research needed regarding the role of social support among community college students.

Thompson's (2008) research provided an orienting methodological approach suitable for the present study.

Summary of the Literature Review

A review of the literature indicated that the dominant models of retention pervading research in higher education are the theories of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and student involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984). The model provided by Bean and Metzner (1985) accounts for persistence factors affecting nontraditional students, but it has not been as widely applied. The existing theoretical models are effective in indicating the vital role of social aspects of retention in general and to a lesser degree in community colleges. Most of the research studies on social aspects of students' experiences were conducted in traditional college and university settings and were based on quantitative methodologies. Strands of research emphasizing social influences of persistence included collaborative learning, social networks, and social support. Despite the variety of extant studies and an increased amount of research on community colleges, Tinto's (1997) call for in-depth research on social relationships

remains largely unanswered. This gap in the literature on social aspects of community college persistence warrants additional research.

CHAPTER THREE

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The research design and methodology that guided this study are presented in this chapter. The grounded theory research design and an overview of the methodological steps are presented. Each of the following methodological considerations and procedures are discussed: (a) research questions, (b) setting, (c) data sources, (d) instrumentation, (e) data collection, and (f) data analysis. The role of the researcher is also presented in this chapter.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to generate theory at the substantive level regarding social support and persistence among community college students. Guiding the study was the primary research question: What explains students' perceptions of social support as related to their postsecondary education at a two-year or community college? The research methodology best suited for this study was a grounded theory approach in which the "researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

As noted by Bryant and Charmaz (2007), the grounded theory method is "currently the most widely used and popular qualitative research method across a wide range of disciplines and subject areas" (p. 1). Although grounded theory is often associated with a key text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the origins of this approach extend historically much further. The highly regarded work

of Glaser and Strauss was not so much the beginning of grounded theory as it was the convergence of influences from a variety of traditions and epistemologies. Among those influences were contributions from Lazarsfeld in methodology, Merton in the sociology of science, Mead in social psychology and ethnography, and Schutz in phenomenology (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Reflecting the contributions of multiple researchers, grounded theory evolved, bequeathing new strands along the way. Denzin (2007) stated that “grounded theory is not a unified framework” (p. 454). Denzin (2007) identified seven different versions of grounded theory that included “positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, objectivist, postmodern, situational, and computer assisted” (p. 454). According to Bryant and Charmaz (2007), the versions of grounded theory methodology can be reduced at the simplest level to three: (a) the Glaserian school, (b) the Strauss and Corbin school, and (c) the Constructivist.

Because the varieties of grounded theory do not represent a unified approach, determining the specific methodological approach was an important consideration. The current study was based on the approach and procedures advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). The goal was to draw on the beneficial explicitness of the approach of Corbin and Strauss and Strauss and Corbin while realizing their approach is one of several viable methodological designs within the cluster of grounded theory.

Overview of the Methodological Steps

The grounded theory methodological approach advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) guided this study. Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) provided a flexible, yet explicit framework for conducting grounded theory research. Provided below is an overview of the major methodological steps of the present study.

The researcher began by developing research questions suitable for a grounded theory study. The primary research question was suitable for a grounded theory study because it was focused enough to provide direction, but broad and open-ended enough to allow for discovery (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Secondary research questions were designed to address components of the primary research question.

The researcher selected an institutional setting for conducting the study. Confining the study to one site allowed for adequate investigation of the primary research question. Sampling one site is adequate for the development of theory at the substantive level (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The one site provided sufficient diversity to investigate concepts under varied conditions as emphasized by experts on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researcher considered which data sources to utilize. Sources of data for a grounded theory study might include interviews, observational field notes, and other written or visual data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher selected several types of data sources appropriate for the research questions and the

methodology. In-depth interviewing was the primary data source. Other data sources included demographic information and characteristics of participants and the use of a card sort activity related to persistence factors.

The researcher considered the use of instrumentation prior to collecting data. The researcher developed guiding questions and created an interview guide (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Questions on the interview guide were open ended to encourage participants to provide descriptive responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researcher collected data. Prior to collecting data, the researcher established criteria for initial sampling. Data collection considerations included allowing time for analysis between interviews, maintaining sensitivity to participants, and remaining structured, yet flexible during in-depth interviewing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As data collection progressed, the researcher utilized theoretical sampling to investigate emergent concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researcher analyzed data based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) guidelines. Data analysis in grounded theory research was referred to as the "interplay between researchers and data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13). Data analysis began after the first round of data collection. Data collection and analysis continued in an alternating pattern, each influencing the other (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data analysis included making "constant comparisons against incoming cases" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 89). Comparisons were also made among the data sources. The researcher coded interview data utilizing the procedures associated with open, axial, and

selective coding until theoretical saturation occurred (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher utilized the analysis of data to generate a grounded theory at the substantive level (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Research Questions

The primary research question provided direction for the study. The primary research question was What explains students' perceptions of social support as related to their postsecondary education at a two-year or community college? The secondary research questions were designed to address subsets of the primary research question.

Secondary research questions included the following:

1. What are the types and functions of social support among community college students?
2. Do students rely mainly on social support relationships created while attending college or relationships that existed prior to entering college?
3. What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support?
4. What influences the formation of social support relationships?
5. What explains the social support behaviors of community college students?

The primary and secondary research questions guided the study.

Setting

The institutional setting for this study was a comprehensive community college in the southeastern United States with a population of approximately 5730 students in fall 2008. The institution offers credit programs and majors through the following academic

divisions: (a) Arts and Sciences, (b) Business and Public Services, (c) Health Education, and (d) Industrial and Engineering Technology. At the time of this study, the college's largest academic division was the Arts and Sciences Division. The Arts and Sciences Division housed the university transfer programs. According to institutional data, university transfer students comprised approximately 41% of the student population in the institutional setting.

In 2006 the College obtained reaffirmation of its regional accreditation through the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). In 2007, the institution opened its first satellite campus in the most populous county of its service area. At the time of this study, plans were under development for two additional satellite campuses in other counties within the college's service area.

The following information regarding the institutional setting was obtained from the institution's 2007-08 annual report. In fall 2007 the college's student population was 57% female and 43% male. Ethnic diversity was as follows: (a) White, 81%; (b) Black, 14%; and (c) Other, 5%. The average age of students attending the college was 25. Over half (53%) of students attended full time, and 69% of students were employed. In 2007, students enrolled in the institutional setting worked an average of 29 hours per week.

Data Sources

After considering the research questions and the setting, the researcher identified data sources. Three data sources were selected for this study: (a) in-depth interviews, (b) demographic information and characteristics of participants, and (c) a card sort activity related to persistence factors. Each source of data is discussed below.

Interviews

In-depth interviews were a data source that yielded rich insights regarding student perceptions of social support as related to persistence in college. The use of open-ended questions and probes enabled the researcher to capture participants' descriptions of their experiences in their own words. Interviews ranged in length from 41 to 70 minutes. The researcher audio-recorded all interviews and submitted the audio files to a professional transcriptionist working at an off-campus location. The text of transcribed interviews was a major source of data. In addition, the researcher converted audio files to a format compatible with a portable audio device for convenient listening. Audio files from interviews served as a data source along with transcribed interviews. Pseudonyms were provided for all participants. Table 1 on the following page provides interview details.

Table 1

Interview Details

Pseudonym	Date of Interview	Length (minutes)	Word Count
Aaron	01-23-09	64	6,464
Carmen	02-02-09	68	8,730
Carl	02-03-09	54	6,718
Michelle	02-10-09	58	8,230
Allison	02-12-09	62	8,188
John	02-13-09	47	5,900
Tina	02-16-09	70	9,840
Elaine	02-17-09	46	6,200
Alice	02-23-09	61	8,115
Jeff	02-24-09	60	9,443
Allen	03-05-09	50	6,225
Samantha	03-09-09	48	7,300
Kay	03-10-09	41	4,180
Kelly	03-11-09	42	5,180
Russ	03-23-09	42	4,290
Kayla	03-25-09	45	6,740
Andrea	03-30-09	45	6,130
Heather	04-01-09	54	6,450
Andy	04-02-09	42	5,880
Billy	04-03-09	56	7,360
Average		53	6,878
Total		1,055	137,563

As shown in Table 1, considerable time was spent in the field for data collection. A total of 20 participants were interviewed during the period January 23, 2009, through April 3, 2009. The total interview length in minutes equaled 1,055 with an average of 53 minutes per participant. The total word count of transcribed interviews equaled 137,563 words, with an average of 6,878 words per transcript.

Demographic Information and Characteristics of Participants

At the time of each interview, demographic information and characteristics from participants were documented under the designated pseudonym. Demographic information and characteristics included data obtained from the institution as well as information the researcher gathered in person from participants. The collected demographic information and characteristics of participants included the following:

- Age
- Distance of commute
- Entry term
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Grade Point Average (GPA)
- Major
- Whether the participant attended a local high school
- Whether the participant previously attended college
- Whether the participant was a first-generation college student
- Work hours per week

The participant profile form used to document demographic information and student characteristics is included in Appendix D.

Card Sort Activity

Another data source used in the study was a card sort activity in which participants selected factors that had contributed to their persistence. The use of card or pile sorts is a data collection technique that has been utilized across the social sciences (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). A card sort is used to “explore the relationships among items” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 770).

In the present study, a card sort activity was used to enable students to indicate factors that influenced their persistence in college. Ten factors related to student persistence were identified from the literature. Those factors represented influences on persistence cited in the research literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, two cards provided space for students to write in other factors. The factors printed on the twelve cards used in the card sort are listed below.

- Financial pressure
- Other factor one (write-in)
- Other factor two (write-in)
- The performance expectations placed on you by others
- The quality of academic instruction
- The support you have received
- The value of what you are learning
- Your interactions with instructors

- Your level of academic preparation prior to entering college
- Your motivation to succeed academically
- Your personality type
- Your use of institutional resources such as the library, Writing Center, or Learning Lab

Results from the card sort provided a data source to which the researcher compared interview data in determining emergent themes.

The Interview Guide

The interview guide developed for use in this study was based on the research questions. Guiding questions and statements associated with each research question were developed for the interview guide (Patton, 2002). Open-ended statements were designed to prompt participants to explain and describe in their own words. Table 2 on the following page includes the initial interview guide.

Table 2

The Initial Interview Guide

Research Questions	Interview Guide Questions
What are the types and functions of social support among community college students?	<p>Describe how your friends and family have responded to your decision to attend college.</p> <p>Tell me how the relationships you have (friends, family, significant others) help or hinder your progress.</p> <p>Describe the influence of others on your study habits.</p> <p>Describe the types of support you need as student and whether you have experienced that support as a student.</p>
Do students rely mainly on social support relationships created while attending college or relationships that existed prior to entering college?	<p>Explain how you usually meet others on campus and what influences this process.</p> <p>Discuss the campus atmosphere as related to meeting and interacting with others.</p> <p>Describe how your relationships have changed over time as you have been a student.</p> <p>Describe the differences in social interactions in the following: (a) people you knew prior to entering college, and (b) people you met after entering college.</p>
What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support?	<p>Think about your first week on campus and describe what you remember about your first week experiences.</p> <p>Describe the influence of your course work as related to interacting with other students.</p> <p>Describe the influence of your course work as related to interacting with instructors and other faculty and staff.</p> <p>Explain how the various approaches of your instructors have affected your interactions with other students in your classes.</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Research Question	Interview Guide Questions
<p>What influences the formation of social support relationships?</p>	<p>Describe how your living arrangements have affected your social interactions and relationships.</p> <p>Think about entering as a new student and describe the role of the institution as related to your social interactions.</p> <p>Describe the sources you are most likely to turn to for support and how those sources came to be the ones you regard as supportive.</p> <p>Explain the factors that have most influenced your interactions with others.</p>
<p>What explains the social support behaviors of community college students?</p>	<p>Prior to attending [the institution], describe what you were expecting to experience as a student?</p> <p>Describe the factors that affect how you choose to spend time (on and off campus) when you are not in class.</p> <p>Explain whether you feel that you fit in at [the institution] and the factors that have influenced this view.</p> <p>Describe your views regarding why students are supportive or not supportive of one another.</p>

As shown in Table 2, each question on the interview guide corresponded with one of the research questions. The interview guide included open-ended questions. The use of terms such as *describe*, *discuss*, and *explain* encouraged participants to provide descriptive details regarding their experiences.

As noted by Corbin and Strauss (2008), “usually at the beginning of the research, questions are open ended, then tend to become more focused and refined as the research moves along” (p. 73). Throughout data collection the interview guide remained fluid. The researcher made minor changes and additions to the interview guide as needed. Only minor modifications were needed. A copy of the final interview guide is included in Appendix E.

Data Collection

Researchers have suggested that data collection and analysis are closely related in grounded theory methodology. Analysis of collected data influences subsequent data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Prior to collecting data, the researcher selected an appropriate subpopulation of students to sample, established criteria for participation, and recruited participants. As data collection and analysis were in progress, theoretical sampling procedures were utilized. Throughout data collection, the researcher wrote field notes to capture relevant details not verbalized. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Initial Sampling

Sampling is an important aspect of grounded theory research. Initial sampling decisions provided direction for the study. In contrast to the sampling of representative

cases used in quantitative research, the concern in grounded theory research is “with representativeness of concepts and how concepts vary dimensionally” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 214). One of the considerations for initial sampling was determining the group to study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The initial selection of research participants for this study was based on purposeful sampling. According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling is utilized in qualitative research to lead the researcher to information-rich cases that yield data needed to answer the research question(s). Because this study focused on social support as related to the persistence of university transfer students, the initial sample included university transfer students. The approach of purposefully selecting an initial group for research aligned with sampling procedures related to grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Prior to identifying participants, criteria for participation in the study were established. The criteria listed below were established for participation in the study.

1. The student’s major was Associate in Arts or Associate in Science. (Both were university transfer programs.)
2. The student was enrolled full-time in the institutional setting during fall 2008.
3. The student was enrolled full-time in the institutional setting during spring 2009.
4. The student’s cumulative GPA was 2.0 or higher.

Prior attendance in the institutional setting or at other institutions was acceptable. The criteria established for participation satisfied the definition of persistence (Crawford,

1999) utilized for this study. Crawford (1999) defined persistence as “maintenance of continued enrollment for two or more semesters, specifically from fall term to spring term and/or completion of a degree/certificate or transfer to a four-year college” (p. 13).

Excluded from the list of possible participants were university transfer students participating in two programs. One of those programs was a transitional program for students transferring to a university located near the institutional setting for this study. Participants from this program were excluded due to the residential aspect of the program as well as the additional support services the program featured. The other excluded program was a learning communities initiative that featured linked courses for a group of students and provided enhanced support services. At the time of this study both of the excluded programs had been recently implemented. The transitional program was launched in fall 2006 and the learning communities initiative was implemented in fall 2007. The effects of these programs on student behavior were still being measured, and the programs involved a small percentage of the overall university transfer population in the institutional setting. Of the total student population (5730 students) only approximately 11% of students were enrolled in excluded programs.

After establishing the criteria for initial sampling, a pool of eligible participants was identified. A representative from the institution’s Information Technology (IT) department generated a report based on the eligibility criteria. The list provided from IT included the names, student identification numbers, and college-issued e-mail addresses for each possible participant. Students were selected at random from the list. After randomly selecting possible participants, the researcher checked enrollment status to

make sure potential participants were still enrolled at the institution. In addition, their grade point averages (GPAs) were checked. Because most postsecondary institutions require incoming transfer students to have a 2.5 GPA (or 2.0 in some cases), participants were selected who met those criteria.

Recruitment of Participants

After students were randomly selected, they were contacted via their college e-mail addresses with a letter of invitation (see Appendix C). Students were notified that participants would receive a \$15 gift card redeemable at a local retail store. Initially, few students responded to the invitation sent via e-mail. The researcher submitted an IRB amendment to include contacting students via their phone number on record with the institution. The amendment was approved (see Appendix B). Phone contact enabled the researcher to inform possible participants to expect a related e-mail invitation. Through the use of phone and e-mail contact, the take-up rate improved. The response rate improved from approximately 20% to about 45%. Overall, the researcher contacted approximately 75 students via e-mail or phone and e-mail to obtain the desired number of participants.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) influenced data collection as the study progressed. Theoretical sampling is defined as “sampling on the basis of the emerging concepts, with the aim being to explore the dimensional range or varied conditions along which the properties of concepts vary” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 73). Theoretical sampling is regarded as responsive and

flexible. It is a “method of data collection based on concepts derived from data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the alternating pattern of data analysis and collection, theoretical sampling shapes what is to be asked in the next interview or observed in the next round of data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through theoretical sampling, the researcher maximized opportunities for data collection.

During data collection and analysis, the researcher utilized theoretical sampling in multiple ways. One example was the modification of the interview guide. For example, following the first few interviews, the researcher added questions to the interview guide that included the following topics: (a) the role of the academic advisor, (b) the use of online networking sites, (c) whether students had older siblings attending college, (d) the extent to which students took online courses, and (e) students’ highlight experiences in college. Those additions to the interview guide were made for the purpose of sampling related concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Probing students regarding the role of siblings was the result of the first interviewee’s comments about his older sister’s role of providing academic support. Questions about siblings in subsequent interviews yielded insights regarding the role of siblings in providing support of various kinds for students.

The researcher also utilized theoretical sampling as a basis for interviewing students attending a satellite campus of the institution. After interviewing a number of students from the college’s main campus, the researcher sought interviewees who attended a much smaller satellite campus with fewer buildings, a differing schedule, and fewer resources for students. Data from students attending a satellite campus provided

insights regarding the campus environment as well as its programs and services in relation to social support.

Another example of theoretical sampling was the review of previous audio interviews and interview transcripts in light of emerging concepts. The researcher listened to audio files of interviews throughout the study in an effort to continually raise new questions that might inform analysis. One such example was the concept that students may become decreasingly interested in establishing relationships with peers, faculty, and staff as they neared their date of graduation or transfer. By reviewing the audio files of previous interviews with the mindset of constant comparison, the researcher generated new ideas based on the data.

One other example of theoretical sampling was the selection of two international students as participants. After interviewing several individuals who graduated from local high schools, the researcher had questions about the experiences of students from other countries. For example, one question was whether students new to the geographic area and culture might experience different types and sources of social support. The college's international student advisor provided a list of several names of students who appeared to meet the sampling criteria. After verifying that the names provided were on the initial list of eligible participants, the researcher confirmed their eligibility status. Two of the international students responded affirmatively to the invitation and participated. The international experiences of those participants added variation to the data.

Field Notes

Field notes were used during interviews to capture non-verbal information and to record ideas regarding new or revised questions for the interview guide. Corbin and Strauss (2008) distinguished the observational focus of field notes from the analytical focus of memos. Writing field notes provided documentation relevant to the study that was not captured in the recording of interviews. Examples included descriptions of the appearance or dress of participants, their level of engagement during the interview, non-verbal cues such as expressions of emotion, and brief researcher notes about interview questions or probes that were not on the original interview guide.

Theoretical Saturation

The procedures for data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined theoretical saturation as the “point in category development at which no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerge” (p. 143). Specific criteria for theoretical saturation include the following: “(a) no new or relevant data seem to emerge regarding a category, (b) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 212).

As noted by Corbin and Strauss (2008), total theoretical saturation probably never occurs. Strauss and Corbin (1998) cautioned, however, that researchers should not end data collection too soon. Twenty interviews were completed for the present study. After approximately 16 interviews, the categories and concepts were well established. The

remaining interviews were conducted to add variation and density, but did not yield data that warranted new categories.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included the following steps: (a) analyzing results from the card sort activity, (b) open coding, (c) axial coding, (d) the generation of memos and diagrams, and (e) selective coding. The data analysis procedures outlined below were utilized in the present study.

Analyzing Results from the Card Sort Activity

Analysis of the card sort activity on persistence factors required several steps. The researcher created a spreadsheet that included the ranking of persistence factors for each participant. The rankings were analyzed to determine the number and the percentage of participants that selected each factor. The researcher also calculated the number of participants who ranked each factor as most important. Results from the card sort activity were used to develop a network diagram based on analysis of the relationships among participants and the persistence factors they identified that contributed to their persistence. The software utilized to develop a network diagram was the Organizational Risk Analyzer (ORA) program (Center for Computational Analysis of Social and Organizational Systems [CASOS], 2009).

Open Coding

In open coding, the focus was on microanalysis for the purpose of establishing categories and identifying concepts. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined microanalysis as “detailed, line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial

categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories” (p. 57). Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined open coding as “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (p. 101). Through open coding the researcher established initial categories and identified concepts. Analyzing the data and fracturing it into manageable pieces provided the basis for subsequent analysis.

During open coding, the researcher utilized QSR International’s NVivo 8 software to create nodes. Nodes were collections of references about a specific concept or theme (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2008). In open coding, free nodes were established. Free nodes were stand-alone nodes that were not part of a categorical hierarchy. Free nodes were helpful in open coding as a meaningful way to fracture the data. Through open coding the researcher established a total of 69 free nodes. The following were examples of free nodes established during open coding: (a) course-based interactions, (b) living arrangements, (c) meeting people, (d) study preferences, and (e) time spent on campus.

Free nodes remained flexible during data collection and analysis. As data collection and analysis continued, the researcher made changes as necessary based on data analysis. For example, the titles of some free nodes were modified to better match the emerging concepts or to reflect the combining of some nodes. The purpose for establishing free nodes was to provide conceptual building blocks for subsequent analysis.

Axial Coding

Axial coding included relating concepts and developing categories, and subcategories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined axial coding as “the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed ‘axial’ because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of the properties and dimensions” (p. 123). Corbin and Strauss (2008) referred to axial coding as the relating of concepts to each other.

The use of QSR International’s NVivo 8 software was instrumental in axial coding. In axial coding the researcher developed tree nodes. Tree nodes represented categories that contained subcategories in a hierarchy (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2008). The researcher analyzed the concepts represented by free nodes and related them to each other to create groupings that comprised tree nodes. Table 3 on the following page provides two examples of axial coding that illustrate the relationships among free nodes, subcategories, categories, and research questions.

Table 3

Axial Coding Examples

Selected Free Nodes	Tree Node Subcategory	Tree Node Category	Related Research Question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classmates • Close friends • Roommates • School Friends vs. Close Friends • Significant others (non-family) • Work friends 	Types of peer relationships	Peer Support	What are the types and functions of social support?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course-based interactions • Group work • Meeting people • Instructor interactions • Study groups 	Collaboration related to course work	Group Work	What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support?

As shown in Table 3, free nodes were grouped into subcategories that later formed categories. The categories related to research questions. During open coding free nodes were established without regard for the subcategories, categories, or research questions to which they might relate. Existing free nodes were examined and selected on the basis of their properties for inclusion in one or more subcategories. Subcategories and categories were linked to related research questions.

Memos and Diagrams

During data collection, the researcher wrote memos and developed diagrams. The purpose of documenting memos and diagrams was to capture analytical observations and conceptualizations as they occurred (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interpretation of the data and the interplay between the researcher and the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were documented in part in memos. Memos and diagrams created as part of data analysis were helpful in the later stages of data analysis at the point of selective coding.

The researcher generated analytical memos throughout data collection and analysis. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined memos as “written records of analysis that may vary in type and form” (p. 217). Memos were helpful in generating and recording ideas. As data analysis progressed, memos were reviewed and compared to new data and emergent concepts. Table 4 on the following page includes two examples of memos.

Table 4

Memo Examples

Example 1: Memo from February 17, 2009: Dimensions of Friendship Receptivity

When students first enter college, they feel a need to meet new people. They desire to meet new people (partly to survive in the new environment as opposed to being alone). Receptivity to making new friends upon entering college is pertinent/high. It's exciting to meet new people; it's also scary for some. As transition to a new institution approaches (i.e., exit date for transfer students), receptivity to making new relationships may decrease. Potential new relationships are influenced by the reduced level of time and energy that the student nearing transition is willing to expend or commit. Perhaps the entire time at a community college as a transfer student is analogous to the last term for a student attending a four-year residential institution.

Example 2: Memo from March 31, 2009: Maturation and Friendships

One element that has come out in several interviews (most recently in John's, No. 6) is the idea of maturation changing friendships. Enrolled students seem to want to distance themselves from those they knew in high school who are not enrolled in college. The new focus on succeeding academically seems to trump even some longstanding friendships. This process is probably related to some new identity-seeking behaviors or thoughts among college students. It seems that what determines if relationships will continue is whether the students have reasonably compatible goals.

As shown in Table 4, memos were utilized to document analytical observations about emerging concepts. Memos were used for capturing ideas for later analysis. The exercise of writing memos was helpful for clarifying thinking by putting thoughts into words.

The creation of diagrams provided a means of analyzing visually the factors and relationships that emerged during data collection. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined diagrams as “visual devices that depict the relationships among concepts” (p. 217). Diagrams were used to visually clarify social influences and types of support. For example, after one of the interviews the researcher sketched a diagram depicting visually the role of social support and motivation as described by the participant. A similar diagram was used later to assist in analyzing the role of individual and social influences on persistence. A sample diagram is presented in Figure 2 on the following page.

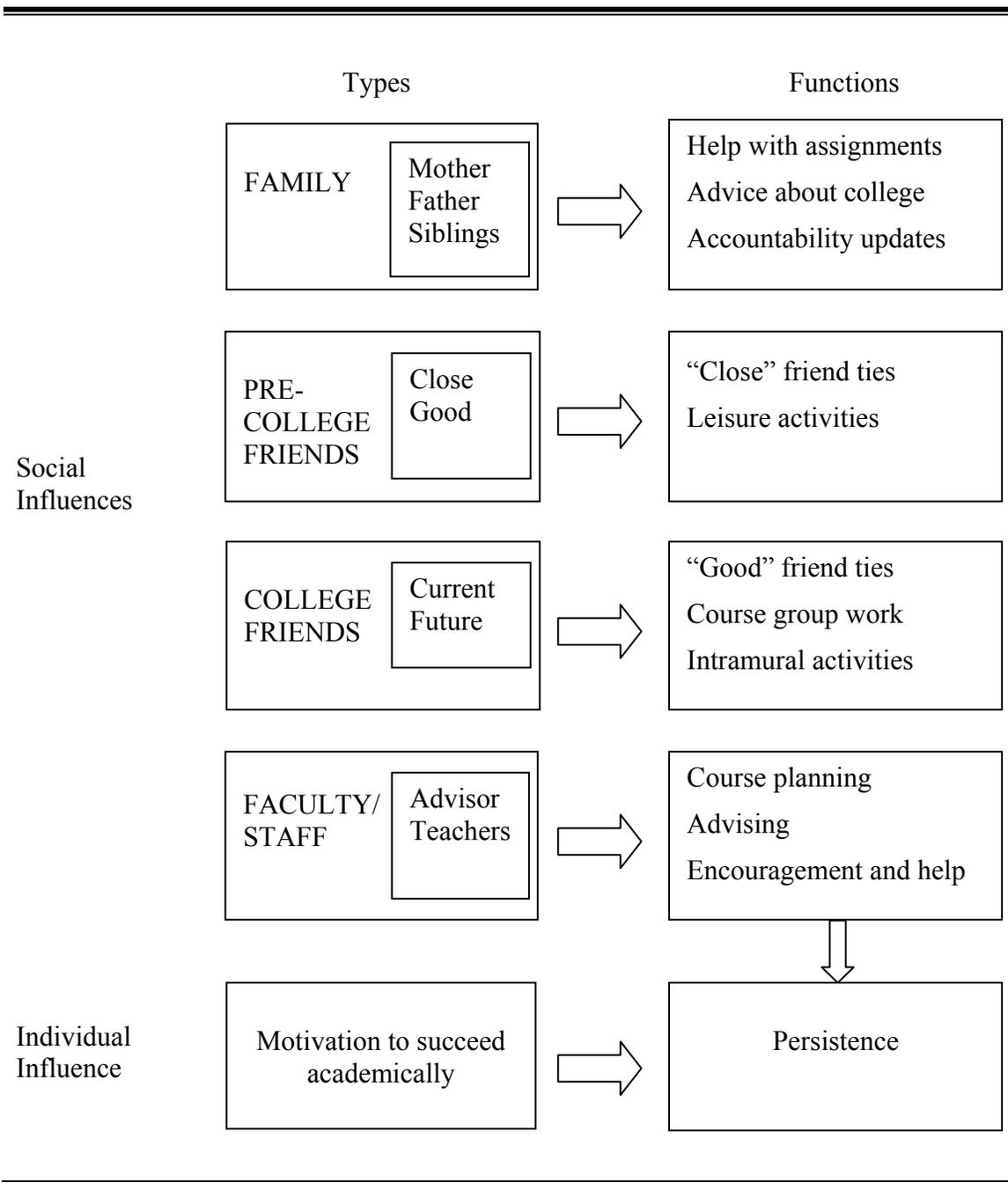


Figure 2. A sample diagram indicating individual and social influences on persistence.

As shown in Figure 2, the visual diagram depicted how individual and social influences contributed to persistence. Categories and subcategories of types of support and their functions were illustrated. The purpose of the diagram was to clarify the contributions to persistence described by the participant.

Selective Coding

Selective coding was the stage at which the categories and concepts were integrated into an explanatory framework. A clarification of the use of selective coding is needed. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined selective coding as “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 143). Corbin and Strauss (2008) described the final step of data analysis as *integration* instead of selective coding. In the present study, the terminology *selective coding* is used to avoid possible confusion with the term *integration* that is used elsewhere in the study in relation to a theory of student retention. The explanatory framework emerged as a result of analysis regarding the interrelationships among the concepts and categories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested several techniques to assist in selective coding: (a) telling or writing the storyline, (b) using diagrams, (c) sorting and reviewing memos, and (d) using computer programs.

In the present study, the review of memos, the identification of a central category, and the use of diagrams enabled the researcher to develop a theory that was relevant to and fit the data. Previously written memos that captured analytical thinking about emergent concepts were helpful in considering the central category. The central category that emerged was students’ utilization of enacted social support. *Utilization* was an operative term because it represented motivation. Participants indicated that they chose to

use (i.e., utilize) the support they needed to succeed. *Enacted social support* was central because it indicated the important role of support as well as the type of support. In contrast to perceived support or network support, enacted social support represented the functional support described by participants. After establishing the central category, the researcher utilized visual diagrams to depict the relationships among the elements of the theory and their relationships. Over time the relationships became clearer and ultimately the visual depiction of the theoretical model was representative of its elements and their relationships.

The Role of the Researcher

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained approval to conduct the study in the selected institutional setting. Approval to conduct the study in the selected institutional setting was included in the application for Institutional Review Board approval. A copy of the Institutional Review Board approval is included in Appendix A.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated that in contrast to objectivity, researchers should focus on the sensitivity they bring to the research process. The term *sensitivity* implied “having insight, being tuned in to, being able to pick up on relevant issues, events, and happenings in data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 32). The researcher’s 14-year career in multiple roles in the community college setting was beneficial to the research process. Realizing that any study is possibly subject to researcher bias, the researcher attempted to draw on his experience in interacting with students to elicit data accurately reflecting their perceptions. By grounding analysis and interpretation in the data from students, the researcher attempted to minimize bias (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The conditions and actions that prevented researcher bias from impairing the procedures and findings of the study are presented below. First, the researcher was open to allowing the data to direct the study as opposed to attempting to force the data to fit a particular finding. A previous phenomenological study conducted in the institutional setting indicated that social experiences were an important aspect of students' experiences. The previous study suggested that social aspects of the community college experience were important and deserved additional exploration. Given the lack of extant qualitative research on the social experiences of community college students, there was no pressure to make the data fit a particular conclusion. On the contrary, the researcher knew that *any* findings from a qualitative study regarding the role of social support would represent a contribution to the research literature on community college students.

Secondly, students with whom the researcher had previous contact were excluded from the list of possible participants. As the researcher randomly selected students from the initial list provided by the IT department, the researcher recognized the names of a few students that were eligible for selection. Examples of previous contact with those students included fielding questions and assisting with resolving issues. The researcher interviewed only students with whom there was no previous contact.

A third action the researcher took to minimize bias was conducting a two-phase member check with participants. In the first phase of the member check, the researcher sent via e-mail to each participant a text transcript of the interview. Participants were asked (see Appendix F) to review for accuracy the transcript and to reply by e-mail or

phone with any changes or additions. No participants submitted changes or additions.

Three participants acknowledged that the material was accurate.

The second phase of the member check included sharing interpretations with participants. Checking out interpretations with participants is a recommended aspect of grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommended that researchers “explain to respondents what you think you are finding in the data and ask them whether your interpretation matches their experiences with that phenomenon” (p. 45). The researcher sent via e-mail to each participant a brief narrative of the major findings and the theoretical model that was developed (see Appendix G). Participants were asked to review the narrative and the theoretical model and to reply by e-mail or phone with any suggested changes or additions. Five participants followed up with the researcher to confirm that they understood the model and the descriptive narrative. Those participants indicated that the model and descriptive narrative accurately reflected their student experiences regarding persistence.

A fourth action the researcher took to minimize bias was collaborating during open coding. The researcher had the privilege of working as a research mentor with two students who attended a research university near the institutional setting of the study. The researcher shared interview transcripts with the students as the transcripts were received. The research team collaborated in open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with the first seven transcripts. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain insights from two future researchers who were able to view the interview data

from a student perspective. Discussion among team members helped determine initial categories and properties that were important in data analysis.

A fifth action the researcher took to minimize bias was discussing the study with members of his doctoral advising committee. A conversation about the study and its methodological procedures began during the dissertation proposal and continued through completion of the study. The researcher apprised members of the committee regarding progress and sought their guidance.

The role of the researcher was to bring experience and sensitivity to the research project. The actions noted above were designed to minimize possible researcher bias. The goal was to minimize external influences to give voice to the experiences and perceptions of participants and to ground the analysis in their data.

Chapter Summary

The grounded theory procedures advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) were utilized for conducting the research. After establishing participation criteria, initial sampling included community college university transfer students who had persisted to at least their second full-time semester. A total of 20 students participated in semi-structured interviews, completed a card sort activity, and provided descriptive characteristics. Theoretical sampling as well as open, axial, and selective coding during data analysis provided the basis for the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results and findings of the study. The purpose of the study was to examine social support and persistence among community college students. Guiding the study was the following primary research question: What explains students' perceptions of social support as related to their postsecondary education at a two-year or community college? To answer the primary research question, five secondary research questions were developed as follows:

1. What are the types and functions of social support among community college students?
2. Do students rely mainly on social support relationships that existed prior to college or relationships established while attending college?
3. What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support?
4. What influences the formation of social support relationships?
5. What explains the social support behaviors of community college students?

The researcher collected data utilizing a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data sources included participants' demographic information and characteristics, a card sort activity, and in-depth interviews. The researcher also utilized field notes, memos, and diagrams generated as a result of data collection and analysis. Through the alternating pattern of data collection and analysis

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), concepts and themes emerged. Data analysis provided answers to the research questions. Additionally, several other findings emerged that were related to students' experiences and persistence.

The findings are presented and discussed in the remainder of this chapter. The presentation of the findings of the study is organized and arranged as follows: (a) participants' demographic information and characteristics, (b) results from the card sort activity on persistence factors, (c) concepts and themes organized according to the five secondary research questions, (d) other emergent findings, and (e) the theoretical model grounded in the study's data and analysis.

Participants' Demographic Information and Characteristics

Participants' Demographic Information

The demographic information collected for each participant included gender, age, ethnicity, date the student entered the institution, and GPA. These data are presented in Table 5 on the following page. A pseudonym is given for each participant.

Table 5

Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity ^a	Entry Term	GPA
Aaron	M	19	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	3.16
Alice	F	19	Black, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	3.77
Allen	M	19	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2007	2.16
Allison	F	20	Hispanic	Fall 2008	2.75
Andrea	F	20	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2007	3.00
Andy	M	18	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	2.00
Billy	M	22	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	2.00
Carl	M	20	Hispanic	Fall 2007	2.95
Carmen	F	19	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2007	3.52
Elaine	F	19	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2007	3.65
Heather	F	20	Black, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2006	2.68
Jeff	M	21	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	3.00
John	M	18	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	2.83
Kay	F	22	Asian or Pacific Islander	Fall 2007	2.70
Kayla	F	18	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	2.00
Kelly	F	20	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2007	2.57
Michelle	F	26	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2007	2.41
Russ	M	19	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2007	3.50
Samantha	F	19	White, Non-Hispanic	Fall 2008	2.06
Tina	F	20	Unknown	Fall 2007	3.74

^aEthnicity descriptors were those used in the institutional setting.

As presented in Table 5, there were 20 participants. Of the participants, 60% were female and 40% were male. The average age of participants was 20. Regarding ethnic diversity, 14 participants were White, Non-Hispanic; 2 participants were Black, Non-Hispanic; 2 participants were Hispanic; 1 participant was Asian or Pacific Islander; and 1 participant's ethnicity was unknown. Regarding date of entry, 10 participants entered the institutional setting in fall 2007; the remainder entered in fall 2008 (9 participants) or fall 2006 (1 participant). The average GPA of participants was 2.8.

Characteristics of Participants

In addition to demographic information, the researcher collected relevant characteristics of participants. The researcher collected the following characteristics of participants: (a) commute distance, (b) weekly work hours, (c) major, (d) whether the participant was a first-generation college student, (e) whether the participant had attended a local high school, and (f) whether the student had previously attended college. Characteristics of student participants are presented in Table 6 on the following page.

Table 6

Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Commute Distance (Miles)	Work Hours (Week)	Intended Baccalaureate Major	First-Generation Student?	Local ^a High School?	Previous College?
Aaron	6	10	Const. Science	No	Yes	No
Alice	20	18	Nursing	No	Yes	No
Allen	5	0	Sports Mgmt.	No	No	No
Allison	11	35	Journalism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Andrea	15	16	Special Ed.	No	Yes	No
Andy	12	32	Secondary Ed.	No	Yes	No
Billy	5	15	Engineering	No	No	Yes
Carl	12	17	Secondary Ed.	Yes	Yes	No
Carmen	4	10	Marketing	No	Yes	No
Elaine	5	20	Business	No	No	No
Heather	12	22	Psychology	No	Yes	No
Jeff	25	35	Journalism	No	No	Yes
John	20	25	Business	No	Yes	No
Kay	14	19	Secondary Ed.	Yes	Yes	No
Kayla	18	20	Elementary Ed.	Yes	Yes	No
Kelly	25	18	Marketing	No	Yes	No
Michelle	12	25	Accounting	No	No	Yes
Russ	15	0	Business	No	Yes	No
Samantha	12	30	Uncertain	Yes	Yes	No
Tina	5	15	Pre-med	No	No	No

^aLocal high school was defined as one within the service area of the institutional setting.

As shown in Table 6, average commute distance to campus was approximately 13 miles. Participants worked an average of 19 hours per week. Academic majors included the disciplines of business (seven participants), education and social sciences (six participants), engineering (two participants), health (two participants), and humanities (two participants). One participant was undecided regarding major. Five participants were first-generation college students, 14 graduated from high schools within the community college service area, and four participants attended college prior to entering the institutional setting.

Introduction of the Participants

Description is an important aspect of qualitative research and is considered foundational for theory building (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Patton (2002) commented that “thick, rich descriptions provide the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting” (p. 437). Although grounded theory research focuses on concepts instead of cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a descriptive introduction of the study’s participants provides context. The brief description that follows provides an introduction to the participants cited later in this chapter.

Aaron is a 19-year-old White male with a GPA of 3.16. His major is construction science and he shares an apartment near campus with several roommates. Because his older brother attends the university to which Aaron plans to transfer, Aaron has friends at the community college as well at the university he plans to attend. Aaron stated that his parents strongly emphasized to him the need to attend college.

Alice is the secretary of the Student Government Association (SGA). She is a 19-year-old Black student majoring in nursing and has a GPA of 3.77. She chose the institutional setting due to her family's inability to cover the costs of the four-year institution she wanted to attend. Alice dressed stylishly and projected a polished image verbally and non-verbally.

Allen, a 19-year-old White male, attended a high school approximately four hours from the institutional setting. He plans to major in sports management and has a 2.1 GPA. He shares an off-campus apartment with several roommates and is not employed. He stated that his previous athletic participation in multiple sports drives his competitive spirit.

Allison is a first-generation Hispanic student with a 2.75 GPA. She attended a four-year institution for one semester prior to enrolling in the institutional setting. She plans to major in journalism. She commutes 11 miles to campus and works about 35 hours per week. Allison stated that she is motivated by the opportunity to attend college because her mom did not graduate from high school.

Andrea is a 20-year-old White student majoring in special education. She works 16 hours per week and has a 3.0 GPA. She was a cross-country runner at the local high school she attended. The institutional setting was her first choice of institutions based on proximity and cost. Andrea referenced her preference of sitting in the front row in most classes so that she could focus on learning.

Andy is an 18-year-old White male majoring in secondary education. He works an average of 32 hours per week and has a 2.0 GPA. Due to his father's Air Force career,

Andy's family relocated often. He said that he had attended 12 different schools prior to college. Andy plans to transfer to an out-of-state university in the city where his family plans to move.

Billy, a 22-year-old White male, transferred to the institutional setting after attending a four-year and a community college in his hometown. He plans to major in computer engineering and has a 2.0 GPA. He attended a high school approximately four hours from the institutional setting. Billy shares an apartment off campus with several roommates he met through the apartment complex's roommate matching service.

Carl is a 20-year-old Hispanic male with a 2.95 GPA. He plans to major in secondary education. He commutes 12 miles to campus and works 17 hours per week. Carl's older brother attended college in the institutional setting two years prior to Carl attending. As a first-generation college student, Carl referred to the important benefits of having an older brother to turn to for advice about college.

Carmen is a 19-year-old White female in her fourth semester in the institutional setting. She plans to major in marketing and has a 3.5 GPA. She lives in a golf-course community four miles from campus and she works in the golf course clubhouse 10 hours per week. In the local high school she attended, Carmen participated in cheerleading, softball, track, and student clubs.

Elaine is a 19-year old White female with a 3.65 GPA. She plans to major in business. She commutes five miles to campus from the apartment she shares with friends she met in high school. Elaine works 20 hours per week. Her older brother attended college and she credits his advice as beneficial to her success in college.

Heather is a 20-year-old Black female who entered the institutional setting in fall 2006. She plans to major in psychology and has a 2.6 GPA. She commutes about 12 miles to campus and works 22 hours per week. Heather commented on becoming increasingly socially interactive during her time in college. She participates in TRiO's Student Support Services program and referenced the many benefits of the program.

Jeff, a 21-year-old White male, previously attended a community college in another state for three weeks before withdrawing. He plans to major in journalism and has a 3.0 GPA. He commutes 25 miles to campus and works 35 hours per week managing a restaurant. Jeff attended a local high school and then lived in two other states before enrolling in the institutional setting.

John is an 18-year-old White male who plans to major in business. He has a 2.8 GPA. He commutes 20 miles to campus and works 25 hours per week. He attended a local high school. John stated that his parents, both college graduates, had hoped that he would attend an institution more prestigious than a community college.

Kay is a 22-year-old first-generation college student. Her ethnicity is Asian or Pacific Islander; she moved to the U.S. when she was 12 years old. Kay plans to major in secondary education and has a 2.7 GPA. Kay explained that her language skills were a barrier for her in the United States. She commutes 14 miles to campus, works 19 hours per week, and has multiple family responsibilities at home. Kay attends classes at a satellite campus as well as the main campus of the institutional setting.

Kayla is a White, 18-year-old, first generation college student. She plans to major in elementary education and has a 2.0 GPA. She commutes 18 miles to campus and

works 20 hours per week. Kayla's communicative personality was apparent during the interview. She attends a satellite campus as well as the main campus of the institutional setting.

Kelly is a 20-year-old White female. She plans to major in marketing and has a 2.5 GPA. She commutes 25 miles to campus and works 18 hours per week. Despite attending a local high school, Kelly referenced transitioning to new friends in college. She stated that she enjoys attending the institution's soccer games where her boyfriend participates.

At 26, Michelle, a White female, was the oldest of the participants. She previously attended a college in her hometown, approximately four hours away from the institutional setting. She plans to major in accounting and has a 2.4 GPA. She commutes 12 miles from an apartment she shares with roommates, and she works 25 hours per week. Michelle referenced her age as a slight barrier in her pattern of interactions with other students.

Russ is a 19-year-old White male. He plans to major in business and he is not employed. Russ commutes 15 miles to campus. Despite having a 3.5 GPA, Russ described himself as a lazy person. He said that his real interest was in writing music and performing in his hard rock band. Russ stated that he coasted through high school with little effort and tends not to exert himself until his grades slip.

Samantha is a first-generation college student. She is a 19-year-old White female. She is uncertain about her major and has been reconsidering her options while attending college. Samantha has a 2.0 GPA and commutes 12 miles to campus. She primarily

attends a satellite campus closer to her home. She works 30 hours per week, lives with her mom, and is helping pay her way through college.

Tina is a 20-year-old female whose ethnicity was not declared. She grew up in the Balkan region of Europe where her family still resides. Tina plans to major in pre-medicine and ultimately obtain a medical degree. She has a 3.7 GPA and works on campus in a tutoring lab. Tina moved to the area to complete her senior year of high school while residing with a host family. While attending college, she continues to live with the host family.

Factors that Contributed to Students' Persistence: Card Sort Results

The card sort activity enabled participants to identify factors that contributed to their persistence. Participants completed the card sort activity during the interview session. First, participants selected the cards representing factors that positively influenced their progress in college. The factors printed on the twelve cards used in the card sort are listed below.

- Financial pressure
- Other factor one (write-in)
- Other factor two (write-in)
- The performance expectations placed on you by others
- The quality of academic instruction
- The support you have received
- The value of what you are learning
- Your interactions with instructors

- Your level of academic preparation prior to entering college
- Your motivation to succeed academically
- Your personality type
- Your use of institutional resources such as the library, Writing Center, or Learning Lab

Only one participant chose to write in factors not printed on the cards. The participant (Carmen) wrote the following on two cards: (1) “Wanting to get to a four-year institution as soon as possible,” and (2) “The thought of getting a good job—knowing I need this degree.” Because Carmen’s two write-in responses were related to motivation and because she was the only participant to utilize the “other factor” cards, the researcher grouped her write-in responses under the “motivation to succeed” factor.

After selecting the cards representing factors that had contributed to their persistence, participants ranked the factors from most to least important in terms of influence on persistence. After ranking the factors, participants discussed the influence or contribution of each factor as related to persistence. The researcher asked for specific details and examples from participants about each persistence factor. The purpose of obtaining specific details and examples was to ensure clarity of communication about the role of the persistence factors to avoid misinterpretation. For example, the researcher asked those who selected “the support you have received” to delineate the sources and types of support they had in mind. The researcher collected similar clarification and elaboration for each persistence factor.

Results from the card sort activity indicated that participants regarded their motivation to succeed academically as the primary factor contributing to their persistence. Second to motivation was the support they had received. The data for each persistence factor are shown in Table 7 on the following page.

Table 7

Card Sort Persistence Factor Selection Frequencies

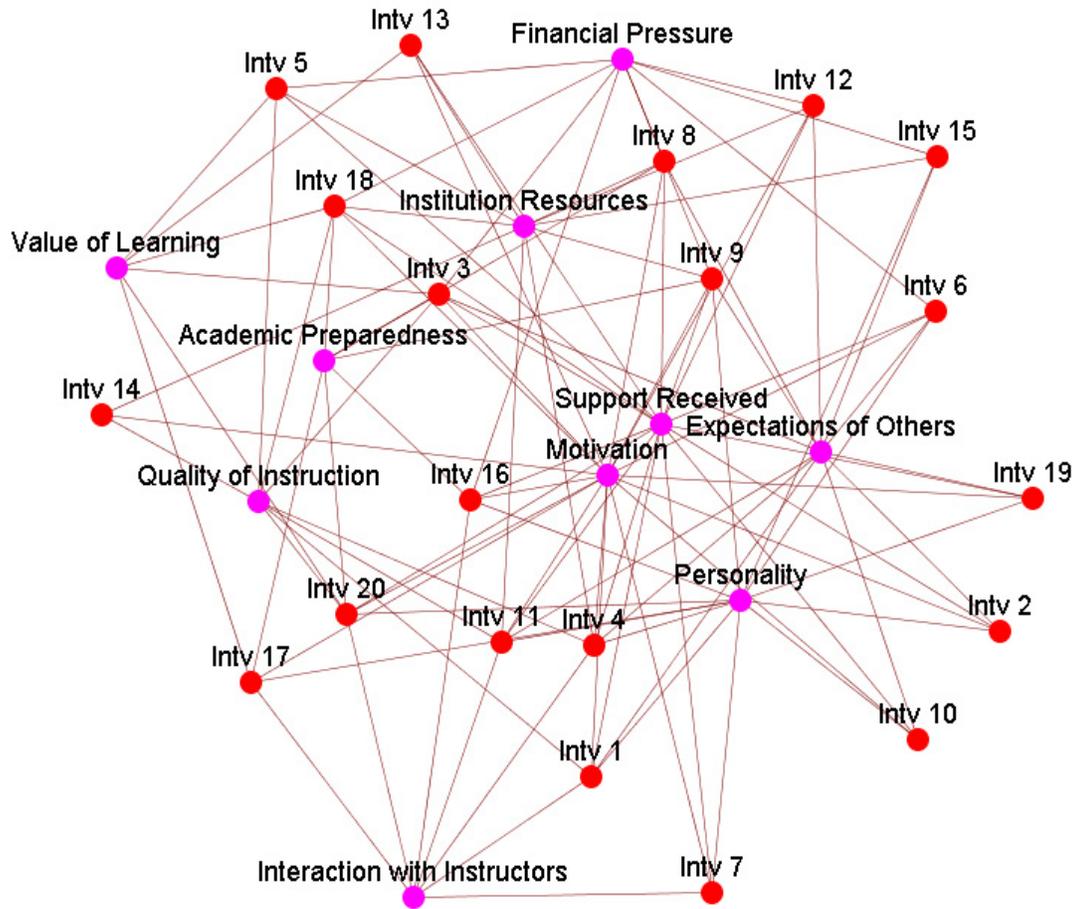
Persistence Factor	No. that Selected Factor	% that Selected Factor	No. that Ranked Factor 1 ^a
Your motivation to succeed academically	18	90%	11
The support you have received	17	85%	3
Your personality type	13	65%	1
The performance expectations placed on you by others	12	60%	—
Your use of institutional resources such as the library, Writing Center, or Learning Lab	10	50%	—
Financial pressure	9	45%	2
The quality of academic instruction	8	40%	—
Your interactions with instructors	7	35%	1
Your level of academic preparation prior to entering college	7	35%	1
The value of what you are learning	6	30%	1

^aA ranking of 1 indicated that the factor was the most important contributor to persistence.

As presented in Table 7, four persistence factors were selected by more than half of the participants. Those four factors were (a) your motivation to succeed academically, (b) the support you have received, (c) your personality type, and (d) the performance expectations placed on you by others. Three of the top four factors were also selected as most important by at least one participant. The only exception was the factor related to performance expectations of others. Other persistence factors were not selected as frequently. Some participants ranked persistence factors as most important that overall were selected by fewer than half of the participants. Those factors included the following: (a) financial pressure, (b) your interactions with instructors, (c) your level of academic preparation prior to entering college, and (d) the value of what you are learning.

To depict visually the connections between persistence factors and interviewees, the researcher developed a network diagram. To develop the network diagram, the researcher utilized the Organizational Risk Analyzer (ORA) program (CASOS, 2009). First, the results from the card sort activity were used to develop a spreadsheet containing the ranked values for each of the persistence factors by participant. Secondly, the spreadsheet was imported into the ORA program. The researcher then utilized the ORA program to generate a network diagram illustrating the relationships among interviewees and the persistence factors. The benefits of the network diagram are as follows: (a) the diagram indicates the degree of centrality for each of the factors, (b) the diagram utilizes lines to indicate linkages between each persistence factor and the interviewee who selected it, and (c) the diagram depicts parsimoniously the results from the card sort

activity. The network diagram developed from the results of the card sort activity is shown in Figure 3 on the following page.



powered by ORA, CASOS Center @ CMU

Figure 3. Network diagram of persistence factors from card sort results.

In the network diagram in Figure 3, lines link each persistence factor to the interviewees who selected it. For example, the support received persistence factor is linked by 17 lines to the interviewees who selected it as a contributor to their persistence. As depicted in the network diagram, the top two persistence factors selected by students were motivation to succeed and support received. The top two factors were visually indicated by the number of lines connecting them to interviewees as well as their centrality in the diagram. The ORA program automatically created the spatial design that indicates centrality. The number of lines linking each persistence factor to the interviewees who selected it corresponds with the card sort frequencies data presented earlier in Figure 3.

The researcher utilized results from the card sort activity as well as participants' commentary about persistence factors as a data source. Analysis of data obtained through the card sort activity provided insights regarding the role of persistence factors. The researcher incorporated those insights into the findings.

Secondary Research Question One: The Types and Functions of Social Support

This section presents results for secondary research question one: What are the types and functions of social support among community college students? Through interviews and the card sort activity, participants identified a range of types and functions of support. After analyzing the data, the researcher created the following categories of types of support: (a) family support, (b) peer support, and (c) faculty and staff support. These categories are shown in Figure 4 on the following page.

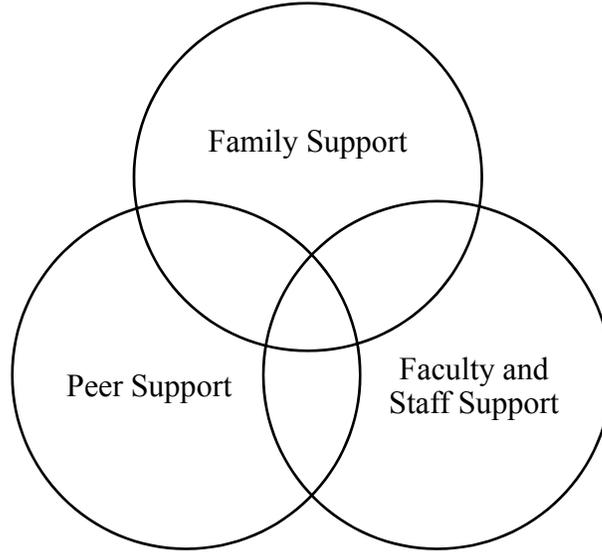


Figure 4. Categories of the types of social support.

The categories of family, peer, and faculty and staff support each include subcategories. Descriptions of the categories and subcategories of social support types are presented in the discussion that follows.

Family Support

Participants regarded family members as a prominent type of support. Support within the family category has been divided into the following subcategories: (a) support from parents, (b) support from siblings, and (c) support from extended family members. These subcategories are shown in Figure 5 in the following page.

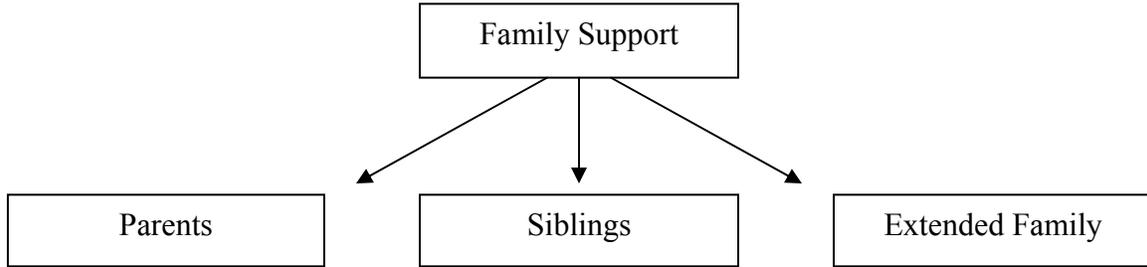


Figure 5. Subcategories of family support.

The results of each subcategory of family support are presented below. Only two participants reported minimal support from family. Following discussion of each subcategory, the two negative cases of family support are addressed.

Support from Parents

Most participants cited parental support as an important contributor to their persistence. Types of support provided by parents included motivation, accountability, encouragement, and assistance with problem-solving.

Participants discussed parents as helping to motivate them in college. Kayla discussed feeling pushed by her parents in a positive manner. Kayla stated, “If my parents aren't pushing me now, then I wouldn't be as hard-working as I try to be now.” Tina provided another example of obtaining motivation from a parent. Tina explained that although her mother lives in Europe, she is motivated by the influence of her mother, despite the distance between them. Referring to her mother, Tina stated:

She doesn't have to say anything. My mom studied all her life and she struggled all her life but she never told me to do things. She told me that I know what I'm

doing and I should just think about what's best for me and think about the consequences. . . . I just leave little notes above my bed saying "Look forward" and "Mom." That's it. That's a big drive for me.

Other students discussed being motivated by the desire to meet their parents' expectations or to not let them down. Elaine discussed how her dad "expected a lot." Elaine described that her dad motivated her to do well in college. Elaine said, "It's really helped to have my dad and my brother push me." Motivation derived through parental influence was cited as an important source of support.

Another type of support from parents was accountability. Participants referred to checking in with their parents and providing updates in response to questions from parents about their progress in college. Aaron stated:

I talk to my mom about all of my courses and whatnot because she wants to be updated and my dad helps me also with my class work also. So, I mean they're curious about how I'm doing and everything. . . . When I do say it's getting hard, she says that I should go see the professor and e-mail him and she just keeps asking if I've done it yet.

Allen stated that he felt a sense of accountability to his parents to do well in college:

I feel like I have an obligation to do good and they want me to do well and they're the whole reason I'm up here. Without them I couldn't do it by myself. . . . She [mom] still asks if I've done my homework every time I talk to her.

Billy chuckled as he discussed how he liked to update his parents about his progress.

Regarding communicating with his parents, Billy stated with a smile:

I felt like a second- or third-grader when I got a 100 or an A on a test. I would call them and tell them how excited I was, and they would get excited with me. It's nice to have someone who is happy for you and behind you.

Allison stated that her mom checked on her status. Despite being busy, Allison's mom communicated with her about Allison's course work:

My mom was a single mom for the longest so she understands that you have to multi-task and things like that, so she tries to help me and things like that, but she's remarried with two smaller kids, so she has her hands full. She is definitely there and making sure I'm going to class and doing my homework and things like that.

Participants described providing updates to their parents as a beneficial form of communication.

Another type of support provided by parents was encouragement. Whether they lived with their parents or had moved out to attend college, nearly all participants reported communicating often with their parents. Frequency of communication ranged in general from daily to at least a couple of times per week. Andy stated his view of the importance of parental encouragement for college students. In response to a problem about encouragement and support for students, Andy replied, "Their families; if they don't have a supportive family, then they aren't going to do well. But if they're supported and if they have a goal, then they'll probably do better." Alice also emphasized the important role of parental encouragement. Regarding her father, she stated, "As far as family, it's helped me a lot. My dad going to college and going here, he's very educated

and knows what he's talking about when he says something.” Alice discussed feeling encouraged following interactions with her dad. Carl stated that encouragement from his parents was a key source of support for him: “They encourage me. It's mostly encouragement from my parents because they don't know most of the things that we're learning now.” Carl’s comments indicated that his parents were supportive in general even though they were not familiar enough with college to provide advice.

Encouragement from parents emerged as an influential form of support for students.

A fourth type of parental support was assisting students with problem-solving. Participants cited parents as key sources of advice and guidance in the effort to overcome obstacles. Jeff cited his mom as the individual he would turn to if he faced a problem.

Jeff stated:

My mom first. If she couldn't help me or couldn't give me any way to get out of the snag that I had, I would call my dad. . . . Even when I lived in Kentucky with my dad, if I was dating a girl and I had a problem with her, I would call my mom and try to get advice. If I had a friend and we were arguing and fighting, I would call my mom because me and my mom are really close. Me and my dad really aren't that close, so she's always been my advice giver and my shoulder to lean on.

Samantha stated that she sought advice from her mom first when she encountered problems. Samantha commented:

I would probably talk to my mom first. She helps me whenever I need it. I got into some financial trouble and got in over my head back in October, and she helped me the most she could with it. I learned from it, and she didn't just say here you

go. She made me pay her back. She knew that if I didn't have the money that I didn't have to worry about it.

Asked who he would turn to if he encountered problems, Andy replied, "My dad, he's a pretty smart guy so I would probably ask him. . . . He knows how things are supposed to work, and he does this kind of work so he has helped me out a lot." Participants reported that assistance from parents with problem-solving was an important type of parental support.

Support from Siblings

Older siblings were another source of support from the immediate families of participants. Ten participants reported having one or more older siblings, most of whom had attended college. Participants reported that older siblings who had attended college were a beneficial source of support. Examples of the type of support provided by older siblings included help with the transition to college, feedback on certain assignments, and fostering motivation.

Russ reported that when he entered college his older sister was a student at the institution. He relied on his sister for help with transitioning to college:

She kind of knew her way around the campus. I didn't go to orientation, and instead she just kind of showed me around and showed me what I had to do and where my classes were and made it easier to fit in.

He also indicated that because his older sister assisted him with the transition to college that he chose not to attend new student orientation.

Two participants reported that they sought assistance with writing assignments from their older sisters who previously attended college. Aaron stated:

My sister, she helps me with my papers for English. I just e-mail them to her and she reads over them and corrects the grammar. . . . It's been pretty helpful. I was a little rusty on the grammatical errors, so she helped me with that and we got them all corrected.

Kay also reported that her sister had provided help with writing assignments: “Sometimes she'll tell me when I have an English problem, and she'll look over my essay before I can turn it in and I don't have time to ask for help at [the institution].”

Other participants obtained motivation and encouragement from older siblings. Billy's older sister attended the university that he selected for transfer. Regarding his interactions with his sister, Billy stated:

My sister is like my other mom. She is constantly pushing me to do better and to make sure that I'm on top of things and that I have my goals and priorities. I don't want to call her stress, but she stresses me out a lot because she's constantly berating me about what I can do better and what I can do more of.

Carl stated that his main source of support was from his older brother who previously attended the institution and successfully transferred to a university in the area:

I'd say I get my main support from my older brother who has already come here and is about to graduate from [the institution]. . . . It's mostly encouragement and he tells me to never give up. . . . He's given me some advice. He says to study two hours for every hour that you're here and that you're going to study that much. If

you know it then, review what you know. If whatever you learned in class clicked right away, just review it even if you know it.

Elaine commented that her older brother had pushed her to do well. Elaine said that her brother “has always been really good at school” and that they communicate with each other about their progress.

For those students fortunate enough to have older siblings who attended college, the siblings provided a source of support. Kay and Carl, both first-generation college students, obtained a significant amount of support from an older sister and brother respectively.

Support from Extended Family Members

In addition to parents and siblings, participants reported that extended family members provided support. During data collection, participants referenced aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. Support from extended family members included encouragement and advice about college. Carmen referenced her aunt and uncle as providing advice and support:

Definitely my aunt and uncle. Especially my uncle. He actually graduated from [a university] and he kind of pushed me. He said I had to get that FAFSA [financial aid application] filled out. I left it lying in my car and didn't get scholarships that I could have. You really have to stay on top of all your deadlines. He just told me to keep school as your first priority. My dad has always said that too. My aunt is always saying, “I'm here when you need me” and “Do what you want to do and

I'm sure you'll make the right decisions.” It's not really guidance, just helping me and building me up.

Elaine stated that her dad was most influential in helping her succeed, but she acknowledged her grandfather as second most important. Allison regarded her mother and father as primary sources of family support, but she also alluded to an uncle who had been helpful:

I'd say it was in the last four or five years. He lived in Georgia for ten years while he was going through his twenties and stuff like that. He's about ten years older than me, but we have a really good friendship and when he moved back here, he's been trying to get back that lost time with us. He's always been the down to earth kind of uncle. My mom and my aunt, his sisters, are about ten years older than him. He's closer to our age and he's gone through more of the stuff that we've gone through so he can help us out a little bit more and if you don't always want to tell your mom something you can go somewhere else. It's good to have another family member.

Other participants referred to support from extended family members as contributing to their success in college. Although help from extended family members was perceived as supplemental to support from parents and siblings, the support of extended family members emerged as another important component of family support.

Negative Cases of Family Support

Two participants reported either lack of support or strained relationships with parents about their educational plans. In both instances there existed disconnected

expectations between the parents and the students. John, a student whose dad attained a master's degree and mother attained a bachelor's degree, experienced stress in relation to his parents' view of the college he chose to attend. In response to a question about whether his family had supported him, John replied:

I think they have eventually. They do support me now but this isn't what they want me doing. . . . My dad supports business and he actually thinks that Marine Science which I might want to go into is neat, but he doesn't think that's the direction I should go, so I'm torn between two things that are complete opposites. John shared that his father had attended a well-known university. It seemed to John that there was an undercurrent that his attending a community college was not acceptable to John's dad. Despite this tension, John stated, "If I go a certain way I think it would be better for me and not what he wants me to do."

Another example of lack of family support was due to a participant's distanced relationship with her family. Michelle stated:

My family is just money. I'm not very close with my family. So, I would have to say that there are more people in the world that know me better than my family. They just don't know me very well at all.

Michelle added that she did not communicate with her parents very often and that she did not view them as a source of support when problems arose. She said, "I do not care what my parents think." Michelle stated that she tried to handle problems on her own or through support from other sources.

The parents of both participants who cited lack of family support had similar educational backgrounds. John's dad obtained a master's degree and his mother obtained a bachelor's degree. Michelle's father held a law degree and her mother held a bachelor's degree. Discussions with both participants revealed that the parents expected the students to attend a traditional four-year college or university as opposed to a community college.

Support from Peers

The second category of social support was peers. This category included support from relationships that existed prior to college as well as support from relationships established during college. Subcategories of peers included the following: (a) school friends, (b) work friends, (c) significant others, and (d) close friends. These subcategories are shown in Figure 6 below.

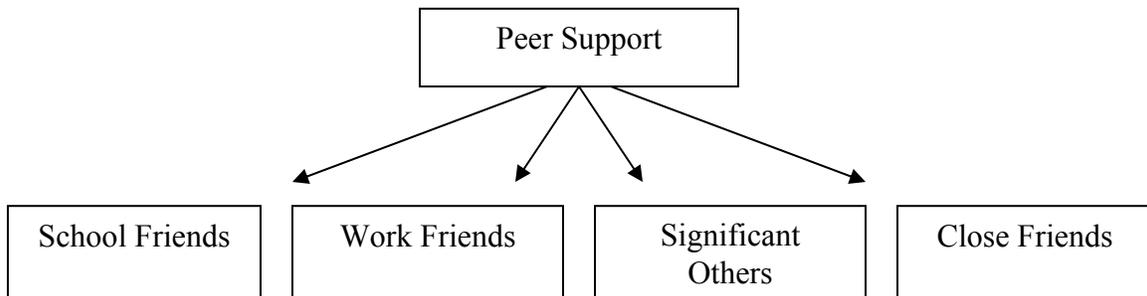


Figure 6. Subcategories of peer support.

Peer support relationships included peers of various ages. Each subcategory of peer support is included in the discussion below.

School Friends

Establishing contact with school friends occurred as students met each other—usually in class—and interacted on a level that was mutually beneficial without the relationship progressing to the level of close friendship. Participants referred to the other individuals in those relationships as acquaintances, associates, and school friends. Carmen used the phrase *school friend* in interview two, so the phrase was retained as an in-vivo code. Other participants commented on the role of school friends, further sharpening the meaning of the concept. School friends were sources of support for assistance or clarification regarding course assignments or tests, support and encouragement, and for help with academic problems.

Comments from participants helped define the concept of school friends. All participants discussed meeting others with whom they had interactions mainly on campus and typically regarding course work. The duration of these interactions was usually linked to the extent of time one shared classes with school friends. Comments from participants clarified the definition of these types of relationships. Alice stated, “You don't feel the bond between an associate. It's not that you don't care, but you don't care as much as a friend. The trust isn't there because you don't know them well enough.” Alice went on to say that associates “aren't long term. They're seasonal.” Michelle commented, “You usually sit by the same people all the time. . . . I'm a friendly person so if someone is just standing there and I have a question, I'll usually just ask them. They're just acquaintances. I wouldn't really call them friends.” Other students differentiated between individuals they would hang out with and those with whom they interacted only while at

school or only about course-related topics. Samantha observed, “I’ve met people but we don’t talk outside of school. They’re usually in my classes so I’ll talk to them on a regular basis.” Kayla stated:

There are some people who I ask them to help in class but they don’t fit with me outside of class. . . . I can handle it during class so it just doesn’t work outside of class but it can be an in-class type friendship.

Andrea commented, “We just see each other at school . . . you don’t hang out with everyone that you think is cool. You just talk in class and that’s it.” Regarding discussions with school friends, Aaron stated, “It’s the not the kind of conversation that grows into friendships. It’s something you have in class and once that class for the semester is over then it’s kind of gone.”

The motivation for establishing school friends appeared to be the promise of mutual benefits related to course work and for support in general. John stated, “Mainly if somebody has problems with homework you ask the person next to them and then they get to talking and it turns into a casual conversation.” Carl’s comments also indicated the mutual benefits of school friends: “We noticed that we were all in the same classes together and then we had group projects. We exchanged numbers and if we needed help with anything else, like needing a book, we could just borrow from each other.” Michelle said, “An acquaintance in class can be more supportive in helping me understand something I don’t understand or helping me finish something I need to finish.” Carmen discussed the role of school friends in terms of providing support: “I guess you’re kind of wanting people to talk to then [first of term] because it’s new and they’re going through

the same things you are and you can really relate to them in class.” Carmen also mentioned the role of school friends as related to specific assignments: “A school friend you'll call for homework or on a test or ask them if they got this on your last project or whatever.” Elaine stated her preference for contacting school friends instead of the instructor for certain types of assistance: “I will sometimes if I don't understand the instructor's teaching style or if I believe they wouldn't be open to help. . . . They're sometimes more patient and they're just easier to talk to.” Echoing Elaine’s comments, Tina stated:

If there's an academic problem, I talk to students around me first and I'll talk to the students who are sitting around me in the class. Then if I can't get an answer, I'll of course look at a book first and read it through and then talk to students. If that doesn't work then I'll go to my professors and ask them.

Although school friends represented individuals with whom participants had limited interaction, the focus of the interaction was significant. Participants perceived school friends as important agents in contributing to success in individual courses.

Work Friends

All but two of the 20 participants were employed in addition to attending college full-time. Participants worked an average of 19 hours per week. Given the amount of time the participants spent at work, co-workers represented a significant source of support. The concept *work friends* was used by Carl in interview three and the phrase was retained as an in-vivo code. Carl defined a work friend as follows: “It's someone you're friendly to at work that you know at work and if you see them out in public you acknowledge that

you know them and work with them.” Unlike school friends, participants reported that relationships with co-workers often developed into closer friendships due to the amount of time spent together.

Comments from participants indicated that work friends provided a range of support related to persistence in college. Allison credited her managers at work with “pushing me to continue with my education.” Elaine stated that friends she made at work “are probably the closest friends I've made since I've moved out here. . . . You only work two people at a time, so you only have to talk to each other while you're working, so it's a lot of time to talk.” Jeff stated that the friends he was most likely to hang out with were “mostly people I worked with.” He added, “I knew some people that I didn't work with, but most of the people that I know . . . that I hang out with on a regular basis before I came here were all people that I had met from work.” Regarding his roommates, John stated, “My roommates are actually from where I work.” Michelle said that she talked with her coworkers about school and other topics: “They're there so I talk to them and you see them every day so you can chat about your life and everything.” Michelle indicated that she was more likely to grow closer to people she met through work: “You see them more often and you spend more time with them. People at class you just see for an hour or an hour and a half.” Kayla stated that her boyfriend was a coworker: “We both work at Hollister, so after work we hang out for a while and then I go home and then from 11:00 to 12:00 is my school time.” Samantha observed that she was likely to discuss school-related problems with her coworkers. She said:

Right after your shift is over and you don't have any more tables, then it's just a good time to vent and nobody is going to remember what you're complaining about tomorrow, but it's a good way to get it out because there won't be anyone to interrupt you. They'll try to give you advice but sometimes they'll just listen and sometimes all you need is someone to listen.

Asked about the type of advice she gets from her coworkers, Samantha stated, “A lot of them are older and they say to stick with it and don't give up because if you do then you'll be completely messed up.”

As illustrated by the comments above, participants regarded co-workers as an important source of support for progress in college. Due to the absence of negative comments about co-workers, it appeared that participants enjoyed their interactions with co-workers. The most beneficial work-related relationships were those in which the co-workers were also attending college or were older and were interested in supporting others enrolled in college.

Significant others

Significant others referred to individuals other than family members who were emotionally involved with participants. Significant others in this study were represented by boyfriends and girlfriends and in one case a roommate. Apart from few examples of individuals reporting temporary negative or mixed influences from significant others, participants involved with significant others reported an overall positive influence from the relationships. One negative case is presented.

Significant others shared deeper relational and emotional ties with participants. The depth of these relationships placed the significant other in a position to influence motivation, provide emotional support, and assist with problem-solving. Referring to his girlfriend who attended a different institution, Billy shared:

She's a nursing major and we started dating right before I moved up here. I had been single for two years before that. She's very into her studies and school work and she's very determined to make good grades. She has a 3.8 [GPA] so she's constantly pushing me to do better. She's always calling me when she's studying saying that I should be studying. She's definitely helped to push me more in a more self-disciplinary kind of way.

Regarding the relationship with her boyfriend, Allison reflected:

It's helped me. He kind of motivates me to get my work done and says that I have to get that work done and can't put things off. You've got to do everything for you and better yourself, especially for looking at other colleges after this. He says to do what you need to do and whatever is best for your major.

Similarly, Michelle referred to performing stronger academically when she was in a relationship during her first two semesters at the college. Michelle stated:

I was more successful when I dated him because I wanted to do well and I wanted to get my stuff done because I wanted to go out with him and I wanted to do well so he would be proud of me.

Elaine discussed a collateral benefit of her relationship with her boyfriend. In her case, she identified her boyfriend's parents as a source of support:

He's in engineering too, and we've been together for about 4 years. I know his family too and they're supportive of what we're doing too. . . . It's helped because I've got his parents interested in what I'm doing too and he's serious about what he does so it's good to be around that.

Another interesting phenomenon was reported by Kelly. Kelly, a student who had established a new set of friends in college, stated that she and her boyfriend decided to take courses together to support one another: “We're taking four out of five classes together. I have six and he has five. . . . We figured that since we'd be in class together it would be easier for us to work together on the same material to study.” Kelly also illustrated the role of significant others in assisting with problem solving. She shared that she had consulted with her boyfriend about an academic problem:

Right now I'm struggling in one course and I'm thinking about dropping it, but my boyfriend told me to just to stick it out and just to study more for the second part of the semester. I feel a little nervous because of my GPA.

Kelly indicated that she had not discussed the problem with anyone else. Her example demonstrated the influence of significant others as a possible source of advice about problems and decision making. Carmen's comments also showed the importance of the role of significant others. When asked who she would turn to for help with a non-academic matter, she replied, “Probably my boyfriend and if it were about him, probably my aunt. I'll tell my sisters what happens and they're kind of supportive but they're more listeners.”

Only one student reported a negative influence from a significant other. Andrea stated, “I had a boyfriend and then I realized I couldn't have a boyfriend like him and go to school. I felt like I was ignoring my studies when I was with him.” Samantha reported a mix of positive and negative influences from her boyfriend: “He's helped in the way of making sure that I actually do stuff but he also doesn't see that I need to spend more time studying than I did before.” Tina reported that she was too focused on her studies to get involved with a significant other: “Here, I did not focus on that. I tried and it really did not work because I'm really busy with school and work.”

Apart from the one example of negative influence from a significant other, participants in relationships with significant others perceived those relationships as contributing to their persistence in a variety of ways. Relational ties with significant others represented emotional connections with strong influence.

Close Friends

Participants frequently cited close friends as a source of peer support. In contrast to school friends, close friends were individuals the participants had been friends with for a longer period of time. In comparison to school friends, close friendships were characterized by deeper levels of intimacy, a greater sense of trust, emotional engagement, and a scope far broader than academic work. Carl defined a close friend as “somebody you can talk to and can tell things to if you need to talk to. They're someone you can hang out with and go do stuff together.” Allison defined close friends as “the ones I've had since high school. The ones that I've talked to on the phone for hours at a time and blab on about my life and they know everything about me.” Several students

discussed having known close friends for a long time. For example, regarding his close friends, Carl stated, “We've known each other for a very long time, most of them since middle school and a couple guys since elementary school.”

Close friends provided support in the form of encouragement, companionship, help with projects, and motivation. Regarding interactions with close friends, Aaron stated, “Some of them [close friends attending other colleges] came and visited me last semester too and just keeping in touch with them and seeing how their semester has been and e-mailing them.” Andy said, “It's always good to have a close friend in a class because it makes it more enjoyable and if you don't get something then maybe they will so you can help each other out.” Andy went on to say that close friends provided support and approval for him. Asked about the key support he had experienced, John replied, “Mainly friends. I think friends is the biggest support. . . . They're just always saying that you can do this and don't listen to what other people say. They say you can do it.”

Regarding help from a close friend from high school, Kayla stated:

She was in two of my classes last semester and in one this semester. She's in the group. She pushes me the hardest to do my stuff. She took English 101 last semester and I didn't, so she's helping me this semester and showing me how to write my essays.

Carl mentioned getting encouragement from close friends. He stated, “You also have your friends, your close friends that care about you and want to see you succeed because they're doing the same thing.” Michelle stated, “In accounting, my friend Christian is an

accountant so if I couldn't understand I had him break it down and explain it to me.”

Regarding the support from a close friend, Heather observed:

I have a really good friend I talk to, he's not my boyfriend but he attends [local university] and he's a pretty good friend that helps me out when I need help. Me and him have the same math class except that I'm here and he's over there. He helps me and keeps on my back about what I need to get done. Sometimes I slack off when I need to be doing work and he tells me I shouldn't be playing around so he stays on my case a good bit.

Several participants commented on the progression of friendships. While most school-based relationships did not progress into close friendships, some participants did experience this progression. Andrea referenced getting closer to a student she had known in high school:

There's people who were my friends in high school, but became more my friend just because we've had class together and we've worked together for extra credit. One girl has always been my friend and we've hung out some and got along. But when we started college we got a lot closer. . . . We study and take a little break and talk and now we're friends just because we have a lot in common. We care about how well we do in school and care about having fun.

Similarly, Allen stated:

We'd work together on projects and stuff. . . . First of all, you start talking about school-related things and venture on out to talking about sports and life in general. You may exchange numbers [online] and you just become close through that.

Jeff noted that he had experienced several deepening friendships. When asked how the relationships began and progressed, he replied:

Just meeting in class and going to the library after class to work on something that the teacher had lectured. Then just talking and having common interests and being like, “Hey, you're a pretty cool person. We could hang out sometime outside of school.” From there you just become friends.

Multiple participants acknowledged seeking input from close friends to help solve academic or personal problems. Tina stated, “When the hard times come you need to have friends. . . . I have to judge what people are good and what people are good listeners and what people are not.” Allen said, “If I were in trouble, I'd probably go to my friends first.” Michelle observed, “If it were personal whatever and even if it were school-related I would probably just ask one of my friends.” Regarding academic struggles, Allison said that she would “probably go to my friends outside of school, the ones I've had since high school.” John also expressed his interest in discussing academic problems with friends before talking with a professor: “I would probably still go to friends first and if they still can't help then I'll go to the professor.” When asked who he would meet with if the problem was not academic, John replied: “That would definitely be friends.”

Close friends represented a key source of support for participants. Close friends were mentioned in relation to providing encouragement, companionship, help with projects, and motivation. Elaine's response to questions about close friends provided an excellent summary of the role of close friends:

Interviewer: And you mentioned your friends also. What have they done that's been helpful to you as a student?

Elaine: They just ask me how it's going and they're really supportive of me.

Interviewer: How would you describe what they have provided?

Elaine: I would just call them my little support group.

As summarized in the exchange with Elaine, close friends were an important source of participants' support.

Support from Faculty and Staff

The third category of support was comprised of faculty and staff employed in the institutional setting. Subcategories for this source included the following: (a) academic advisors, (b) instructors, and (c) staff from various offices on campus. These subcategories are shown in Figure 7.

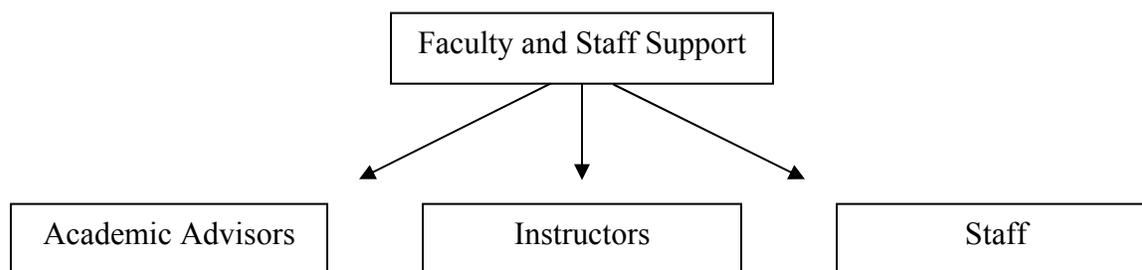


Figure 7. Subcategories of support from faculty and staff.

Each subcategory of faculty and staff support is discussed below. The discussion also includes negative cases of faculty and staff support.

Academic Advisors

All participants commented on their interactions with their advisor(s). Only three students (Heather, Kayla, and Kelly) referenced obtaining any support from an advisor other than routine assistance with course selection and registration during the designated advising and registration period. Students in the institutional setting were required to meet with an advisor to obtain access to online registration. Among the three students obtaining support from advisors beyond course selection, Heather's case was atypical because she participated in TRiO's Student Support Services program. As part of Student Support Services, Heather was assigned a counselor who also performed the role of an advisor. Regarding the assigned counselor, Heather stated:

She's helped me out a lot because if Student Support services had not taken me on tours of different schools and taken me on career days then I probably wouldn't be transferring out next semester, so she's really helped me out a lot and she stays on me a lot too to make sure I get everything like my course transfers and making good grades. She really helped me out a lot along the way.

Kayla referenced meeting with her advisor when she was struggling:

She showed me that the classes are going to be challenging no matter where they're at, so I'm going to have to push myself and ask questions and I shouldn't think myself stupid for asking a question or think that other people are going to make me feel that way because other people have the same question and aren't willing to ask.

Kelly mentioned meeting with her advisor for the purpose of class registration as well as for broader questions. Kelly stated that she met with her advisor for “class registration or whenever I had questions about changing my major about what I needed to do and some about math classes.”

The remaining 16 students who commented on the support received from their advisors emphasized communicating only about course selection and registration. Billy stated:

When I came into her office it felt like she wanted me to get in and get out and I understand that there's a lot of people she has to advise but I was trying to ask her questions and they were just simple one-word answers. I was trying to bounce some opinions off her and ask what I could possibly do and she told me that this is what I need to get it done. She said this is what you need and you can decide what you need to do. She was helpful in the sense that she showed me the classes I need to transfer into the major that I want and for helping me understand the classes here but on a personal level she wasn't very personal with me.

Andy discussed having two advisors: “I've actually had two advisers. I had one to start with and I don't think he had been an advisor for very long because he mixed up the courses that I needed but he helped me fix them.” Andrea also indicated that she had changed advisors:

I was lucky to have been switched to a helpful one. It made a big difference and made things easier. He showed me there was the one class that I didn't know I had to take and he let me know about it. It does help out when you have one that

knows what he's doing and really seems to care about really helping whoever the student is.

Michelle's observations were characteristic of the perspectives shared by most students regarding support from advisors:

Advisors just see you once or twice a semester, and she doesn't know who I am so she doesn't know what I'm capable of. . . . She just doesn't know you personally I guess. I wouldn't get advice from her; I would just go and get her signature.

Overall, the emergent theme regarding the advising relationship was that support from advisors was limited mainly to assistance with course selection and registration. Although advisors were potentially available to offer broader assistance with students (i.e., developmental advising) participants reported little utilization of those services. Support from advisors was significant to the extent that course selection and registration were vital to persistence. The few exceptions included participants who sought out their advisors for broader assistance and the students' participation in TRiO's Student Support Services program.

Instructors

Instructors were another source of support for participants. Some participants reported taking the initiative to contact their instructors for assistance beyond class meeting times. As indicated previously in Table 7, the results from the card sort activity indicated that only 35% of participants rated interactions with instructors as contributing to their persistence. For those students who took the initiative to interact with instructors,

the communication was important. Andrea emphasized the importance of meeting with instructors outside of class:

With anything you're going to help the person who cares the most because why would you want to help someone that doesn't care? I think if you go and talk to them then it makes a big difference because they know who you are and know your name and it's good because then they will sometimes look out for you.

Tina also commented on the importance of communicating with instructors, even during personal challenges:

I let all of my professors know when something is big going on because they're part of my life too. They might just be a figure that talks once or twice a week in front of me but all of that around me is affecting me and my studying. I might need extra time and if I'm whining all the time and sending them e-mails then they're going to know what's behind that and they'll know I might need extra support because of this and that.

Carl commented on the helpfulness of encouragement from his instructors:

Some teachers do keep up with you and they worry about you. If you're on the edge between a grade of C and B, then they help you out in any way possible.

They tell you what you need to make on the next test to jump up a grade if you're on the edge or they give you encouragement so you can keep on going.

Carl stated that he performed better academically in courses in which the instructor demonstrated care. Carl commented, "I have made better grades in courses where the

teachers actually care about you. Not really care but look out for you. I wouldn't say care because they have so many students that they can't be your mom or your dad.”

Several students identified one or two instructors with whom they had established a relationship beyond the course content and with whom they had received some supportive assistance. Referring to his English instructor, Jeff stated:

I spent a lot of time in his office last semester trying to pass the class. I kind of got to know him and I've been to his office quite a few times this semester just to talk to him, see if I can get advice, and just to see how he's doing. His wife just had a baby. I've got a professor I had last semester and got his class again this semester for logic so I talk to him and I have a pretty good relationship with him.

Elaine referenced getting to know a couple of instructors more personally because of seeking assistance:

[A College Skills instructor] and one of my math teachers, we became really close because sometimes I would go after class for extra help and after we talked about class we would sometimes talk about other stuff. Maybe two or three of my instructors I would get close with.

Kay recalled a situation in which an instructor was instrumental in helping her remain in a course. Asked which course she was referring to, Kay replied, “My psychology class. It's tough, but I know I want to become a physical therapist. So I continued and I passed it.” Kay stated that she remained in the course due “mostly to just the professor saying that you can do it and not to drop it.” Regarding the effect on her she said, “It helped me to continue and try to study even if it's tough.” John stated that of all the possible

individuals on campus he would approach about a problem, he would seek out a former instructor: “If I had to choose someone on the campus it would probably be my English teacher last semester.” Asked how she became the individual he would seek help from, John replied, “You could just tell she cared about her students and she was an all-around good teacher. She learned everyone's name and she learned about each student.”

Kayla shared an example of her instructors “pushing” her to succeed:

Every instructor has pushed me and I still go back to my psychology teacher. This semester I have gone back to her once because she's in a class right beside mine and she's talked to me and pushed me and has told me that if I could do it in her class then I can do it in any class. It's good to know that my instructors are very supportive and tell you that they're there. There's some people who say they're there and weren't when you needed them, but everyone I've needed has been there.

Most students reported that they did not communicate with their instructors during office hours. The typical time periods for interacting with instructors were just before and right after classes or via e-mail. Kayla's comments summarized most responses from students regarding the times they met with instructors. Kay said, “Usually when class is about over I meet with them, but I haven't really met any of them outside of class like not around class time.” Other students referenced communicating with instructors by e-mail. Kelly said, “I never really talk to instructors outside of class about the homework. If I have a problem, then I'll e-mail them.” Andy commented that this interaction outside of class with instructors was mainly “just e-mail about different things.” Billy stated, “I had

kidney stones the beginning of this semester so I had to do a lot of e-mailing back and forth between professors, and a couple of them I got along with pretty well.”

Negative Cases of Faculty Support

Some students reported negative cases regarding instructor support. Those cases indicated that students did not perceive all instructors as interested in helping them succeed. Carl provided an example when he stated, “Some of them are here just to get a paycheck. They don't really care about the students. They're just here to teach and they feel indifferent if you don't learn everything.” Asked if she had interacted with any of her instructors outside of class, Samantha replied, “Not at all. I feel that they're strictly an instructor, especially when I get really frustrated about something, so I can't really complain to them.” Kay also indicated that there were times when instructors would not assist her: “Some of the instructors will help you and some will not. When that happens then I have to go to the Learning Center or the Writing Center.”

Apart from the negative cases, which were few in comparison to the number of students interviewed and the number of instructors represented, interactions with instructors were another source of support for participants. The theme that emerged was that students do interact with instructors but usually before or after class and via e-mail. Visits to instructors' offices during their office hours were reported by only a few participants. Some participants indicated that they had established relationships with instructors outside of class. Those participants were socially assertive in seeking out their instructors and obtaining guidance from them. Among those who developed relationships with their instructors, the number of instructors usually cited was two or three.

Staff

Staff working in various departments designed to provide support for students comprised another source of support for students. Within the institutional setting, multiple support services for students were available. These campus departments included Financial Aid, Admissions, Disabilities Services, Student Life and Counseling Services, TRiO Programs, Career Services, and others. Notably, few students referenced utilizing these various support services for assistance. There were a few exceptions.

Students involved in TRiO's Student Support Services program expressed having received a high degree of support and they viewed their interactions with that office as instrumental in their persistence. For example, Kay stated:

I heard from my sister that in college you have to do everything for yourself. That's why I was afraid that when I went to [institutional setting] that it would be really difficult. But when I got here I have so much support from the school. . . . It came from the [Student Support Services] counselor and they tell me where I should go for help and if I have trouble and all those things.

Tina also cited Student Support Services as a key contributor to her success. When asked where she might turn for help with a problem, Tina stated, "There's Student Support Services. That place, there's people in there who are willing to help your problems, academic problems and also with other problems." Michelle identified the Career Services office as a place to obtain assistance:

Job Services definitely. Even if you come in there a million times during the semester they just want to help and all of that. . . . I'd probably turn to [name of staff member]; that's who I come to ask for advice or help or whatever.

A couple of students said that they had obtained help from an individual in a particular office as the result of not being able to meet with the intended person. Samantha shared how she began interacting with a member of the Career Services staff.

She said that I needed to talk to my adviser but if you're not comfortable talking to them then she could help me. She helped me at the beginning of my first semester and she helped me at the beginning of my second semester. . . . I don't feel comfortable just talking to some people about things. She's just been there from the beginning. I figured I'd stick with that because I don't want to have to tell somebody else the whole story all over again.

Kelly stated, "One of the deans actually helped me in the beginning because I didn't know who my adviser was and she actually helped me and told me what courses I needed to be taking." Aaron cited a situation in which his dad introduced Aaron to a family friend who worked in an office that does not typically provide advising support for students. Aaron recalled:

Before I started my summer session, my dad made me come up here and have an appointment with him [the family friend]. I knew him before, but that's when I met him again. He just told me about everything and I just kept coming back to him.

Aaron's comments were reflective of other students who indicated that once they obtained assistance from a particular individual they preferred to return to that individual for similar help on future occasions.

Participants indicated that staff members were regarded as a source of support. Responses also indicated, however, no pattern among students for utilizing the support services made available by specific offices or departments. Instead of accessing services through the appropriate office or department, participants indicated accessing assistance from individuals with whom they had previous contact. Participants' preferences to seek out individuals who provided the needed support, as opposed to offices, underscored students' perceptions of the value of support from helpful individuals as related to persistence.

Summary of Emergent Themes for Secondary Research Question One

This section presented findings for secondary research question one: What are the types and functions of social support among community college students? Three categories of support were presented. The three categories were family, peer, and faculty and staff. The family category included the following subcategories: (a) parents, (b) siblings, and (c) extended family members. The peer category included the following subcategories: (a) school friends, (b) work friends, (c) significant others, and (d) close friends. The faculty and staff category included the following subcategories: (a) academic advisors, (b) instructors, and (c) staff. Each subcategory and the related data and analysis were presented. A summary of the emergent themes for secondary research question one is shown in Table 8 on the following page.

Table 8

Secondary Question 1: Categories, Subcategories, and Emergent Themes

Categories	Subcategories	Emergent Themes
Family support	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source of motivation • Often push students to succeed • Communicate support • Hold high expectations • Provide accountability • Give encouragement • Provide counsel for problems
	Siblings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise based on experiences in college • Help with transition to college • Give encouragement • Review some assignments • Ask about progress
	Extended Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give advice • Support college attendance • Give encouragement • Share experiences from college
Peer support	School Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet each other in classes • Perceived as seasonal • Rarely become close friends • Mutual support in course work • Mainly discuss course work
	Work Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push students to succeed • Closer than school friends due to time • Advise based previous experiences • Can vent to work friends about issues

Table 8 (continued)

Categories	Subcategories	Emergent Themes
	Significant Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger emotional ties • Reinforce getting work done • Links to other support • Taking courses together • Source of help with problems
	Close Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term relationships • Deepest emotional ties • Trust and transparency • Broad scope of conversation • Push students to succeed • Give encouragement • Friends since middle or high school • Often first source of help for problems
Faculty & staff support	Academic Advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on course selection • Interaction forced for registration access • Limited mentoring • Changing advisors
	Instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed levels of care • Bonding with one to three • Sometimes inspiring • Some mentoring • E-mail and before/after class discussion
	Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of Student Support Services (TRiO) • Connecting with individuals, not offices • Focus on results not sources

As presented in Table 8, the types and functions of social support were numerous and varied. Most support was obtained through family and peers. Students often turned to friends and family for assistance before utilizing the support resources on campus. One exception was the influential role of TRiO's Student Support Services program as experienced by the participants in the program. Overall, students relied on family, peers, and faculty and staff to help them achieve their academic goals.

Secondary Research Question Two: Pre-college and Post-college-entry Support

This section presents results for secondary research question two: Do students rely mainly on social support relationships that existed prior to college or relationships established while attending college? The purpose of this secondary research question was to ascertain the extent to which participants utilized relationships established in college as sources of support. The category of social support relationships is divided into two subcategories: (a) pre-college and (b) post-college-entry. The two subcategories of social support relationships are shown in Figure 8.

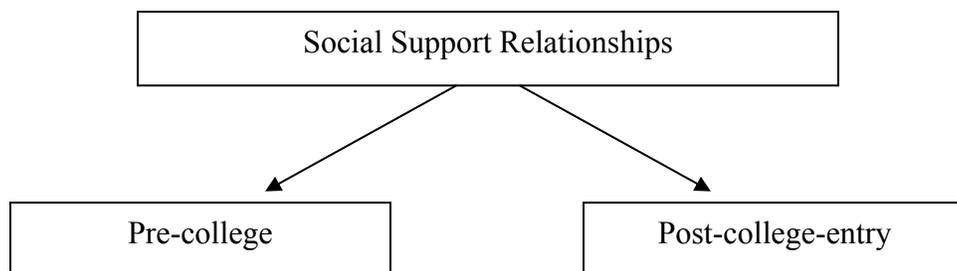


Figure 8. Subcategories of social support relationships.

Participants' social support included pre-college and post-college-entry relationships. Both types of social support relationships are included in the discussion below.

Pre-college Relationships

Participants varied in the extent to which they experienced support from pre-college relationships. Factors influencing the role of pre-college relationships included the following: (a) low levels of social assertiveness and receptivity to establishing new relationships; (b) the level of emotional comfort and support provided through pre-college relationships; (c) the presence of former friends on campus; (d) perceived barriers to establishing new relationships; and (e) transitional ambivalence regarding former friends. Participants utilized online social networking to maintain pre-college relationships.

As a result of low levels of social assertiveness and receptivity to establishing new relationships, some participants maintained relationships that existed prior to college and did not develop many new friendships in college. Andy stated that he spent time in college with former friends and that he had not made an effort toward making new friends:

I have a few friends that go here and we meet up in [building name] because that's where we all have classes. . . . I actually knew them before I got here. I haven't made any friends since I've been here.

Asked if not making new friends had been a disappointment to him, Andy replied, "Not really. I'm focused more on my school work and my job. I don't have time to make new

friends really.” Aaron referenced spending most of his spare time with friends from high school:

I still see, on the weekend, my closer friends from high school and my family is like, 10 to 15 minutes away, so I still go down there a lot. I go to my house probably five times a month. . . . The people I've known from high school. They're still my closest friends right now. I know eventually that everyone starts taking their own path and it's hard to keep up with people. As for now, I still have a lot of close friends from high school.

Russ stated that his closest friendships were forged in high school “mainly through liking music and different battle of the bands stuff that the school hosted. I met them there.”

Allison also stated that her closest friends were those from high school:

Those are mostly my friends from high school still. Actually, I've known them all from high school and ROTC specifically. So that's at least a six-year friendship there or longer with some of them . . . I actually work with two of my schoolmates now. Since [town in the area] isn't that big of a town, we're always going to run into each other somewhere.

Without a high level of social assertiveness and receptivity to making new friends, students gravitated to maintaining relationships with friends that they knew prior to attending college.

One of the factors that influenced participants to maintain relationships with pre-college friends was the level of emotional comfort and support provided through those relationships. Most participants viewed relationships with pre-college friends as

emotionally closer and more intimate than recently established relationships. The consensus was that duration of relationships was a key determinant of the level of emotional closeness experienced. The deeper levels of intimacy resulting from lengthier friendships enabled these participants to draw emotional support and deeper levels of communication from their pre-existing relationships. Michelle drew a distinction between the types of support she experienced from a longer-term friend in comparison to a more recent established friendship:

I guess just having someone always there, someone to hang out with. An acquaintance you can obviously ask them since they're in the same class. Friends might not necessarily know what's going on and they could be in a completely different major. They could be an English major and I need help on calculus. They're more supportive of me doing well where an acquaintance in class can be more supportive in helping me understand something I don't understand or helping me finish something I need to finish.

Michelle's comments indicated that pre-existing friendships are sources of deeper communication and emotional support. In contrast, school friends represent relationships that have not been in place long enough for trust to have been established. Further illuminating this distinction in types of relationships, Heather stated:

Most of the people I've known since high school and even since elementary. . . . So of course I hang out with them and act different with them than someone I may have met here at [institution]. You feel more comfortable with the people you've known the longest. You generally act yourself. There's certain things I wouldn't

do around those I just met. . . . I'm a really silly person so I might crack some jokes and be really silly with people I've known for a long period of time versus someone I've just met here. I feel more comfortable being silly around the people I've known the longest.

Jeff shared similar comments regarding the comfort of knowing people longer:

I feel closer to the people that I went to high school with because I've known them for so much longer. I know more about them and know them on a more intimate level than I know a lot of the people that I've met here.

Contrasting recent friends with older friendships, Samantha stated:

I talk about school with people from [institution] because it's something we have in common. It just depends. The other people I've known for so long, if I see something pretty looking on the side of the road I'll give them a call and tell them what I've seen. I also talk to other people about that but not as much. I have a problem to where I'll have a strictly school friendship and if we're still friends after school then it'll go further. You never know if someone is just looking for a friend to get through school so they're not alone. Last semester with the one girl who drove from [nearby city], we talked every day. We saw each other wherever else and we'd talk. We'd talk about more than school but we didn't talk after that semester. It was just someone to get through the semester with.

The distinctions illustrated above between close friendships that existed prior to college and relationships established in college (school friends) indicate that emotional support and closeness provided strong incentives for students to maintain existing relationships.

Another phenomenon that influenced maintaining of previous relationships was the presence of former friends on campus. In several cases, participants reported seeing familiar faces from high school in their classes. Carl stated that he often saw his former friends at the college: “I had a lot of friends in high school. Most of them go here.” John stated, “All of my sociology classes I had a few people in there that I knew from high school.” When asked if seeing former friends from high school in his classes changed the dynamic of meeting others, John replied, “Just the first couple of times in class. We would sit by each other so we knew each other, so I guess it would change who you met in the class.” John’s point is important because it demonstrates how having friends from high school in class influenced interactions with possible new friends. One of Kayla’s courses was held at a satellite campus location not far from her high school. She was surprised to see ten students in her class that she had known from high school. Kayla stated:

It was good but I was ready to meet some new people. I love my people from high school but I was ready to meet new people and start new friends but having them in my class made it easy because I wasn't worried about saying something wrong in front of them.

Andrea also recognized many familiar faces from high school. She recalled, “I heard everyone say they were going to go to all of these different schools. I saw probably 80% of my graduating class here that first week. . . . I didn't have more than two or three in my classes.” Those students who graduated from local high schools were likely to see

familiar faces on campus. The presence of former friends on campus exerted influence on the patterns of interactions with existing and potentially new friends.

The perception of barriers that impeded the process of making new friends was another reason students sometimes privileged pre-existing friendships over new relationships. Aaron pointed out that he felt obligated to be more formal with people he met in college:

When you meet people in college, you have to be more formal about it compared to when you meet people from high school. You can just be “Wassup man.” In college, it's more of a “Hey, how are you doing . . . nice to meet you.”

Michelle, age 26, cited the perception of an age barrier as related to her making new friends. She stated:

The people I hang out with came through my roommates and people I knew prior. Both of my roommates are in [university nearby], one just graduated and the other is still in, she's a junior I believe. It's just going out with them and meeting people. Because most people at [the institution] now aren't my age, so they can't go out and do some of the things I like to go out and do.

Alice cited the difficulty of making new friendships at a commuter campus:

When you have four-year college, you live on campus and you're constantly seeing those people and they might be in your dorm room. Like in high school you're seeing the same people all year round and not just in classes since it's such a small area you're seeing them. Here you're seeing them for just that semester and

you might not see them at all because of their time schedule and because they go and come. They don't come and stay for a while. They go to class and go home. The perceived barriers cited above influenced some students to make fewer new friends on campus.

One other factor that influenced interactions with pre-college friends and changes in those relationships was transitional ambivalence regarding former friends. Whereas some students maintained previous relationships almost exclusively, other participants simultaneously held on to older friendships while also establishing new relationships. These students reflected that they were in transition in terms of their support relationships. Elaine stated her contact with previous friends had decreased since she began attending college: “There's just a handful that I still hang out with from high school. It just depends on what my friends from high school did. If they didn't go to college then we don't have much to talk about anymore.” Like Elaine, Carmen referenced changes in relationships with pre-existing friends:

I had friends that went to [another institution], so they're six hours away. Some went to [another institution] and they're two hours away. Even the ones that go to [another institution nearby] I don't talk to them a lot because we're in different worlds. One of my best friends goes here, but she has a completely different schedule than I do and it's kind of hard to talk to her and see her here.

John mentioned drifting apart from former friends and establishing new relationships in college. John stated:

Some of the friends from high school I'm still friends with and some we've kind of drifted apart. It kind of builds a new foundation when you meet new friends so I guess you would get closer with those. I met a lot of friends through this school and I'm pretty close with them now.

Heather shared how she was becoming more distant from one of her former closest friends:

She goes to [another institution]. We hardly talk to each other now. I just never hear from her. When she comes home she's at home with the family. I talk to friends I've met here more than I talk to her. When you get older and your friends go another way then things change so you don't tend to talk to them like you used to.

Billy commented that he attempted to keep up with friends he knew prior to college through social networking online while also establishing new friendships in college:

It's hard to be in two places at once. So the people that I knew back in [hometown] I can't be with because I'm up here. All the friends I have up here I can't be with when I'm in [hometown], obviously. You kind of flip back and forth between the two and I wouldn't call it a double life but you maintain friendships via the Internet.

From a relational perspective, participants indicated that entering college was transitional for them and their responses to the transition varied.

Several participants discussed utilizing online social networking sites to keep in touch with friends met prior to college. John stated that he used online social networking

to “stay in touch with friends pretty much.” Andrea stated that she used it to “keep in touch with people I don't see on a regular basis. I also have friends in New York, and I like to interact with them sometimes.” Allen said that he used online social networking to “keep track of my friends from [other institutions] and friends back home that may have gone to other schools. We communicate like that.” Kayla’s comments summarized the participants’ use of online social networking sites:

Mostly just [to communicate with] people from my high school as we grow up.

That's how I keep in touch with them. A lot of them are either in different schools or different classes for different majors so I don't see them anymore. That's how I keep in touch with all of them.

Online social networking sites provided participants with a convenient way to keep in touch with friends established prior to college. The most common purpose for usage was to communicate with existing friends and family as opposed to meeting others.

Post-college-entry Relationships

A number of participants reported that they transitioned away from most former friends and embraced new friendships as replacements for former relationships. Those participants demonstrated the highest levels of social assertiveness and receptivity to establishing new relationships. Participants who embraced the opportunity to establish new relationships demonstrated the following: (a) openness to relational transitions, (b) a desire to relate to those with similar educational goals, and (c) the opportunity to establish mutually beneficial supportive relationships.

Openness to relational transitions was one shared characteristic among students who indicated receptivity to making new friends. Heather demonstrated strong receptivity to making new friends upon arrival in college. She explained:

My first class in my first semester I didn't have a class with anybody that I knew at all so I was hoping that I made new friends instead of trying to wait around and find my old friends. . . . At some point while you're here you have to talk to other people about things and I was one of those people when I first got here. I was hoping to get out of the box when I got here. When I was in class I would talk to people and force myself to talk to somebody and try to get a good understanding of everyone else. . . . I was tired of talking to the same friends I had since high school and I was going to be older and I don't want to keep hanging out with the same people over and over again.

As another illustration of her receptivity to relational transitions, Heather went on to say that she had gotten as close to some of her new friends as she had been to those she knew prior to college. She said, “The people I've met here I would treat the same as the people I've known for years. That's how close we've become since I came here. I wouldn't treat them any different.” Alice also commented on the transition from old to new friends. She stated that attending college resulted creating a new circle of friends:

When you start college . . . you're always used to hanging out with people and you have to form a whole new friendship circle while holding onto the one you had. It shifts a lot and your old ones are more like memories.

Kelly represented an interviewee who had almost completely broken away from her former high school friends. Asked how her relationships with people from high school had changed, she stated:

Dramatically. I don't talk to anyone from high school anymore. All of my best friends went to different colleges so I don't talk to any of them anymore. If I run into people from high school then it's just a brief "Hey" and then it's gone. . . . I guess people just change as they get older.

Kay also referenced changes in relationships due to friends from high school attending different colleges. Kay stated:

We don't have much time to talk to each other now because we're busy with school work now. . . . Most of my high school friends have already transferred to a four-year school or are on their way.

Asked if she remains in contact with her friends from high school, Kay replied, "Not very much now." Jeff stated that he had known few people on campus when he arrived but that he had eagerly sought to establish new relationships:

When I came up here there were two or three people I knew pretty well that I had gone to high school with. Everybody else I met as I came along or knew from my sisters. So I actually knew a few people and I continuously met more and more people since I've been here.

Heather's observations provided a summary of an agentic approach in reaching out to make new friends:

I guess it depends on whether you're a person that wants to know new people and make new friends instead of hanging out with the same people that you've known your entire life. I think it's a big social choice and you have to be a person that has to want to meet new people.

Students who were socially assertive and receptive to establishing new relationships indicated that they had little difficulty in making new friends.

Another motivation for making new friends was the desire to interact with individuals with similar educational goals and shared experiences. Those participants reported gravitating toward individuals who attended college and had similar educational goals. Jeff stated that his friendships were “shifting more toward people that are at [the institution] and shifting away from the people who are either going to [another institution] or just working.” Jeff attributed this change to his “change in priorities.” Jeff described his new priority as being focused on progressing through college successfully. Andrea also discussed changes in her relationships as a result of circumstances related to college attendance:

It's that it's easier to have friends who are in college because they understand. You're not really free until the weekends. Even then you're not free usually at night time because you have work to do during the day. If you work and have school then you have very little free time. You're with people who understand that.

Although Kayla indicated that she recognized a number of individuals from high school on campus and in class, she stated that over time her friendships had shifted to those in

college. Regarding the people she spent the most time with she stated, “There's a couple from [high school] I still hang out with, but most of them are from [institution] now. It's about meeting people here and a few at the [satellite] campus.” Kayla went on to describe the gradual transition away from maintaining friendships with those who chose not to attend college. Regarding changes in relationships with friends from high school, Allen commented, “I've lost touch with some; some didn't really matter to me I guess. . . . With people at [institutional setting] I feel that I communicate well with them and see them all the time.” Allen’s comments summarized participants’ preferences to affiliate with individuals attending college with whom they shared educational goals and experiences.

Participants who reported receptivity to making new friends acknowledged the benefits of mutually beneficial supportive relationships. Heather stated:

I'm glad I got to meet new people because I really came to count on those new people. So I'm glad I got to [meet others]. At first I was hoping to see people I recognized so that I could talk to someone I knew already, but I'm glad I didn't really see many people I knew because it's nice to meet new people.

Tina stated that one of her favorite experiences in college had been meeting people. She stated, “I guess knowing people. It's more than just classes and education and sitting in there and listening to professors. There's other ways to get that knowledge.” Tina went on to discuss the benefits she had experienced of working with others through group work and team projects and the benefits of collaborating. John also expressed his interest in meeting others. Asked how his new friendships had been of educational benefit to him, John replied, “It just helps and makes you feel more comfortable at school and it does

end up helping you academically. Just because you have people to talk to if you need help.” Carmen discussed how she had hoped to make new friends as part of her transition to college. She referenced a desire to reach out to others for the purpose of mutually beneficial support:

Like, you're just entering college and you don't know what to expect. You're still young and still in the high school mode. You think that it's going to be pretty easy and whatever and that you have a lot ahead of you. And you want people to talk to and to hang out with because you just left all your friends at high school. So you're kind of sad and you're wanting people to reach out to and say, “How is your day?” or “How did you do on that test?” or “How are you doing the homework?” and “How are you keeping up with everything?”

As part of their transition to college, some participants realized the benefits of expanding their sources of support. New relationships provided opportunities to find meaning and satisfaction through providing as well as receiving support.

Summary of Emergent Themes for Secondary Research Question Two

This section presented findings for secondary research question two: Do students rely mainly on social support relationships created while attending college or relationships that existed prior to entering college? Two subcategories of social support relationships were identified: (a) pre-college and (b) post-college-entry. Each subcategory and the related data and analysis were presented. Emergent themes for secondary research question two are shown in Table 9 on the following page.

Table 9

Secondary Question 2: Category, Subcategories, and Emergent Themes

Category	Subcategories	Emergent Themes
Social support relationships	Pre-college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low receptivity to new friends • Connections from high school • Ties based on duration of relationships • Comfort of existing relationships • Emotional support • Shared interests beyond course work • Familiar faces on campus from H.S. • Perceived barriers to making new friends • Commuter experience • Online contact with previous friends
	Post-college-entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receptivity to new friends • Social assertion • Dissatisfaction with past friends • Distance from former friends • Relating to those with shared goals • New people to count on • Mutual academic support • Adapting to interpersonal changes • Changing priorities

As indicated by the emergent themes shown in Table 9, participants relied on pre-college as well as post-college-entry relationships for support. The emergent themes were based on data from participants that reflected a range relational transition associated with attending college. Some participants relied heavily on pre-college relationships and expanded their relationships minimally after entering college. Other participants held on to selected pre-college friendships and also embraced the opportunity to create new friends from whom they received support. Some participants assertively sought new relationships in college and exerted little effort in maintaining pre-college relationships. The emergent themes reflected variation in levels of social assertion and receptivity to post-college-entry relationships.

Secondary Research Question Three: Instructional Approaches and Social Support

This section presents results for secondary research question three: What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support? Data from participants revealed three subcategories of instructional approaches that fostered the development of social support. The three subcategories include the following: (a) emphasizing interaction, (b) requiring group work in class, and (c) assigning team projects that required collaboration outside of class. The subcategories of instructional approaches are shown in Figure 9 on the following page.

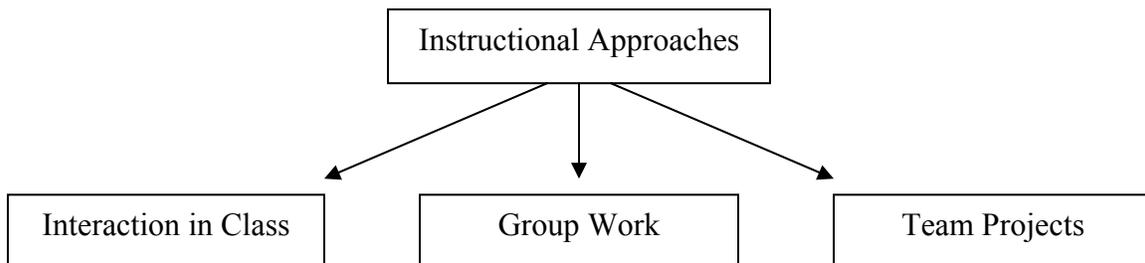


Figure 9. Subcategories of instructional approaches that contribute to the development of social support.

The subcategories of instructional approaches that contribute to students' development of social support included in-class and out-of-class interactions. Findings related to the subcategories of instructional approaches that contribute to students' development of social support are presented below.

Emphasizing Interaction in Class

Several students commented on instructional approaches that were designed to enable students to get to know one another in class. John stated that he mainly met other students through classes. John said, "When the teacher breaks the ice and makes people start working together, that's when you start meeting new people." He reported that most of his instructors had used icebreakers to get students talking. When asked about the benefits of icebreakers and interaction in class, John replied, "It's more comfortable walking into class and walking out. It's not so tense or silent." Allison commented on the differences between classes that do and do not utilize icebreakers:

It was two or three weeks in my English class before anybody would actually talk to each other and exchange phone numbers and stuff like that compared to our

sociology class where one of the icebreakers was to get six different names and contacts.

The context of Allison's comments indicated that she preferred courses with high levels of interaction. Regarding the use of icebreakers on the first day, Carmen stated:

I wish all my instructors would have done that on the first day. Get everybody to know everybody's names. You'd have more to talk about outside of class; you can ask people if they like music if you do too. You can spark up conversations then and get closer to people outside of class.

Students differed regarding the specific courses they had experienced as interactive. Elaine cited a sociology class as being interactive through the instructor's use of stories to generate discussion. She stated, "My favorite class right now is probably sociology because she gives a lot of stories instead of just lecturing and it makes it more interesting." Billy, on the other hand, cited his English class as interactive:

My English teacher did a lot on provocative subjects, as did my psychology professor. Other than that there were some group activities in my other classes that were kind of fun and light as far as the mood in order to get people to talk to each other and maybe break down some walls or the ice.

Aaron referenced the length of time in science labs as beneficial for interaction. He stated:

My Physics lab took three hours one time, so you have to know your partners pretty good. But English classes and math classes, when you get together it's only

for 15 to 20 minutes because you're only in a group for that long. It's not like a three-hour swing.

Several students referred to their College Skills courses as highly interactive. Allison stated:

For the most part in the interactive classes like my College Skills, my professor in that class everyday had a new topic. Luckily it was last semester where we had the election going on and we talked about that and we talked about diversity and things like that.

Heather also regarded her College Skills course as interactive:

When I first enrolled I took a College Skills course and we did all sorts of activities where the whole class engaged each other and we did personality activities and all kinds of things to get people talking together. That class did a lot in that area.

Heather added that class sessions for her English courses were discussion oriented. She stated, “In my English classes we engage in conversations and talk about stuff we read and we give our opinions on it.” The variety of courses cited as interactive suggests that the approach of individual instructors—not the course discipline—was the key to interaction.

Observations from two students provided insights regarding why some instructors emphasized icebreakers and student interaction in class. Tina stated, “They want to make us communicate. They obviously want to make us communicate because people don't realize how much help they can get from talking to classmates.” Similarly, Alice

recounted an example of a math teacher encouraging students on the first day of class to get to know one another. She summarized the teacher's comments in which he compared the individualistic culture of American students with other more collective cultures:

On the first day of class, he compared the American students to the foreign students that come over to America. He says that the difference in how we were falling down was that we weren't forming study groups and that we would study by ourselves and do it all by ourselves with hours of studying where the [students from other nations] would study a lot by themselves then study with their study groups, and when you put those both together, they are higher. If you study in study groups, it's not better than studying by yourself, but if you have any problems you still have another student your age teaching it to you and it will stick in your head a lot longer. I tried it out and it works, so I kept it up.

Some instructors, regardless of the content of their academic discipline emphasize to students the importance of interaction in and out of class. Recognizing this need for interaction, those instructors created an environment in the classroom that stimulated student interaction.

Group Work in Class

Another instructional approach that contributed to students' development of social support was the use of group work in various classes. Students discussed a number of variations of group work, but the common theme was mutually beneficial collaboration among students as part of the learning process. Elaine stated:

In my Accounting 102 class this semester she put us in groups of four, and you have to sit with that group all year so you work with each other a lot. It's just easier to split up the work, and if I don't know how to do something maybe someone else does.

Kayla commented on the use of groups in her math class:

She puts people together that she thinks can work together. Sometimes my group, all of us, won't get the question at the right time at the right moment that she wants us to get it, so we all end up talking to each other or going to the next group trying to get everybody to help us out because we're not getting it.

Kay also mentioned the use of groups in her math class. She said, "That teacher puts us in a group and we try to figure out problems and I like that. Asked whether the groups were helpful, Kay replied, "Yes, because they [other students] think differently so they have different ideas that give us many different ways to think about it." Andrea also cited the use of groups in her math course. Andrea stated, "In math class we work in rows so that if we have any questions for each other whenever she's assigned us then we can ask each other." Jeff discussed the use of groups in his English courses. Jeff stated:

Both of my English professors in 101 and 102 have had us actually work in groups and you get to know people that way. Even if you are working a group of four people you work in a different group one or two times, you know everybody in the class. Plus, last semester we wrote journals and every day we were reading that journal to the class so you get to know these people even if you haven't had a chance to talk to them because you hear them read their journals.

Referring to group activities in his English and history courses, Carl said, “In history or English you discuss what you read or what you learned and what you think about it.”

Samantha shared an example of group activity from her English class:

In English last semester, we worked in groups a lot. We did partner activities so you get to know people in general and you'd get to know the assignment better.

There was one time where we had to write something for grammar to see how our writing style was so that she could figure out what we needed to work on. We were blindfolded and in a group of three. We had to trust the two people in our group to lead you around to wherever they wanted to and back to the classroom.

So you had to trust people.

Regarding his experience with group work in a management class, Andy commented that it was “fun and interesting.” Asked about the group performance, Andy said, “We got a B but that grade was better than we thought. Andy’s comment underscores the apparent motivation for having students work in groups in class: increased learning and performance based on input from multiple individuals. Billy provided the other explanation for why groups are popular in courses: “It's good to meet people and to gain and understanding and to get to study with someone or to make friends with someone rather than be in a rigid and strict environment.” Tina stated, “Professors do a great thing, they put people into groups. We don't usually work on projects, but we aren't doing problems by ourselves.”

Team Projects

Extending beyond the classroom, team projects that require collaboration represent another instructional approach that fostered the development of social support among students. Kelly stated, “I have group projects I do with people and we meet up outside of class and do them, or we study for tests and get together for lunch and dinner and study before and after.” Asked about the benefits of group projects that require out-of-class meetings, Kelly replied, “Good. It's widening that friendship base again but it's people you don't know so it's intimidating I guess.” Allen also commented on meeting with others outside of class:

Last year I took public speaking, and we had a group speech and we had four to a group and some groups may have had more. I know we all sat in my apartment and made our speeches together, and we had to have visual aids to help the speech and we all worked on that. Me and two of the people in that group are really tight and good friends now. That seemed to improve relationships too. This semester I have a history class and we worked on something today together. One of my best friends is in that class and me and him were in groups together.

John shared an example from a history course:

We were just divided up into four groups in the entire class so they were a little larger and we just picked an era for history and we researched that and had to tie a clever end to it to teach the class and make you learn something from it.

Asked whether any of his courses had required group projects, Russ replied, “Just about every one of them, mostly my English and history classes.”

Whereas group work often occurred in class, most work on team projects required students to meet outside of class. Meeting others outside of class sometimes resulted in students making new, mutually supportive friends. Team projects gave participants the option of determining when, where, and for how long to meet. Working on team projects with others enabled some students to broaden their relationships and support from peers.

Summary of Emergent Themes for Secondary Research Question Three

This section presented findings for secondary research question three: What instructional approaches contributed to students' development of social support? Three subcategories of instructional approaches that contribute to students' development of social support were identified: (a) emphasizing interaction in class, (b) group work, and (c) team projects. Each subcategory and the related data and analysis were presented. A summary of the emergent themes for secondary research question three is shown in Table 10 on the following page.

Table 10

Secondary Question 3: Category, Subcategories, and Emergent Themes

Category	Subcategories	Emergent Themes
Instructional approaches that contribute to students' development of social support	Interaction in class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference for icebreakers • Comfort of knowing classmates • Engaged discussion preferred • Learning and sharing • Instructor methods, not subject matter, determined interaction
	Group work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborating in class • Splitting the work • Classmates clarifying material • Rotating to get to know others • Forming out-of-class contacts
	Team projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting to work on projects • Widening friendships • Getting closer by working together • Students controlling meeting times

As shown in Table 10, participants preferred instructional approaches that stimulated interaction among students. Interaction was engaging and fostered the development of new relationships from which participants obtained support. Group work in class as well as team projects outside of class enabled participants to learn material through discussion and clarification with classmates. Collaborating on assignments also led some students to establish contacts that developed into supportive friendships.

Secondary Research Question Four: Influences on the Formation of Social Support

This section presents results for secondary research question four: What influences the formation of social support relationships? Data analysis revealed five subcategories of influences on the formation of social support relationships. The five subcategories include the followed: (a) course-related interactions, (b) extracurricular interactions, (c) support needed, (d) social assertion and receptivity to new relationships, and (e) place of residence. These subcategories are shown in Figure 10.

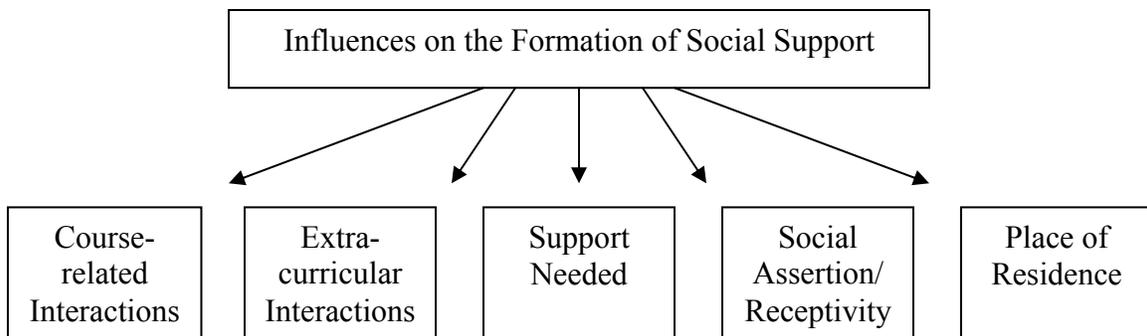


Figure 10. Subcategories of influences on the formation of social support.

The five subcategories included a wide range of individuals and factors that influence the formation of social support. The findings on the subcategories of influences on the formation of social support relationships are included in the discussion below.

Course-related Interactions

Participants reported meeting most students through their classes. Meeting others in classes often led to interactions outside of class. Usually those out-of-class interactions were related to course work and sometimes led to a closer relationship. Regarding the process of meeting others in classes, Billy stated, “When you're in class with someone that you sit next to, you can find things in common and you start a conversation and if you get along with them you do and if you don't you don't.” Similarly, Carl stated:

I met these people in class, and then it was usually we sat next to each other on the first day, but on the second and third day we just kind of kept on talking to each other. We asked if it was our first day here, how we liked it, and whenever we did group projects we would work together.

Kelly's comments indicated how class meetings sometimes led to other relationships:

This guy in my English class asked me about a homework assignment and I started hanging out with him. That's where I met my boyfriend through one of his friends. I just hang out with all of their friends now.

Samantha stated that she met others by arriving early for class. She said, “I usually get there ten minutes early and if there's anyone in there I'll talk to them.”

Meeting other students in class was the impetus for subsequent meetings regarding homework and team projects. Groups formed in class often shared study time

outside of class. In a number of cases, students informally created their own study groups that met outside of class. Michelle stated:

In my database class, I would study with other people just because I didn't understand it very well. I understood the concepts but the teacher wasn't teaching. He would kind of let us go and I was frustrated beyond means. So I would just do it and work on my database with other people so they could explain it better than he was. So that worked out really well. With accounting and math if you sit there and you study with somebody and you're teaching them or they're teaching you then you can get a better understanding because you're asking them questions that can one-on-one do that for you.

Heather shared an example of how students initiate their own study groups, especially in certain courses:

Maybe in the more difficult classes, like the sciences which are very difficult to me, everybody wants to see how one another looks at things. [The groups were] initiated by the students. We all came together so it wasn't really an instructor's idea. We all felt that we could help one another in some way so we all teamed up.

Billy stated:

We study stuff in class and you can see that a lot of people are struggling with it through their facial expressions or quizzes or stuff like that. People are pretty good about saying how they feel and maybe when the announcement of a big test or something that you need to work on to understand a concept, then some of the acquaintances or people you met in class you ask if they want to study together.

Allen commented on how relationships developed as a result of meeting outside of class to work on projects:

Sometimes we'd work together on projects and stuff. They also help me become friends with some of them because you have to communicate and make sure you're on the same page with other people in your class to make sure you're doing the right thing. That improves relationships.

Alice reflected on the enjoyable aspects of meeting with others:

Most people though want to talk to someone, and then as far as study groups, they enjoy that, not just to study, but just to communicate and have fun and just enjoy talking. We don't talk about my macroeconomics the entire time. We talk about football and other things going on.

Regarding exceptions to meeting others in classes, a few participants cited other venues where they had met people. Those sites included the cafeteria, the library, in the tutoring lab, and through participation in activities and events on campus. In addition, students sometimes met others through work.

Course-related interactions, primarily in-class, emerged as the most influential factor related to students meeting others. Meeting others in class sometimes led to the development of relationships that transcended taking courses together. More often, however, interactions among students were influenced by course work requirements.

Extracurricular Interactions

Another influence on the formation of social support relationships was extracurricular interactions. Extracurricular interactions occurred on campus as well as

off campus. On-campus interactions occurred during student activities and events. Off-campus interactions occurred primarily at work or through engagement in other off-campus activities not sponsored by the college.

On-campus Activities and Events

Interviewees reported little participation in on-campus activities and events. Regarding on-campus activities and events, Elaine stated, “There's just not a whole lot of things to join here, to meet people. When you get to [university] there's all sorts of clubs you can do to meet people.” Carmen reported that she had been highly involved in sports and activities in high school. In college, however, she indicated that she had not gotten involved at all. Reflecting on her experiences, Carmen commented, “It's like that period of my life is over and I'm fine with that but I miss having a lot to do...I miss being on a team.” Asked about her expected extracurricular involvement after she transferred, Carmen replied:

Maybe getting involved in clubs or whatever they have for intramural sports. I'd definitely do that. I think there would be a lot more activities and stuff. People who go to four-year colleges say they always have something to do, and there's nothing to do here.

Elaine's and Carmen's responses summarized the shared perception among students that few extracurricular opportunities existed at the college. Some students, however, expressed that they knew about opportunities but chose not to participate. Billy stated:

I did attend the job fair that we had recently just to get a perspective on things and a blood drive, but those are the only things I've done on campus. It's not because

of a lack of knowledge though. I knew those things were going on and I chose not to do them.

Andy indicated that he had been too busy to get involved. Andy stated, “I've been quiet most of the time and trying to stay focused, and I haven't gotten involved in any of these groups or clubs like I normally would because I'm just too busy.”

Only two students indicated significant involvement in extracurricular activities on campus. Alice served as the secretary for the Student Government Association (SGA) and she was active in the Student Democrats organization. Regarding her on-campus extracurricular activities, Alice stated:

As part of SGA I have an office and I usually stay in the office and maybe e-mail the student democrats if we have a meeting. It's just things like that and whatever our advisor wants us to do for the upcoming event.

Alice stated that she spent about an hour a day on average on campus as the result of being involved in SGA and the Student Democrats organization. She indicated that she spent more time on campus when those organizations sponsored special events. The other student, Tina, mentioned two organizations with which she was involved. Tina said, “There's the Spanish Club and I was part of the Spanish Club. . . . I'm also a part of the honor society here.” Tina indicated that she participated in meetings of the Spanish Club and the honor society that were held on campus.

Related to lack of participation in extracurricular activities and events on campus, most participants reported spending little time on campus outside of attending classes. About half of the students interviewed reported that they left campus immediately after

classes ended. Andy stated that he did not spend much time on campus because “there's not much to do here besides eat.” Aaron stated, “I park right near where I go to class and all my classes are in that one hall. So, I just go to class and when it's out, I leave.” For the participants who indicated that they left campus immediately after classes, Carmen's comments provided a summary of their views:

It just seems like I don't want to be here anymore after classes because you're drained. I'm in class, counting down the minutes, so I don't want to stay here longer than I have to. It's not like it's torture or anything, but it's in my mind that “Why would I stay at school longer than I have to?”

Some students reported spending some time on campus to complete course-related requirements and to hang out with friends. Russ commented that he was not as distracted on campus as he was at home: “Usually if I have some Internet classes that I want to get done such as when homework is due, then I'll just stick around here where I'm more likely to do it.” Kayla also stated that her primary reason for spending time on campus was to complete course work:

I spend a lot of time after class writing papers for my English class. Usually if I go home then I'll find something to distract me and there isn't too much on the computer to distract me so it's easier for me to get it all done at one time here.

Jeff was one of a few students who commented on visiting the cafeteria occasionally. Jeff stated:

If I had a paper to write and I felt like I needed some hard research, I would probably be in the library. Sometimes I'll hang out at the cafeteria with friends. If

it's pretty outside and I don't have to work, sometimes I'll just sit outside and do homework.

Overall, students either left campus after classes ended, worked on course-related assignments, or occasionally spent time with friends in the cafeteria.

Off-campus Extracurricular Activities

Participation in off-campus extracurricular activities was a source of influence in the formation of relationships that led to social support. The primary off-campus activity for participants was their employment. Of the 20 participants in the study, 18 were employed, and the average number of hours worked each week was 19. Only one participant (Tina) worked on campus. Through their various places of employment, participants reported meeting new friends and significant others. Multiple participants commented on the support they had received from co-workers and supervisors. Employment emerged as a major source of influence in the formation of support relationships.

In addition to employment, some participants reported involvement in other off-campus extracurricular activities that influenced the people they had met. The students who participated in TRiO's Student Support Services program cited field trip events that led to their interacting with other students. Regarding Student Support Services, Heather stated, "Sometimes they take us on college tours of different schools." Tina also referenced trips offered through TRiO: "We have TRiO field trips that anyone can come to. We go to restaurants and eat.... We go eat and you can bring your friends and your friends can bring friends and you can meet others." Aaron discussed getting involved in

activities at a nearby university where he intended to transfer. He recalled meeting others by playing flag football through the nearby university's intramural program:

Aaron: I played flag football for intramural at [university name]. . . . This was last semester. . . . I actually had my brother's ID.

Interviewer: Did you meet new people through flag football?

Aaron: One of my good friends, he's actually my brother's age, and he goes to [university name] now and his brother has a team and he asked me to play and I just came out one day and played with him and I met all of those people. It was fun.

In addition, Aaron stated that he played basketball about three times a week. Asked if he played with students from the college he attended, he replied:

No. They're [university name] students because I have a [university recreation center membership] and use their gymnasium. So they're mostly [university name] students.

Participation in extracurricular activities held off campus was a source of influence on the formation relationships that sometimes resulted in support for participants.

Support Needed

Another factor influencing the formation of social support relationships was the type of support students felt that they needed to be successful. Participants who perceived that they needed support from peers were more inclined to seek mutually beneficial relationships with other students. Sometimes the positive results from group work or team projects convinced students that they could benefit from collaborative efforts. Most

students indicated a preference for as well as the need to collaborate with others and to experience support from their peers. Carl stated, “I think you need somebody to tell you that you're doing well. If you live off campus then you don't have your parents telling you good job and such.” John observed that he needed the support of his peers:

If you have someone to turn to about a question, then it does help. I think half of it is finding out on your own what you can take and tolerate and the other half is depending on other people because you can't do everything yourself.

Andrea stated what she thought students needed in terms of support:

Link up with people in your classes right away and get study groups going because that's what I think makes the biggest difference. Just because you get to make friends as you do it and your grades will go up.

Allen commented, “You need backing from your family and friends because if they don't believe in you then you aren't going to believe in yourself.” Allison stated that in addition to having good instructors she benefitted from the support of peers:

Definitely the people that are in the classes are a help also. The friends you make, some of them are wise, and you make friends with the people who are actually willing to help you and not just the ones that want you to help them.

Billy observed, “Having people that you at least feel care about you and your well being is important to me. Knowing someone wants me to succeed makes me want to succeed even more.” Jeff’s comments summarized the view that support from others was valuable. Asked about the value of making new friends in college, Jeff replied, “Huge value. . . . you never know when you are going to need help with a paper or with a flat

tire.” The view that support from others was needed and was valuable influenced the interactions that students had with others. Students who preferred to collaborate with others kept in mind the mutual benefits of working with others and that influenced their interactions with others.

Social Assertion and Receptivity to New Relationships

Another factor that influenced the formation of relationships that led to social support was students’ levels of social assertion and their receptivity to new relationships. As they entered college, students exhibited varying levels of social assertiveness. High or low levels of social assertiveness combined with interest in establishing new relationships influenced the extent to which new sources of support were developed. Students’ levels of social assertion and their receptivity were not static. Over time some students became increasingly socially assertive as well as more or less receptive to new relationships. No participants, however, reported decreases in social assertiveness. Receptivity to new relationships seemed to be higher as students entered and in some cases decreased as the students prepared to transfer from the institutional setting.

Social Assertiveness

Responses from participants about their social interactions revealed variation in their levels of social assertiveness. Some students stated that they rarely initiated conversation. Russ commented on his preference not to initiate contact with others. Russ stated, “I usually don't initiate contact. I get really nervous around people and I'm not really good at meeting other people. I've always been quiet and haven't talked to many people at school.” Kay provided another example of low social assertiveness. Asked if

she ever initiated discussion with students she didn't know, Kay replied, "Not that much because I'm a person that doesn't talk that much, but when someone talks to me then I keep going." Kay later commented that due to her language skills as a non-native English speaker that she is sometimes misunderstood. Instances in which she was misunderstood were partly responsible for her inhibition regarding initiating conversation.

Other students indicated that they were socially assertive and often took the initiative to converse with others, even those they did not know. Andy stated:

I think I'm pretty assertive. I work in customer service and I used to work on the yearbook staff, so I had to be able to open up to people and be assertive in all the things I've had to do recently.

Kayla described herself as outgoing. Regarding initiating conversation she said, "I usually do because I'm very talkative and outgoing so I talk to everybody that's around me, so I'm the one that goes up to people." Billy provided another example of a high level of social assertiveness. He recalled one example of initiating conversation with someone he did not know:

In my English class, there was a girl that sat next to me who had a lanyard that had a video game system on it, and I used to be a manager of a video game store. So I started talking to her about the lanyard and asked where she got it from. Then we started a conversation about video games and it progressed all the way to politics and religion all throughout English. It's just finding those small elements or making a joke about a professor or it being early in the morning and starting those small conversations that lead to friendship or things like that.

Allison stated, "I think of myself as a very outgoing people person. I like be out with friends and I'm a people person. . . . I can get along with a lot of people, different types of people, and I don't judge." Tina stated that she regarded herself as outgoing. Tina said, "I'm always open and talkative to everyone. I don't give wrong impression; I just talk to people." The participants who indicated social assertiveness relished opportunities to develop new relationships that often become sources of social support even though those relationships did not necessarily progress into close friendships.

Also of interest were those participants who indicated that they had become more socially assertive as a result of their college experience. Although he initially indicated his preference for not initiating conversation with others, subsequent discussion with Russ revealed that he thought he had become more open to interacting with others. He attributed this change to his involvement in group work in various courses. Russ reflected:

There have been these group projects where I've had to work with others and been pushed into the situation and realize that it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I've kind of gotten used to it a little where before I had no need to jump into it so I didn't progress at all.

Alice stated that she was "very social." Asked if she had changed any in the area of social interaction with others, Alice replied, "Yes, because I've come to realize that everyone wants to talk to someone and not everyone is vocal about it." As a member of the SGA, Alice indicated that she felt part of her responsibility was to get more students interacting with one another. Samantha recalled that she had become more willing to interact with

others. Samantha recalled, “I didn't talk to hardly anybody my first week. I was just trying to figure out this school and learn what I needed to do.” Asked if that changed later, Samantha replied: “I started to [talk to others] and things started to get easier when I started to talk to people.” Jeff indicated how he had become more socially assertive over time in college:

First semester I was more shy because I didn't know a lot a people and I was new to [institutional setting]. This semester I feel like I've met more people already than I met last semester because I feel more comfortable with the surroundings. I know where the classrooms are and I know where the buildings are, so I'm not so worried about that. I kind of take time to slow down and I'm not rushing from one place to another and worried about this or that. I'm comfortable here so it makes me come out more and I talk to people more and I've met more friends through that.

Heather also indicated that she had become more socially assertive in college. Heather reflected, “I became more of a social butterfly since I've been here, so I talk to people when I'm in class and make new friends. That's how I make friends by talking to them in class.” Responses from participants indicated that some of them had become more socially assertive over time.

Receptivity to Establishing New Relationships

Descriptions from participants indicated that their levels of receptivity to establishing new relationships varied. Differing levels of receptivity were apparent among as well as within participants. Some participants expressed minimum receptivity

to establishing relationships with others. Regarding new relationships not progressing into deeper friendships, Carl commented:

My opinion is that it really doesn't matter because you'll see the people for a couple of semesters, then you won't see them the next semesters. If you do see them the two years or four years you're here, you'll probably just forget about them. If you do remember them, you'll just remember that you went to college with them.

Samantha cited the changes that occurred in previous relationships as limiting her receptivity to developing close relationships. She reflected:

I don't want to get too close to somebody then have them not be there. I had my dad live with me until I was in the ninth grade and then he was gone and we barely talk and see each other since then. My brother moved out and moved 900 miles away. My sister moved out and got married, so I got used to people leaving, so I just push them away. I'll be friends with anybody, but I don't get attached.

Similarly, Tina expressed her limited receptivity to getting too close with others:

There's no best friend right now and I'm not trying to make one because I'm the one that's going to transfer again. . . . I talk to people straightforward. I'm not getting involved with anything very serious. I'm always there for them. Some people take that for granted so I get calls at four in the morning. I don't have a problem with that, I'll answer the phone. I'm not building something dependable that I can be attached to. They're my friends and I'm there for them anytime and thanks for the cheer for me this year, but I left my best friends after 17 years and I

moved on and I know how hard it was and I don't want to get myself into something that deep and move again in six months. They respect that because that was my attitude from the beginning.

Tina's comments indicated that she was receptive to and had experienced getting close enough with others to provide support for them. She was not receptive, however, to becoming emotionally involved with others.

Other students indicated a high level of receptivity to establish new relationships and to allow those relationships to progress into deeper friendships. Heather stated that she had been eager to make new friends in college:

I was tired of talking to the same friends I had since high school and I was going to be older and I don't want to keep hanging out with the same people over and over again.

Kayla said that she planned to continue to make new friends through graduation without considering the effects of an impending transfer. She stated, "It wouldn't hurt me to start friendships the week of graduation. It wouldn't bother me at all and would be great."

Regarding the individuals with whom she studied, Andrea said that she remained open to those relationships developing. Andrea stated, "I wouldn't be able to study with people I didn't get along with and be good friends with." John indicated that that he thought friendships would progress with students he met in class. Regarding the friendships progressing, John stated, "I think they will; hopefully they will." Some students reported receptivity to allowing friendships to develop from contacts they made with others in college.

A phenomenon of interest regarding receptivity to new relationships was participants' indications that their receptivity varied at certain times. Referring to the time he entered college, Allen stated:

I wanted to meet some people then worse than I do now. I tried harder to make friends then because I wanted some people I felt comfortable around. Now I feel like I don't try to meet people as hard but I'm still making friends now and meeting new people from different times.

Kayla reported that she had become “a little more open to anybody that has been in the class that I can help at all than I was when I first started.” Andy reported that his level of openness to meeting others had changed. He said, “If anything it's decreased because I know I'll be leaving soon.” Andy went on to discuss how his planned exit from the college discouraged him from establishing relationships with others. Asked if he would view his social interactions similarly after he transferred, Andy speculated, “No, because I know that's the permanent place and I'll graduate from there. I'll be more social and make more friends and put some roots to that university.” The above examples illustrated different levels of participants' receptivity to establishing new relationships.

Place of Residence

Participants reported a high level of variation regarding their social relationships based on their place of residence. Those participants who shared apartments with other students met a number of students through their roommates. Aaron stated:

One of my roommates has a bunch of friends who come up all the time but they're still in high school, and we know them. Me and the other guy who went to high

school together, we still know people in [nearby town] too, so we go and hang out in [nearby town]. I guess you can say it affected not meeting more people at [institution].

Referring to his experience moving to the area and sharing an apartment with roommates, Allen reflected, “That was a good experience. I met a lot of people and met a lot of friends like that and most of us are still pretty close.” He also commented on how living away from home for the first time affected his studies:

I'd say sometimes it helped and sometimes it hindered. Sometimes there were things other people might influence you to do other than study like going out watching a movie. Sometimes you could call up two or three of your friends and say, “Let's work on this together.” We'd all get together and work on it.... There were a lot of things going on that I didn't expect. There was a lot of partying. I realized that you can't do that every night and be where you want to be.

Speculating about her plans to move off campus in the future, Andrea noted:

I think that if I'm around other students doing their homework then I'll do mine just so I won't look like the lazy one. I think it really depends who your roommate is also. If you're with a roommate who parties all the time, then you'll be partying all the time also. If your friends are having fun, then you'll want to have fun too.

Regarding the influence of his roommates, John stated:

It varies. Usually it's a positive because if we have a test that day we'll study together and most of the time it's a positive influence unless they want to go out and want me to go with them. Then it's entirely negative.

Michelle reported that her social interactions had been influenced by her living arrangements. She said that during her time as a student she had been living with students who had already transferred to the university to which she planned to transfer.

Regarding how his roommates influenced his social interactions, Billy stated:

So far as on campus stuff, there were several things going on that I chose not to be a part of. My roommates who I got along with knew some people so we were kind of in party mode and people were getting back to college and seeing each other.

Socially it was very active the first three months of college.

Billy cited an experience in which he had one roommate who exerted negative influence and others who were positive and supporting:

One of the roommates that I live with that I actually went to [institution] with, he was in some really bad stuff and I ended up having to move out because of him.

The other roommates that went to [nearby university] definitely helped me out and were very willing to help me if I needed anything.

In comparison to those who had moved away from home, students who lived at home with their parents did not have as much social freedom and did not meet others through roommates. Alice discussed how living at home created an expectation from her parents that she would be home when she was not in class.

As far as being involved and not being here at school sometimes. We stay over as far as meeting and afternoon meetings and stuff like that. Parents worry about your classes ending at 1:15 and you should be home at 2:00 and they don't realize that I'm involved in stuff. If I lived off campus I could stay however late and not

have to worry about coming home at a decent time and not have to worry about coming home from the activities at school.

Andrea commented on living at home while attending college. Andrea stated, "I'm still living at home so it's like when I was in high school the way I was with my work. But next year I'll either be living on campus or at an off-campus apartment, we'll see how that works out." Kay explained that living at home sometimes required her to spend more time on helping her parents instead of studying or socializing with others:

My father just had an accident falling down from the roof and I don't have that much time to study and I have to put so much focus on him and taking care of him and taking him to the doctor. So my time has gone down because of that reason.

Russ stated that he preferred to live at home due to convenience:

I'd much prefer to live at home and commute. That's one of the reasons why I want to go to [local university]. It's very close to my home. . . . Living away from home seems like a lot of work to me. I'd rather just have my mom cook my meals and do my laundry and just relax. I have a slight social anxiety.

When asked about what he meant by social anxiety, Russ indicated that he preferred to spend time alone so that he could work on his music. He stated that he had become more socially comfortable as a result of attending college. Tina, an international student, stated that her social interactions were influenced by her not having a driver's license and by living with her host family. She stated:

I'm lucky that all of my friends are driving and all my friends are drivers. I became a driver a couple months ago. I was basically handicapped and I couldn't

go anywhere without someone taking me around or going on the bus. If I was staying here late, then I couldn't count on the bus and a couple times I got late to class because of it. . . . I had problems with that but I had people with the same classes I do and they would come and pick me up. For now I have someone to pick me up all the time.

In Tina's situation, she had to rely on support from others in the form of transportation and her reliance on transportation support influenced whom she met.

Summary of Emergent Themes for Secondary Research Question Four

This section presented findings for secondary research question four: What influences the formation of social support relationships? Five subcategories of influences on social support were identified: (a) course-related interactions; (b) extracurricular interactions, (c) support needed, (d) social assertion and receptivity to new relationships, and (e) place of residence. Each subcategory and the related data and analysis were presented. A summary of the emergent themes for secondary research question four is shown in Table 11 on the following page.

Table 11

Secondary Question 4: Category, Subcategories, and Emergent Themes

Category	Subcategories	Emergent Themes
Influences on the formation of social support relationships	Course-related interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting others in class • Conversation focused on course work • Student-initiated study groups • Some progression to friendships
	Extracurricular interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited interest and participation • Little time on campus • Employment as activity and influence
	Support needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for peer support • Study groups • Knowing others care
	Social assertion and receptivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied levels of social assertion • Increased social assertiveness • Varied levels of receptivity to new relationships • Increased and decreased levels of receptivity to new relationships • Transient view limiting some close relationships
	Place of residence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roommate links to social contacts • Closeness to others residing nearby • Living at home limits social contacts • Social contacts through carpooling

As shown in Table 11, numerous factors influenced the formation of social support. Emergent themes indicated that most social support relationships formed in college began through conversation related to course work. Few students met others through extracurricular interactions. Participants varied in the degree to which they perceived a need for social support and that variation influenced the formation of relationships. Differences in levels of social assertion and receptivity to new relationships also influenced the formation of new relationships. Living arrangements influenced the formation of social support relationships. Participants who resided with their families experienced limited exposure to new relationships in comparison to those who shared apartments with roommates.

Secondary Research Question Five: Explanations for Social Support Behaviors

The purpose of this section is to answer secondary research question five: What explains the social support behaviors of community college students? Explaining why students seek and provide support contributes to understanding the phenomenon of social support. Data analysis led to the development of three subcategories that explained students' social support behaviors: (a) goal attainment, (b) social transitions, and (c) camaraderie. The three subcategories of explanations for social support behaviors are presented in Figure 11 on the following page.

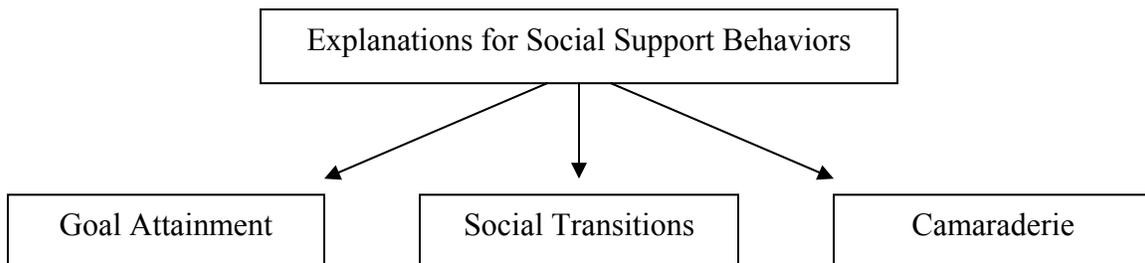


Figure 11. Subcategories of explanations for social support behaviors.

The subcategories include conditions or motives that explain social support behaviors. Each subcategory is described in the discussion below.

Goal Attainment

Participants reported that they were focused on attaining their educational goals. While they commented that meeting and interacting with others was interesting and enjoyable, students made it clear that they were in college to reach their goals. As a result, academics were prioritized over social interaction and academic goals influenced social relationships. Social interactions and relationships were largely driven by students' shared aspirations to succeed in college. Jeff stated:

I've tried to make more friendships and relationships with people who kind of have the same goals that I do, who want to go to school and who are trying to do that, because I feel like it's better to be with friends who have the same common goals that you do. I feel like they are less likely to hinder you.

Billy referenced networking with others to help achieve his goals. Billy said, "The more people you meet and the more network opportunities you make then the more beneficial it is for you later."

Alice commented on internalizing instructors' comments about working with others to perform better academically:

I started listening to teachers and they were saying that study groups were a good way to not only form friends but also study and do well on your tests. I was more comfortable starting study groups and doing things like that and you meet a lot of people doing that.

Aaron mentioned being focused primarily on graduating but also acknowledged the importance of meeting others. Aaron stated, "Learning is more important than meeting people, because you have to graduate, but I guess it's [meeting others] pretty close up there with it." Carmen discussed how she had become more goal-oriented and focused in college in comparison to high school. Regarding the differences between high school and college, Carmen stated:

It's [high school] not always focused on school; it's more focused on the social part of school. What is so-and-so doing, who broke up, and stuff like that. Petty little things that aren't really focused on academics.

The comments from Carmen serve as a good summary of how the participants indicated a sharp focus on their goals as college students. While participants reported a great deal of social interaction, meeting new people usually occurred in classes, meetings outside of class usually related to course work. Continued progression of friendships hinged on whether or not the students' goals were compatible. Jeff stated, "I really enjoy all the people I've met but if I was failing right now and I had all those friends I'd be in a really

bad spot.” His comments indicated that social support and interactions revolved around participants’ educational goals.

Social Transitions

Another explanation for social support behaviors was the realization of social transitions that participants identified. Students who had moved away from home reported a stronger perception of transition, but those living at home also observed changes in themselves and in their relationships. Although some participants held on to former friendships more strongly than others, all participants expressed some changes in terms of friends and support. Michelle stated, “The last issues I had made me come up here to get away from [hometown] and to separate myself from my old life and move into a new life.” Michelle discussed wanting to break away and to establish new relationships and ways of interacting with others. Regarding the transition, she said, “I was ready to take that step.” Kelly commented on her transition in relation to friends from high school:

They all split up and went away to college and I stayed at home. It kind of forced me to make new friends and that's what I did. So when they came back home they wanted me and expected me to be there just like old times but it wasn't because I had new friends now.

John stated, “Well, my best friend throughout all of high school, he has changed. I guess he never grew up really and we aren't friends anymore that much.” Heather stated how she had been in a personal transition regarding her social engagement with others:

I think I've grown to be a better person and have better study habits in school. I have a better understanding of people and learning how to work well with others.

In high school I was a person that stayed to myself and was somewhat anti-social. Now that I'm here I engage in conversation with people and listen to what they have to say, unlike what I did in high school. I was often on my own doing my own thing. I think I've become a broader person and listen to other people's ideas.

Regarding transitioning away from certain friends, Jeff said:

If I was still hanging out with all my friends that I hung out with the first year, just playing basketball, there might be quite a few more days from school that I missed as opposed to if most of my friends being up here at school every day.

Andrea stated:

If you're trying to do better for yourself and go to school and get good grades and everybody you are hanging out with are just wanting to do whatever and slack off, then it's going to make you want to do that. They don't have any tests; they don't have any papers due next week, so you will want to just hang out, too. So you have to stay self-disciplined because they might be able to hang out all the time but in five years I'm going to be making really good money whereas they might be just starting where I'm at right now. It's all about what you want for yourself and what you are willing to do to get there.

Social transitions included students opening up socially, realizing the benefits of increased social interaction, and gravitating toward friends who would support—not hinder—their progress.

Experiencing Camaraderie

Experiencing camaraderie was the third explanation for social support behaviors. Participants indicated experiencing a sense of camaraderie as they expanded their interactions with others in terms of receiving and providing support. In the excerpt below, Samantha recounted how she had opened up over time.

Samantha: I didn't talk to hardly anybody my first week. I was just trying to figure out this school and learn what I needed to do.

Interviewer: What about later?

Samantha: I started to [talk with others] and things started to get easier when I started to talk to people.

Interviewer: How did that make a difference?

Samantha: I wasn't alone, because I was at school for so long. I had really big breaks in class times; then it made things easier to bear and take in whenever I didn't understand something. I could ask them [other students] to explain something when I didn't understand.

Regarding interaction in groups, Alice alluded to enjoying working with others on a personal level. Alice stated, "Most people though want to talk to someone and then as far as study groups they enjoy that, not just to study, but just to communicate and have fun and just enjoy talking." Allen referenced wanting to establish camaraderie with other students as soon as he began. Allen said, "I tried harder to make friends then because I wanted some people I felt comfortable around." Billy referred to his motivation for meeting new people:

I have a very eclectic group of friends at home and I find that different people bring different things to the table whether it's someone who is anti-social to someone who is outgoing to someone who is a social outcast. Everyone has a unique trait about them that I find I can learn from and enjoy being around them for that thing.

Kayla shared an example of her willingness to extend support to another student:

Yesterday I met a new girl in one of my classes because she was out for a couple of days and she asked for help. So I met with her and told her that I could help her with some things and help her outside of class if she needs it. I have been a little more open to anybody that has been in the class that I can help at all than I was when I first started.

Tina stated that her favorite experience in college had been providing support for other students as a tutor:

It's more than just classes and education and sitting in there and listening to professors. There's other ways to get that knowledge. From private sessions, from study sessions, from helping people. So that on Christmas day I get a phone call from one of my students that says that they passed the class and I got a C. Some of them crying. It's the best feeling. I don't even have to be their tutor. I'll sit with them and study at the library and they're calling me and telling me they made a good grade. That makes me feel great because I want to help them and show them. I can't go to the professor and tell them to show them this way. I can show that person the way that they understand it. It makes me feel great if I feel a good

response. It's about people; it's not about school and sitting in classrooms and reading books. You can do that anywhere. It's about the people around you.

Camaraderie is related to the notion of mutual support. Participants discussed the benefits they experienced by receiving support as well as the rewards of helping others reach their goals.

Summary of Emergent Themes for Secondary Research Question Five

This section presented findings for secondary research question five: What explains the social support behaviors of students? Three subcategories of explanations for social support behaviors were identified: (a) goal attainment, (b) social transitions, and (c) camaraderie. Each subcategory and the related data and analysis were presented. A summary of the emergent themes for secondary research question five is shown in Table 12 on the following page.

Table 12

Secondary Question 5: Category, Subcategories, and Emergent Themes

Category	Subcategories	Emergent Themes
Explanations for social support behaviors	Goal attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common goals as basis for affiliation • Collaboration and better performance • Social as means to academic • Mutual support experienced
	Social transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breaking with the past • Increased receptivity to new friends • Realizing benefits of new interactions • Gravitating toward college attenders
	Camaraderie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaching past loneliness • Enjoying the company of others • Experiencing rewards of helping others

As shown in Table 12, emergent themes indicated that participants prioritized educational goals and demonstrated a desire to relate to others with shared goals. Participants experienced changes in their views regarding previous friends and began to realize the benefits of interacting with new acquaintances. As they progressed in college participants became more interested in affiliating with other college students. Participants shared how they enjoyed the company of other students and experienced the rewards of helping others reach their goals. The emergent themes helped explain the behaviors of students who received and provided social support.

Other Emergent Findings

The purpose of this section is to present other emergent findings related to participants' experiences in college as related to social support and persistence. These findings were not specifically linked to the secondary research questions; they emerged during data collection and analysis. The other emergent findings included the following: (a) emphasis on motivation, (b) experiencing increased anonymity in college, and (c) social diversity in college. The subcategories of other emergent findings are shown in Figure 12 on the following page.

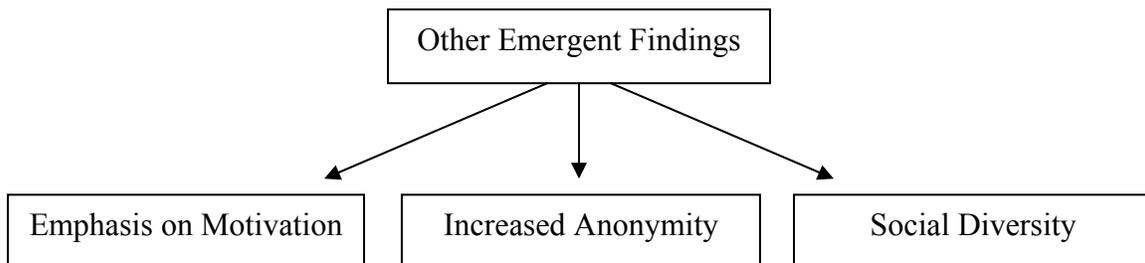


Figure 12. Subcategories of other emergent findings.

The subcategories represent emergent findings related to students' experiences and persistence. Each emergent findings subcategory is included in the discussion below.

Emphasis on Motivation

The results from the card sort activity on persistence indicated that participants perceived their motivation to succeed as the primary contributor to their persistence. Eleven participants rated motivation to succeed as the key persistence factor. Participants commented on the role of motivation during interviews and in response to probes from the researcher following the card sort activity. Tina said, "A person must be motivated to go to college." Andrea commented, "You have to have motivation to do anything. If you want to do well, then most likely you are going to do well." Heather stated, "I have a lot of self-motivation. I set out to complete a college degree and I will no matter how long it takes."

Several students referenced the hope of a good job or a promising career as a source of motivation. Samantha stated, "I really need to make something of myself or I will end up working two jobs. The economy is not good right now. I must be motivated to go to school and get an education." Allen observed, "I want to transfer, and I want to

do good. I want to be able to get a good job when I graduate.” Billy stated, “I’m tired of being in school and I want a career and I need to complete college. I’m ready to move forward and succeed in the real world.” Billy expressed that his motivation had increased after attending two colleges previously.

Participants also cited parental influence as a source of motivation. Alice referred to her father and said, “My father wanted to get his doctorate but couldn’t because of money and kids. He always wanted his kids to be able to complete college and that has contributed [to motivation] a lot.” Kayla commented on the motivation she experienced due to her parents not attending college. Kayla said, “Neither of my parents went to college and it is exciting for me to be the first in my family. I have wanted to be a kindergarten teacher since age five, and I want to do it.” Andy also referred to parental influence on his motivation:

I want to do well in all I do and get the highest grade I can. I’ve been motivated for as long as I can remember. My dad is all about education and has wanted all of us [children] to go to college. It was never a question of if we would go to college.

In addition to the examples above, other participants discussed the role of parents in strengthening their motivation. Some students were motivated by parents who wished they had attained higher levels of education. Other students were motivated by the influence of parents who had completed college.

Comments from two participants provided summary statements of participants’ emphasis on motivation as a key persistence factor. Regarding motivation, John

commented, “This one ties all the others [persistence factors] together.” Jeff stated near the end of his interview:

I think pretty much everything you’ve asked me today is based on self-motivation and self-determination. If you don’t believe in yourself, if you don’t want to do something, if it’s not in your heart and in your head and you’re not 100% sure about it, you’re not going to do it.

The important role of motivation in persistence was a significant emergent finding.

Experiencing Increased Anonymity in College

In the second interview, Carmen used the phrase *high school mode* to refer to her perception of differences between high school and college. Carmen’s reference to high school mode influenced the researcher to ask subsequent interviewees to describe from a social perspective some of the differences between high school and college. A key theme that emerged was that high school was much more close-knit and intimate than college in terms of relationships. For example, students commented on having teachers who had taught older siblings and who knew their parents. Participants reported that students and teachers were more visible in the community and saw each other more frequently at activities and events. In contrast, participants reported experiencing greater levels of anonymity in college. The experience of greater anonymity in college occurred as students adjusted to expectations from instructors that students take personal responsibility for their actions. The concomitant experiences of greater anonymity and expectations about personal responsibility forced participants to alter their reliance on some types of support. For example, students did not have the safety net of relationships

with instructors they knew well or classmates with whom they spent much time.

Regarding the high school social atmosphere, Allison stated:

We just became really close and if somebody wasn't at school then we'd ask where they were at and would automatically assume where they were because we were always together.

Allison's further comments provided an excellent illustration of increased anonymity combined with increased expectations of student responsibility. Regarding the support she experienced in high school, she recalled:

It was more so with my ROTC instructors because those were the same teachers for the entire year and my journalism teacher. They actually took a personal interest because it was more of an after-school activity with the ROTC to where they met our families and our families went and did stuff and saw competitions and things like that. I think that's why it was a little more supportive. When I see my instructors now, they're asking about my family and are more of a friend than just an instructor. They actually show the support with school and with your family and if they see something is going on with your life then they have a higher tolerance with things like that. In college you kind of have to live up to that higher expectation and you're older and you're expected to be in class. And if you're sick, you're expected to have someone else turn in your assignment for you and things like that.

Carl referenced getting to know teachers more personally in high school than in college:

In high school you would see them every day for an entire semester. I would say that because you did see them every day that they would get to know you a bit better. They also look out more for you.

Asked what it meant for an instructor to look out for a student, Carl replied:

In high school, if you needed extra help then they would tutor you and give you extra credit, not just to you but to everybody. It would help you out. Here at [institutional setting], I would say they just help you out telling you what to study.

John shared similar reflections about how students are expected to assume greater responsibility in college:

A high school environment is a lot closer together and is more nurturing just because you feel more comfortable because you've been there a long time.

College is more of you on your own.

After being accustomed to the social atmosphere and support they had experienced in high school, participants reported having to make adjustments in college. Those transitional adjustments caused students to rethink how to obtain the support they needed to progress closer to achieving their educational goals.

Social Diversity in College

Another finding that emerged from data collection and analysis was students' perception of increased social diversity in college as compared to high school. In the first interview, Aaron referenced getting to know an older female student in one of his classes. He commented that she was older than his mom. His comments prompted the researcher to ask subsequent interviewees about the extent of diversity among students with whom

they interacted. The theme that emerged from these data was that students reported interacting with more diverse individuals in college as compared to high school.

Samantha stated:

High school is a more clique-based lifestyle and if you're not there, then you're not there. If you don't have a group of friends then you don't have anybody.

Everybody has their friends and they don't go outside of that box usually.

Sometimes they do, but most people have that box that they're in. Here you see a lot of different kinds of people being friends.

Allen commented on how he interacted with individuals in college that he probably would not have associated with in high school:

I'd say the types of different people I hang out with have been different. In high school I hung out with the people I played sports with, and I'm not going to say I was judgmental but maybe I was. At [institutional setting] I seem to hang out with all sorts of different people. There are people I met at [institutional setting] that I probably would not have been friends with in high school that I became friends with here.

Heather observed:

In student support services, the age varies and I've met a couple people that are in their thirties and I've met people younger than me, like the girl in my music class.

So I've met younger and older people.

Billy expressed his preference for a more diverse social environment. Billy commented, "I like diversity and it's nice to get an understanding about different parts of the world

and other people's lives.” Carmen stated, “I see a lot of different ethnicities from people of different countries actually, but there's only a few in my classes. It's a lot more diverse than high school was.” Tina shared:

Age doesn't matter at all, and it doesn't matter if it's a 20-year-old or a 53-year-old. People around here are very helpful with anything. They'll help with anything they can.

Jeff provided comments regarding how all people can fit in within the institutional setting:

I don't really know if there's really anybody that “fits out” of [institutional setting] because pretty much everybody up here can fit in with a certain group of people. Everybody seems like they're pretty nice and there's not really the high school cliques, so I think it's kind of hard to fit out.

Although the institutional setting for the study lacked the ethnic diversity characteristic of many community colleges, participants indicated that attending college had expanded their social horizons in terms of diversity.

Summary of Other Emergent Findings

This section presented other emergent findings that were not specifically related to the secondary research questions. Three subcategories of other emergent findings were identified as (a) emphasis on motivation, (b) experiencing increased anonymity in college, and (c) social diversity in college. Each subcategory and the related data and analysis were presented. A summary of the themes for other emergent findings is presented in Table 13 on the following page.

Table 13

Other Emergent Findings: Category, Subcategories, and Emergent Themes

Category	Subcategories	Emergent Themes
Other emergent findings	Emphasis on motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire to earn degree • Promise of a good job • Parents as source of motivation • Motivation connects persistence factors
	Experiencing increased anonymity in college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College less close-knit than high school • Not as relational with instructors • More on your own
	Social diversity in college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater diversity • Fewer cliques • No one fits out

As indicated by the emergent themes shown in Table 13, participants identified several areas of interest regarding their college experiences and persistence. Motivation emerged as the key persistence factor and linked the others. Sources of motivation included personal as well as parental influences. Students also found that the college social environment was not as cohesive as the high school social environment. Greater anonymity required students to rely less on instructors looking out for them. The amount of social diversity in college was liberating to participants. Interactions with diverse individuals enabled students to obtain support from a broader representation of student types.

Social Support and Persistence: A Theoretical Model

The findings that emerged as a result of data analysis provided the basis for the development of a theoretical model that explains the role of social support in the persistence of community college students. Key components of the model include the two primary contributors to persistence that emerged from the data: (a) motivation to succeed and (b) enacted social support.

The title of the theoretical model presented is the Students Utilizing Community College Enacted Social Support (SUCCESS) model. The model is presented in Figure 13 on the following page.

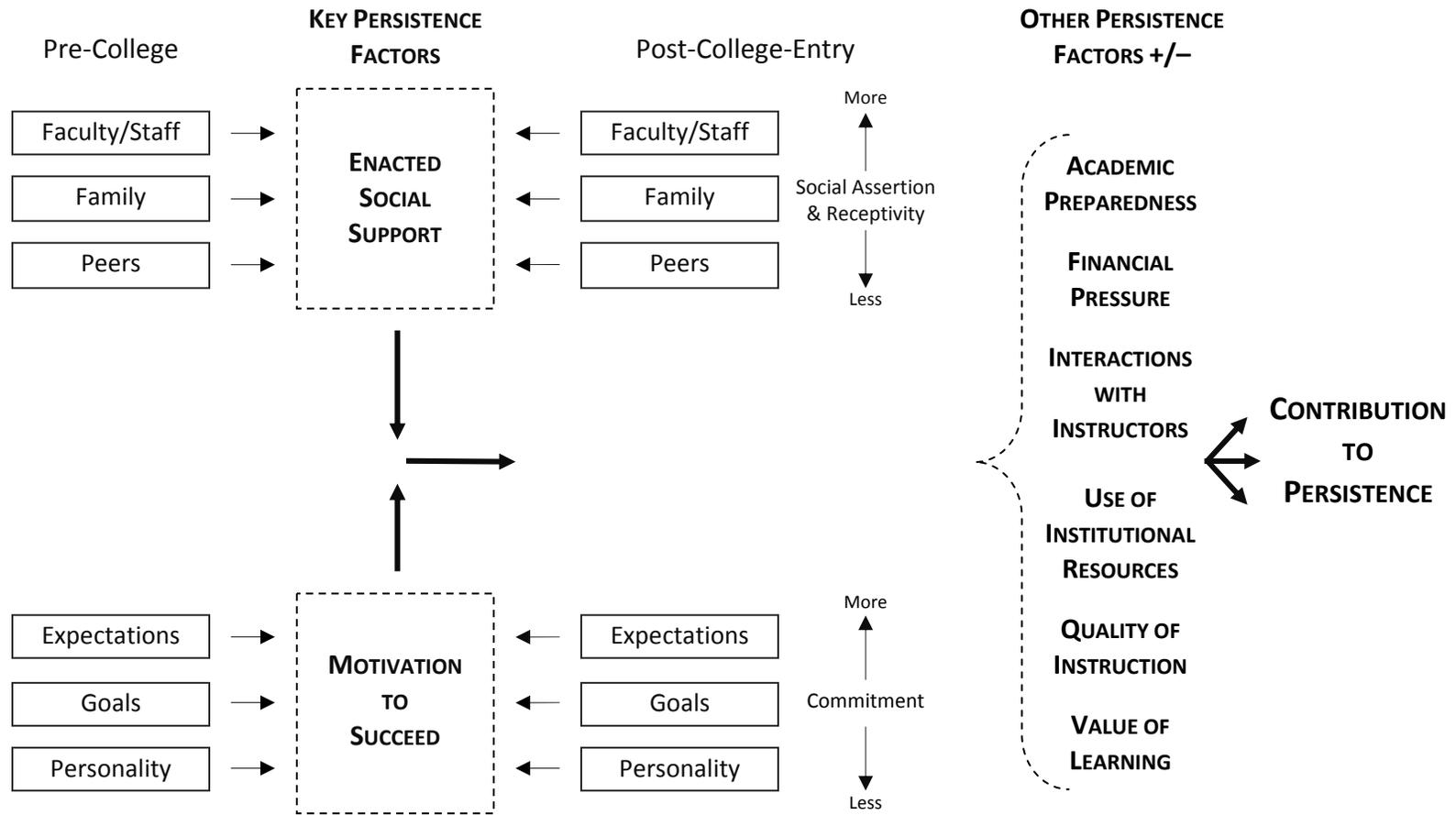


Figure 13. Students Utilizing Community College Enacted Social Support (SUCCESS) Model. © 2009 S. Vinson Burdette

As indicated in Figure 13, the two major constructs featured in the SUCCESS model are enacted social support and motivation to succeed. Participants identified support and motivation throughout the data as factors contributing to persistence. At the stage of selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), enacted social support and motivation to succeed were selected as the key constructs around which the remaining concepts were integrated. The term *enacted social support* was utilized to capture students' emphasis on what others said or did to support them (Goldsmith, 2004).

As depicted in the SUCCESS model, enacted social support consists of support from relationships classified (in columns) as pre-college and post-college-entry. The categories of support are consistent in both classifications and include faculty and staff, family, and peers. Although the categories of support are the same in the pre-college and post-college-entry classifications, the individuals represented may differ. For example, faculty/staff in the pre-college classification includes high school faculty, guidance counselors, coaches, and other staff. In the post-college-entry classification, faculty/staff includes college instructors and staff. Family in the pre-college classification includes the support from one's family members prior to college. After entering college, however, the family members providing support may change or the type of support may change. Family is included, therefore, in the post-college-entry column. Regarding peers, students enter college with friendships already established. After entering college, new relationships with peers develop.

The arrows in the SUCCESS model linking the pre-college and post-college-entry columns to enacted social support indicate that support is received through pre-college

and post-college-entry relationships. Students reported differences regarding the amount of enacted social support they received from new relationships after entering college. To indicate differences in students' adjustments after entering college, the SUCCESS model includes a range in the post-college-entry column. This range depicts the varying levels of social assertion and receptivity to new relationships that students exhibit in college. Students who are both social assertive and receptive to new relationships garner the greatest increase in enacted social support received from new relationships. On the other end of the range, students who are neither socially assertive nor receptive to new relationships remain reliant primarily on support relationships that existed prior to college. Other combinations of social assertion and receptivity may occur within the range. The range of social assertion and receptivity to new relationships is not static for each student. Changes also occur over time with individual students. For example, some students reported becoming more receptive over time as they interacted with students in college classes. Their college experience increased their social assertiveness as well as their receptivity to new relationships. Conversely, some socially assertive individuals indicated a decrease in receptivity to new relationships as they neared the date they planned to exit the institutional setting to transfer.

The other major construct in the SUCCESS model is motivation to succeed and is depicted in the lower section. Motivation to succeed is influenced by students' pre-college and post-college-entry expectations, goals, and personality. The expectations category in the pre-college column represents the expectations of students and others prior to college attendance. Others who might have expectations of students include

parents, peers, siblings, and previous faculty or staff. In the post-college-entry column, the expectations category represents students' perceptions of college after attending. In addition, the category represents the influence of others' expectations on the student attending college. The pre-college goals category includes the aspirations and goals of students before entering college. The post-college-entry goals category represents the possible altered goals of students that changed based on college experiences. Data from students indicated that their goals often changed after they began attending college. Examples included students changing their majors or choosing a replacement institution to which to transfer. The final category depicted in the model as influencing motivation is personality. Participants in the study referenced the role of their personality as an influence on their level of motivation to succeed. In the pre-college column, personality represents the habits, ways of being, and approaches to education prior to entering college. Personality in the post-college-entry column represents the discoveries and realizations students made about themselves as part of their college experiences. Examples included students' realizations about their ability to adapt to changes due to college, observations about methods of interacting with other students, and adjustments to the intellectual rigor of college. Participants usually described the realizations and discoveries experienced in college as positively affecting their motivation. Personality, then, is depicted as a pre-college and post-college-entry influence on students' motivation to succeed.

The arrows in the SUCCESS model linking the pre-college and post-college-entry columns to motivation to succeed indicate that motivation is influenced by pre-college

and post-college-entry expectations, goals, and personality influences. Differences exist among students regarding the influence of their experiences after entering college. To indicate those differences, the SUCCESS model includes a range in the post-college-entry column beside expectations, goals, and personality. Some participants indicated that after entering college their expectations and goals grew increasingly focused. More focused expectations and goals combined with new self-awareness regarding personality exerted strong positive influences on motivation to succeed. On the other end of the continuum, students with unrealistic expectations, under-developed goals, and few new personality discoveries did not experience as many new positive influences on motivation after entering college. Differences in students' adjustments in expectations, goals, and personality affected their level of commitment to their educational goals. In addition to pre-college influences, the post-college-entry level of commitment influenced motivation to succeed.

The inclusion of key and other persistence factors in the SUCCESS model indicates that motivation to succeed and enacted social support were the most influential, among multiple contributors to persistence. Secondary persistence factors contributed to persistence at varying levels of influence. The SUCCESS model includes the following secondary persistence factors: (a) academic preparedness, (b) financial pressure, (c) interactions with instructors, (d) use of institutional resources, (e) quality of instruction, and (f) the value of learning. All of the participants credited one or more of the secondary factors as contributing to their persistence. Financial pressure was cited by two participants as most influential. Other secondary factors selected by at least one

participant as most influential included the following: (a) academic preparedness, (b) interactions with instructors, and (c) the value of learning. The three clustered arrows in the model pointing to contribution to persistence indicate that the secondary factors exert some level of contribution to persistence. There is variation in the extent to which persistence factors other than enacted social support and motivation to succeed contribute to persistence.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the study's results and findings. Participants' demographic information and characteristics were discussed. Results from the card sort activity related to persistence factors and the findings from data analysis were presented. Discussion covered each of the study's research questions as well as other emergent findings. The chapter concluded with the presentation and discussion of the Students Utilizing Community College Enacted Social Support (SUCCESS) model.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to provide a summary of the study, discuss major findings, and offer recommendations for future research. The summary of the study conveys the major aspects of the study. The presentation of major findings includes key discoveries from data analysis. The discussion section covers implications of the study and relates it to existing literature. Limitations of the study are noted in this chapter. The recommendations for future research indicate how the present study raises questions to be addressed in subsequent research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and explicate through a grounded theory approach the role of social support as related to the persistence of community college students at one institution. The primary research question for this study was as follows: What explains students' perceptions of social support as related to their postsecondary education at a two-year or community college? Secondary research questions included the following.

1. What are the types and functions of social support among community college students?
2. Do students rely mainly on social support relationships created while attending college or relationships that existed prior to entering college?

3. What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support?

4. What influences the formation of social support relationships?

5. What explains the social support behaviors of community college students?

The grounded theory method and procedures utilized in this study were those based on the work of Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Data sources included demographic information and characteristics of participants, a card sort activity on persistence factors, and in-depth interviews. A total of 20 participants comprised the sample. Participants were university transfer students enrolled full-time who had persisted to at least their second term of enrollment. Data analysis yielded emergent concepts and themes that formed the building blocks for a theoretical model grounded in the data collected. From the data analysis results, the researcher generated a grounded theory to explain the role of social support as related to community college student persistence. The grounded theory, the Students Utilizing Community College Enacted Social Support (SUCCESS) model, emerged from the study and is explained in its accompanying narrative.

Major Findings

Major findings from the study are presented for the following: (a) demographic information and characteristics of students, (b) results from the card sort activity on persistence factors, (c) findings related to the secondary research questions as well as other emergent findings, and (d) the development of the theoretical model. Major findings are presented through narrative summaries.

Demographic Information and Characteristics of Participants

Twenty participants were involved in the study. Among the participants, 60% were female and 40% were male. The average age of participants was 20. Fourteen participants were White, Non-Hispanic; two participants were Black, Non-Hispanic; two participants were Hispanic; one participant was Asian or Pacific Islander; and one participant's ethnicity was unknown. Regarding date of entry, ten participants entered the institutional setting in fall 2007; the remainder entered in fall 2008 (9 participants) or fall 2006 (1 participant). The average GPA of participants was 2.8. The average commute distance to campus was approximately 13 miles. Participants worked an average of 19 hours per week. Categories of academic majors included business (7 participants), education and social sciences (6 participants), engineering (2 participants), health (2 participants), and humanities (2 participants). One participant was undecided regarding major. Five participants were first-generation college students, 14 graduated from high schools within the community college service area, and four participants attended college at another institution prior to enrolling at the institutional setting.

Card Sort Activity on Persistence Factors

Participants completed a card sort activity in which they indicated the factors that contributed to their persistence. The card sort activity included the following steps: (a) students selected cards representing factors that positively influenced their persistence, and (b) participants ranked the factors in order of importance. The aggregate ranked order of the persistence factors was as follows:

1. Your motivation to succeed academically.
2. The support you have received.
3. Your personality type.
4. The performance expectations placed on you by others.
5. Your use of institutional resources such as the library, Writing Center, or Learning Lab.
6. Financial pressure.
7. The quality of academic instruction.
8. Your interactions with instructors.
9. Your level of academic preparation prior to entering college.
10. The value of what you are learning.

After ranking the persistence factors, participants responded to probes from the researcher to provide clarification of the role of each persistence factor. Overall results indicated that the two most important contributors to participants' persistence were their motivation to succeed and enacted social support.

Secondary Research Questions

Findings related to the secondary research questions were instrumental in developing the theoretical model. A summary of the major findings for each secondary research question and other emergent findings is provided below.

Secondary research question one: What are the types and functions of social support among community college students? Findings included three categories and multiple subcategories. The category *family support* included the following

subcategories: (a) parents, (b) siblings, and (c) extended family. The category *peer support* included the following subcategories: (a) school friends, (b) work friends, (c) significant others, and (d) close friends. The category *faculty and staff support* included the following subcategories: (a) academic advisors, (b) instructors, and (c) staff.

The types and functions of social support were numerous and varied. Most support was obtained through family and peers. Students often turned to friends and family for assistance before utilizing the support resources on campus. One exception was the influence of TRiO's Student Support Services program on students involved with the program. Overall, social support related to persistence included support from family, peers, and faculty and staff.

Secondary research question two: Do students rely mainly on social support relationships that existed prior to college or relationships established while attending college? The major finding was that students obtain support from relationships that existed prior to college as well as relationships formed after entering college. Data analysis revealed differences in participants' levels of social assertion as well as their receptivity to new relationships. Participants' levels of social assertion and receptivity to establish new relationships determined whether they obtained most support from pre-college or post-college-entry relationships.

Secondary research question three: What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support? Findings related to this question included three subcategories of instructional approaches: (a) emphasizing interaction, (b) requiring group work in class, and (d) assigning team projects that required collaboration outside of

class. Participants indicated a preference for interactive instructional approaches that led to the formation of new support relationships. Participants indicated that collaboration with other students enabled them to learn course material effectively. Collaboration also led to the development of some supportive friendships.

Secondary research question four: What influences the formation of social support relationships? Findings included five subcategories of influences on the formation of social support relationships: (a) course-related interactions, (b) extracurricular interactions, (c) support needed, (d) social assertion and receptivity to new relationships, and (e) place of residence. Data analysis revealed that most support relationships formed in college grew out of class meetings and discussion about course work. Participants rarely met others during extracurricular activities. Participants' perceptions of the support they needed to be successful influenced their interactions with others and affected their social assertiveness and receptivity to new relationships. In comparison to participants who shared apartments with roommates, participants who resided with their families experienced less exposure to new relationships.

Secondary research question five: What explains the social support behaviors of community college students? Findings related to this question included three subcategories that explained social support behaviors: (a) goal attainment, (b) social transitions, and (c) camaraderie. Participants prioritized educational goals and demonstrated a desire to relate to others with shared goals. As they progressed in college, participants became more interested in affiliating with other college students as opposed

to former friends and acquaintances who chose not to attend college. Participants expressed enjoying the company of others and assisting others.

Other emergent findings were not directly related to the secondary research questions. One finding was participants' emphasis on motivation as the primary contributor to their persistence. Enacted social support was secondary to motivation and participants often viewed social interaction as a means for academic goal attainment. Another emergent finding was that students described experiencing increased levels of anonymity in college. The increased anonymity was manifested as having few individuals to look out for participants. As a result, students were cognizant of the increased levels of personal responsibility required in college. A final emergent finding was that students reported interacting with a more diverse group of individuals in college as opposed to high school. Participants reported few barriers in college regarding interacting with diverse others.

Development of the Theoretical Model

Findings from data analysis provided the building blocks for developing a grounded theory related to social support and persistence. The theory developed is entitled the Students Utilizing Community College Enacted Social Support (SUCCESS) model. The key constructs in the model are motivation to succeed and enacted social support. Motivation to succeed and enacted social support are depicted in the model as key persistence factors.

Influencing the key persistence factors were pre-college and post-college entry influences. The model depicts the following pre-college and post-college-entry influences

on enacted social support: (a) family, (b) peers, and (c) faculty and staff. A range of social assertion and receptivity to new relationships explained the differences among students regarding post-college-entry influences on enacted social support. The model depicts the following pre-college and post-college-entry influences on motivation to succeed: (a) expectations, (b) goals, and (c) personality. Expectations include those related to self and others. A range of commitment explains differences among students in post-college-entry influences on motivation to succeed.

In addition to the key persistence factors, the model also includes other persistence factors that participants selected during the card sort activity. Other persistence factors are depicted as exerting secondary influence in contributing to persistence. Other persistence factors included the following: (a) academic preparedness, (b) financial pressure, (c) interactions with instructors, (d) use of institutional resources, (e) quality of instruction, and (f) the value of learning.

Overall, the SUCCESS model depicts motivation to succeed and enacted social support as the key persistence factors. Influences on the key persistence factors include pre-college and post-college-entry support relationships. The SUCCESS model depicts differences in students' adjustments to college by indicating ranges of social assertion and receptivity to new relationships as well as commitment level. The model depicts motivation to succeed, enacted social support, and secondary persistence factors as contributing to community college student persistence.

Discussion

The findings indicated that social support was a major contributor to the persistence of students. Participants indicated overall that their motivation to succeed academically was the primary contributor to their persistence. Second to motivation was the role of social support. The types and functions of social support varied, but the major categories of sources of support were peers, family members, and faculty and staff. Students relied on support from sources that existed prior to college as well as new sources that they identified after entering college.

Students reflected a range of social assertiveness and receptivity to new relationships. Participants' levels of social assertiveness and their receptivity to new relationships were influential in their identification and development of new sources of support. As students transitioned and adjusted to college, some maintained their former sources of support and relied on them primarily. Other students indicated a preference to break with the former sources of support and were inclined to develop new relationships that expanded their sources of support. Some students were socially assertive but not receptive to new relationships due to their perception of the community college as a transitional institution. Those students opted not to become relationally involved with others due to their plans to transfer as soon as possible.

The primary influence on the identification and development of new sources of support was interaction among students regarding academic matters. Most interactions with other students began in the classroom. Instructional approaches that stimulated interaction and discussion among students were influential in enabling students to meet

others. The classroom was the primary site on campus where students met each other. Most often, initial conversations among students centered on topics related to course work. Recognizing their shared educational goal of progressing through classes, students were willing to support one another through group work, team projects conducted outside of class, discussions that occurred before and after class meetings, and through the formation of study groups. Most study groups were student-initiated and were helpful to students academically.

As part of their transition and adjustment to college, students experienced changes in their expectations and goals. Pre-college expectations often were adjusted in relation to students' actual experiences. In comparison to their pre-college expectations, most students indicated that college was more difficult academically, offered more types of support, and required greater responsibility. Those realizations were sometimes accompanied by adjustments in goals. Some students decided to remain longer at the college than originally intended, others changed their career goals, and some decided to transfer to a different university from the one they had originally selected. In general expectations became more realistic and goals were adjusted accordingly.

As part of their college experiences, students gravitated toward relationships with others who shared or supported their educational goals. Participants discussed the transition away from relationships with peers who chose not to attend college. Affiliating increasingly with others who shared their educational goals, students experienced a sense of camaraderie with other college attenders. The camaraderie among college students provided a framework through which support could be received as well as provided.

Students indicated their willingness to support others. Mutually supportive relationships with peers, family members, and significant others grew stronger. Diminishing over time were relationships with peers who chose not to attend college or those who were not supportive of participants' educational goals.

Another major finding from this study was students' emphasis on enacted social support (Goldsmith, 2004) as a more important contributor to persistence than integration into the college community. Enacted social support served a functional role (House & Kahn, 1985) and included sources of support from on as well as off campus. Relationships from which support was obtained included pre-college as well as post-college-entry sources. Integration into the institutional life of the college was minimal. Most students spent little time on campus outside of meeting for classes and working on academic projects, participated infrequently in extracurricular activities, and perceived their institutional experiences as transitional. Despite their minimal integration in college, the students experienced enacted social support rather frequently and attributed such support as a primary reason for their success in college.

The findings from this study carry several implications. One implication is applicable to retention theory. Findings from this study revealed the need to place increased emphasis on the functional role (House & Kahn, 1985) of enacted social support as a contributor to persistence. As noted previously, the dominant theories of student retention and persistence relate to student integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and involvement (Astin, 1977, 1984). According to those theories, a student's

institutional commitment is strengthened by academic and social integration or level of involvement in institutional life.

Neither of the dominant theories of retention helped explain the contributions to persistence identified by participants in the present study. For example, integration is related to the extent to which students become structurally enmeshed with the institution. Integration occurs academically and socially, with the two reinforcing each other. In the present study, the phenomenon of school friends, however, indicated that most students viewed their on-campus relationships as utilitarian and functional. Social integration consisted primarily of mutually enacted social support among classmates with shared goals. In terms of involvement, participants reported that they worked an average of 19 hours per week. They spent little time on campus. The secretary of the SGA, one of the participants in the study, reported that she spent only about an hour a day on campus. Student involvement was minimal. Moreover, students indicated that they did not interact with faculty except via e-mail and usually just before and right after class sessions. Students reported rarely visiting the cafeteria, and few indicated that they had participated in extracurricular activities.

Despite their minimal integration into institutional life and their meager participation in out-of-class activities on campus, the students were committed to their educational goals and were progressing effectively. Neither their integration nor their involvement was noteworthy. What was noteworthy, however, was the extent to which they attributed the support they had received as instrumental in their success. One major theoretical implication is that student integration and involvement may not be as vital to

persistence as the role of enacted social support. Theories of student integration and involvement focus attention on structural as opposed to functional factors regarding persistence. This implication suggests that Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of retention, with emphasis on influences external to campus, was likely more suitable for community college university transfer students than models emphasizing integration or involvement.

Implications for Practice

Findings from the study also have implications for practice. One of the findings was that instructional approaches are influential in fostering students' development of new sources of social support. Students indicated their preferences for and the academic benefits of icebreaker activities, group work, and discussions in class. Also cited as helpful were team projects that required students to collaborate outside of class. Working on team projects and studying together were referenced as forums that extended learning beyond class. Instructors who implement those instructional approaches will most likely help students strengthen their social support and enrich their learning experiences.

Another implication for practice is related to the role of the institution in encouraging the establishment of support among students. The implication is that providing environments on campus that invite student interaction is important. The incorporation of campus green spaces that are aesthetically pleasing and include seating areas is an example of a practice that invites student interaction. Other considerations might include the creative use of space, furniture, and décor in the cafeteria, vending areas, and library study rooms. Those efforts might positively influence the use of

campus green spaces and meeting areas. Inviting student interaction might also be achieved by considering students' schedules in relation to breaks between class sessions. Many of the participants noted the benefits of meeting with classmates just before and right after class sessions. Having a few extra minutes between classes on a commuter campus might help foster supportive interactions among students that could contribute to their success.

Implications for Policy

The present study also has implications for policy. Students' identification of the vital role of social support as a contributor to persistence provides a focal point for policies designed to enhance the student experience. One example of this implication is the suggestion that new student orientation sessions occur in small groups that are interactive and emphasize the support students will receive. Orientation sessions that enable students to meet one another, that emphasize the shared goals of students, and that introduce students to institutional support services would emphasize to students a supportive environment. The present study revealed that only about one-half of the participants attended new student orientation. Those participants who attended orientation recalled facilitators reviewing basic facts about campus instead of emphasizing a supportive campus environment. A policy implication is to examine the intake of new students to determine how the first impressions of campus might reinforce the institution's intent to provide and facilitate the development of support.

Another implication for policy is the need to examine how academic programs could help students capitalize on social support. An example is the implementation of

learning communities through linked courses. The transient nature of commuter campuses, which is characteristic of most community colleges, limits the amount of time that students can spend together. Participants indicated that they developed a number of transient school friends through their courses. Often those relationships did not progress beyond discussion of course-related topics, usually due to lack of time. Through the implementation of learning communities, linked courses could provide deeper levels of supportive interactions. First, students' establishment of mutually supportive relationships would not be left to chance. Through linked courses, students' interactions with others could be reinforced systematically. Secondly, the interaction of faculty members teaching linked courses could further model the role of supportive relationships and extend the supportive atmosphere across multiple classes. By coordinating learning communities in advance the college could help establish a built-in network of support for students. To date some linked courses have been implemented in the institutional setting and preliminary data indicate that students participating in those courses have experienced higher rates of persistence. The specific causes for those students' higher than average persistence rates have not been pinpointed. Findings from the present study, however, support the idea that learning communities developed through linked courses is a promising idea for further policy consideration.

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study. Due to the study's qualitative design, the findings were not intended to be applicable in other institutional settings. Conducting the study within a single institutional setting limits the applicability

of the findings in other settings. Also, the data collected were self-reported and included the inherent biases of the participants.

Another limitation was the age range of the participants. Although age was not utilized as a criterion for participant selection, the average age of participants in this study was 20. The average age of students enrolled in the institutional setting was 25. The results, therefore, may not be representative of older students in the institutional setting.

A third limitation of the study was the role of the researcher as instrument. As an employee of the institution where the study was conducted, students could have filtered their responses due to the interviewer's position at the institution. Although steps were taken to put interviewees at ease and to emphasize confidentiality, interviewees' knowledge of the position held by the interviewer might have affected their responses.

Recommendations for Future Research

The exploratory nature of this study led to the discovery of a number of ideas for future research. The following recommendations for future research are offered in the interest of continued research on the role of social support in community college student persistence.

One recommendation for future research is to study the role of social support as it relates to a wider range of student types. For example, one might investigate the role of social support in the persistence of students in majors other than university transfer. Another suggestion is to examine the role of social support in the experiences of first-generation college students, part-time students, or evening students. Also of interest is determining how the types and functions of social support vary with students across age

categories. Though age was not considered as a criterion for participants in the present study, the participants were between the ages of 18 and 26. Many community college students are over the age of 26, so knowing how social support varies across age in relation to persistence would be valuable.

Related to the phenomenon of social support are some student programs that foster interaction among students. Some community colleges utilize learning communities in which certain courses are linked. A suggestion for future research is to examine the role of social support as experienced by students participating in linked courses. Because students in linked courses have the opportunity to spend more time together in class, examining the possible progression of their relationships is of interest. Similarly, some academic programs at community colleges result in the creation of a cohort of students who take many of their courses together over a one- or two-year period. Examples include allied health programs with a clinical component as well as other programs that utilize cohort scheduling. Future research might include investigating the dynamics of social support as related to persistence within students' cohort experiences.

The present study revealed that some instructional approaches are effective in fostering interaction among students and encourage students to support one another. Future research might examine the role of specific pedagogical approaches in contributing to students' development of social support. The purpose of research on instructional approaches that foster interaction would be to go beyond mere discussion of providing interactive instruction. The focus would need to be on the enacted social

support that students experienced as a result of various instructional approaches and the effects or influences of new sources of social support.

A final recommendation for future research is to explore negative cases of social support. Identifying the positive contribution of social support in the persistence experiences of students leads one to question the extent to which the absence of social support leads to attrition. A suggestion for future research is to conduct a study on the experiences of students who withdrew from the community college to determine how the lack of social support might have influenced the decision to withdraw.

The research designs of the recommended studies should include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. The paucity of research on the specific role of social support in community college persistence warrants the need for numerous additional studies. Researchers who continue to explore and examine the role of social support among community college students will meaningfully broaden the existing literature. Future studies on social support and persistence will increase understanding of community college students' experiences as related to persistence. Most importantly, future research on social support and persistence will reveal ways to strengthen the rates of postsecondary goal attainment among community college students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a summary of the study, discussion of major findings, and recommendations for future research. Major aspects of the study were highlighted. Findings from data analysis were presented along with a summary of the theoretical model entitled the Students Utilizing Community College Enacted Social Support

(SUCCESS) model. The study's limitations were noted. Discussion included implications for theory, practice, and policy. The chapter concluded with recommendations for future research related to social support and community college student persistence.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

From: Rebecca Alley
Sent: Friday, December 19, 2008 11:42 AM
To: Frankie Williams
Subject: Validation of IRB protocol # IRB2008-390, entitled "Social Support and Persistence among University Transfer Students Attending a Community College: A Grounded Theory Study"

Dear Dr. Williams,

The Chair of the Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) validated the protocol identified above using Exempt review procedures and a determination was made on December 19, 2008, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt from continuing review under Category B2, based on the Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46). You may begin this study.

Please remember that no change in this research protocol can be initiated without prior review by the IRB. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. You are requested to notify the ORC when your study is completed or terminated.

Attached are documents developed by Clemson University regarding the responsibilities of Principal Investigators and Research Team Members. Please be sure these are distributed to all appropriate parties.

Good luck with your study and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions. Please use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Rebecca L. Alley, J.D.
IRB Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance
Clemson University
223 Brackett Hall
Clemson, SC 29634-5704
ralley@clemson.edu
Office Phone: 864-656-0636

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Amendment Approval

From: Rebecca Alley
Sent: Thursday, February 19, 2009 4:16 PM
To: Frankie Williams
Subject: Your amendment to IRB protocol # IRB2008-390, entitled “Social Support and Persistence among University Transfer Students Attending a Community College: A Grounded Theory Study”

Dear Dr. Williams,

The Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB)/Office of Research Compliance (ORC) reviewed your proposed amendment to the protocol identified above using Exempt review procedures. A determination was made on February 19, 2009, that the proposed activities involving human participants continue to qualify as Exempt from continuing review based on the Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46). You may begin to implement this amendment.

Please remember that no change in this research protocol can be initiated without prior review by the IRB. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events must be reported to the ORC immediately. Please notify the ORC when your study is completed or terminated.

Good luck with your study and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions. Please use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Rebecca L. Alley, J.D.
IRB Coordinator
Office of Research Compliance
Clemson University
223 Brackett Hall
Clemson, SC 29634-5704
ralley@clemson.edu
Office Phone: 864-656-0636

Appendix C

Participant Invitation Letter

Dear <student's name>:

I am a student in the Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership at Clemson University. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study on the role of social support in the experiences of students. As part of this study, I will be interviewing university transfer students attending [institutional setting].

I am inviting you to participate in this project through a voluntary and confidential interview about your experiences as a student at [institutional setting]. Specific topics to be discussed include the following: academic experiences, social experiences, sources of social support, types and functions of social support, and the role of social support as related to academic success.

Your participation will require participation in a confidential interview to be held on [institutional setting's] campus at a time convenient for you. No personally identifiable information will be collected and you will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. No discomforts, risks or stresses are foreseen throughout the interview process. The interview will last between one and two hours and will be audio-recorded. As an interview participant, you will receive a \$15 gift card redeemable at a local retail store.

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please reply to this e-mail or contact me by phone at 864.646.1559. My advisor on this research study is Dr. Frankie Keels Williams, who can be reached by phone at 864.656.1491, or e-mail, fkw@clemson.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864.656.6450.

Thank you for considering participation in this research project.

Sincerely,

S. Vinson Burdette

Appendix D

Participant Profile Form

Interviewee # _____ Date _____ Pseudonym _____

Number of miles student commutes to campus _____

Average hours per week spent working (on and/or off campus) _____

First-generation college student? _____

Previous college history (if any) _____

Age _____

Gender _____

Ethnicity _____

GPA _____

Major pursuing at destination institution _____

Date of High School graduation or GED attainment _____

Date student entered [institutional setting] as a full-time student _____

Appendix E

Final Interview Guide

Research Questions	Interview Guide Questions
What are the types and functions of social support among community college students?	<p>Describe how your friends and family have responded to your decision to attend college.</p> <p>Tell me how the relationships you have (friends, family, significant others) help or hinder your progress.</p> <p>Discuss the influence of your siblings on you as a student.</p> <p>Describe the influence of others (positive or negative) on your study habits.</p> <p>Describe the types of support you need as student and whether you have experienced that support as a student.</p> <p>Describe the role of your academic advisor in college.</p>
Do students rely mainly on social support relationships created while attending college or relationships that existed prior to entering college?	<p>Explain how you usually meet others on campus and what influences this process.</p> <p>Discuss the campus atmosphere as related to meeting and interacting with others.</p> <p>Describe how your relationships have changed over time.</p> <p>Describe the differences in social interactions in the following: (a) people you knew prior to entering college, and (b) people you met after entering college</p>
What instructional approaches contribute to students' development of social support?	<p>Think about your first week on campus and describe what you remember about your first week experiences (in and out of class).</p> <p>Describe the influence of your course work as related to interacting with other students.</p> <p>Describe the influence of your course work as related to interacting with instructors and other faculty and staff.</p> <p>Explain how the various approaches of your instructors have affected your interactions with other students in your classes.</p> <p>Describe the level of interaction with your instructor and classmates in any online courses that you have taken.</p>

<p>What influences the formation of social support relationships?</p>	<p>Describe how your living arrangements have affected your social interactions and relationships.</p> <p>Think about entering as a new student and describe the role of the institution as related to your social interactions.</p> <p>Describe the sources you are most likely to turn to for support and how those sources came to be the ones you regard as supportive.</p> <p>Explain the factors that have most influenced your interactions with others.</p> <p>Describe your use of online social networking sites.</p>
<hr/>	
<p>What explains the social support behaviors of community college students?</p>	<p>Prior to attending [the institution], describe what you were expecting to experience as a student?</p> <p>Describe the factors that affect how you choose to spend time (on and off campus) when you are not in class.</p> <p>Explain whether you feel that you fit in at [the institution] and the factors that have influenced this view.</p> <p>Describe your views regarding why students are supportive or not supportive of one another.</p> <p>Describe your views about your personal growth and development. How have those changes affected your interactions with others?</p> <p>Discuss what you regard as a favorite experience in college.</p>

Appendix F

Member Check: Phase One

Dear Research Participant,

I appreciate your previous participation in my research study on student experiences at [institutional setting].

I am attaching the text transcript from our interview session. I would appreciate your looking over the transcript to make sure the information is accurate. If you would like to make any changes or additions to the content, please let me know.

You can contact me by replying to this e-mail or by calling me at 864.617.6209 (office/mobile).

Regards,
Vinson

Appendix G

Member Check: Phase Two

Dear Research Participant,

Thanks again for participating in the research project on student experiences at [institutional setting].

As we discussed during the interview session, I am following up with you regarding my tentative findings from the study. I am attaching a PDF document that includes the following: (a) a visual diagram depicting factors contributing to student persistence, and (b) a brief narrative explanation of the model.

Please review the attached document. I welcome any feedback you have regarding the visual diagram and the description of the theoretical model. Your input will be helpful as I seek to better understand and represent the data that participants provided.

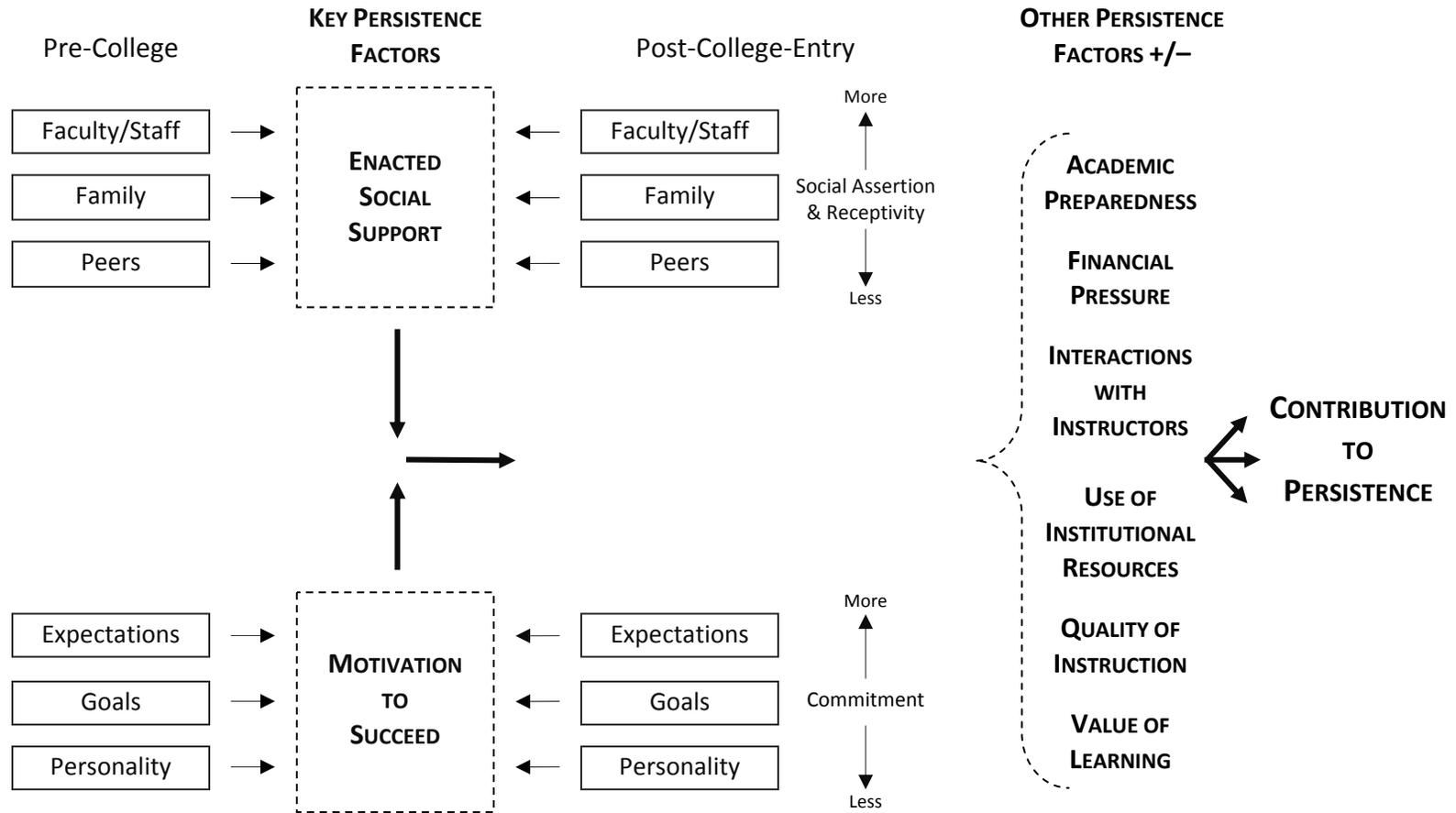
I would appreciate a reply to let me know that you received this e-mail and the attached document. If you have any comments, questions, or suggestions, please send them via your e-mail reply or contact me at 864.617.6209 (office/mobile).

I appreciate your participation and input.

Regards,
Vinson

[The attachment is on the following page.]

A Theoretical Model of Social Support and Other Factors Related to Persistence



Description of the Model

Key Persistence Factors

After analyzing data from all student interviews and the card sort activity, the researcher identified motivation to succeed and enacted social support as the two key factors contributing to student persistence. Those two factors are shown in the “Key Persistence Factors” column in the model. Motivation to succeed is defined as students’ personal motivation to achieve their educational goals. Enacted social support is defined as what others say and do to support students.

To the left and right of the key persistence factors are two major of influences: (a) relationships and influences that existed prior to students entering college (“Pre-College”), and (b) relationships and influences associated with students after they entered college (“Post-College-Entry”). The pre-college and post-college influences on the key persistence factors are discussed below.

Enacted Social Support

As shown in the model, pre-college influences on enacted social support were faculty and staff, family, and peers. Those were the three categories of support types that emerged from the data analysis. In the pre-college column, faculty and staff represent high school teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors. Family includes immediate and extended family members. The peer category in the pre-college column represents relationships with peers that existed prior to college.

Post-college entry influences on enacted social support are shown as faculty and staff, family, and peers. In the post-college-entry column, faculty and staff represent

those at the college. Family includes immediate and extended family members providing support while the student is in college. The peer category in the post-college-entry column represents new peer relationships established in college. Types of peer relationships include school friends, work friends, significant others, and close friends.

The post-college-entry column also includes a range of social assertion and receptivity to new relationships. Participants indicated that they were more or less outgoing and more or less receptive to establishing new relationships. The range of social assertion and receptivity represents the variation in students regarding the effort to meet and/or obtain support from others. Students with high levels of social assertion and receptivity established more relationships with others who provided support.

Motivation to Succeed

Pre-college influences on motivation to succeed are shown as expectations, goals, and personality. Based on data analysis, those were the three factors influencing motivation. In the pre-college column, the expectations category represents students' expectations prior to attending college as well as the expectations placed on them by others. The goals category represents the students' goals prior to attending college. Personality represents personality influences prior to students attending college.

Post-college-entry influences on motivation to succeed are shown as expectations, goals, and personality. In the post-college-entry column, the expectations category represents students' expectations after attending college as well as the expectations placed on them by others. The goals category represents students' goals after attending college. Personality represents personality influences after students entered college.

The post-college-entry column also includes a range of commitment. Participants indicated that they became more or less committed to their educational goals as a result of their experiences attending college. The range of commitment represents the variation in commitment levels student experienced after entering college. Students with a high level of commitment to their educational goals were more motivated to succeed than those with a lower level of commitment.

Other Persistence Factors

In addition to the key persistence factors, the model shows the influence of secondary persistence factors. Based on the card sort activity, the following were included as other persistence factors: (a) academic preparedness, (b) financial pressure, (c) interactions with instructors, (d) use of institutional resources, (e) quality of instruction, and (f) the value of learning. Although some students selected one of the secondary persistence factors as the most important contributor to persistence, the model is designed to reflect the experiences of students overall.

Visualizing all the Elements

As shown in the model, the two key persistence factors, enacted social support and motivation to succeed, are the main contributors to persistence. The directional arrows indicate their contribution to persistence. The other persistence factors are secondary in influence but they affect persistence as well. The three clustered arrows indicate that the combination of influence from the key persistence factors and the secondary persistence factors contribute to persistence.

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