ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS AT A SMALL, PRIVATE,
FAITH-BASED UNIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FACTORS
PROMOTING PERSISTENCE TO THE FOURTH YEAR

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by
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presented by Dana Lynn Steward,
a candidate for the degree of doctor of education in educational leadership,
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, W. J. and Ann Steward. From my youth, they promoted the value of education. Their example of dedication, hard work, self-sacrifice, deep faith, and enduring love inspire me. Without their unending love, support, and encouragement, I would not be who I am. I am forever grateful for them and to them.

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ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS AT A SMALL, PRIVATE,
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the factors that promoted and the factors that impeded persistence to the fourth year for students who were considered academically at-risk when they entered college. Eighteen participants took part in this basic qualitative study, which utilized three forms of data collection: (a) interview, (b) open-ended survey, and (c) reflective writing. The researcher piloted the data collection tools, along with analyzing data as it was gathered, to ensure the research questions were being answered. Upon the completion of data collection, the researcher utilized inductive, constant comparative analysis, which resulted in the identification of emerging themes. The study's findings indicated persistence is fostered by care and support from within and outside the institution and through participants making connections to the campus and adjusting in ways that demonstrates a refusal to quit. The primary barriers participants had to overcome were academic struggles, institutional impediments outside of academics, and personal obstacles. The findings highlight the need for policies and practices that foster a supportive and caring campus culture, including capitalizing on the importance of family support for this population of students.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION

Over the past couple of decades, enrollment in higher education has increased by approximately six million students (U.S. Department, 2015a). The growth in enrollment includes higher numbers of students from diverse backgrounds, such as more students from underrepresented groups and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (U.S. Department, 2015b). According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2015b), between 2000 and 2014, the enrollment of Black students increased by 2.8%, the enrollment of Hispanic students increased by 6.6%, and the enrollment of White students decreased by 12.5%. Additionally, the enrollment of students from low-income families increased approximately 12% from 2000 to 2015, while the enrollment of students from middle-income and high-income families increased only a few percentage points (U.S. Department, 2017). Students from underrepresented groups and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are also more likely to be first-generation college students, which often creates an additional perspective and challenge regarding the college experience (Chen, 2005).

As access to higher education has increased and created a more diverse student population, institutions, foundations, state governments, and the federal government have invested resources into programming designed to promote student persistence to college graduation, yet over the past 20 years graduation rates remain relatively unchanged (Seidman, 2012a; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2016), six-year college graduation rates for the 2008 cohort at all four-year Title IV receiving institutions was 59.6%, which is a 1.9% increase since the 2000 cohort. Six-year college graduation rates for the 2008 cohort at all four-year private, not-for-profit, Title IV receiving institutions was 65.4%,

which is a 0.9% increase since the 2000 cohort (U.S. Department, 2016). With the increased emphasis on programming and initiatives to promote persistence to graduation, it is logical to question the reasons for the minimal increase in graduation rates over the past eight years.

One viable explanation for the negligible improvement in graduation rates is the number of academically unprepared students entering college, including students from underrepresented groups, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and first-generation college students (Chen, 2005). The likelihood of collegiate academic success is based on the quality of a student's preparation in high school (Adelman, 2006; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Radunzel, 2016; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). Data from ACT (2016) reflected the lack of adequate preparation for college in that only 26% of the 2016 high school graduates who took the ACT met the college and career readiness benchmarks in all four content areas represented on the exam. Conversely, 34% of the 2016 high school graduates who took the ACT failed to meet the college and career readiness benchmarks in any of the four content areas (ACT, 2016). In comparison, 2010 ACT data indicated that 24% of 2010 high school graduates who took the ACT met the readiness benchmarks in all four content areas, while 28% did not meet the readiness benchmarks in any area (ACT, 2010). This demonstrates that, based on ACT college and career readiness benchmarks, a noticeable percentage of high school graduates are not adequately prepared to earn a grade of C in entry-level general education courses and that percentage is increasing (ACT, 2016). Unfortunately, this lack of adequate preparation is a significant contributor to a lack of student persistence

and to low college graduation rates (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008).

A student's preparation for college course work can be measured with additional factors beyond the ACT or other standardized test scores. In fact, several studies indicated that standardized test scores and high school grade point average (GPA) are both strong predictors of college graduation (Adelman, 2006; Astin, 1993; Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011). Astin and Oseguera (2005), along with Franke (2012), found that the combination of high school GPA and standardized test scores is a more powerful predictor of persistence than either factor individually. Students entering college with low standardized test scores and a low high school GPA are eight times less likely to graduate from college than those with high test scores and a high GPA (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Research from ACT (2012) revealed that 44% of students with a below average ACT score persisted to the fourth year of college at the same institution with which they entered, which means this group of students persists to the fourth year at a lower rate than the national average for six-year graduation at all Title IV receiving institutions, which was 59.6% (U.S. Department, 2016). Research by Moore (2015) indicated that it is important for institutions to have an understanding of the complex experiences of at-risk students. Additionally, Nora and Crisp (2012) stated that, while research regarding first-year student retention is ubiquitous, institutions should seek to understand the factors that promote persistence and those that are barriers to persistence for individual students beyond the first year. With this in mind, this study focused on the experiences of students who persisted to at least the fourth year of college even though,

based on high school GPA and ACT or SAT score, they entered college at risk of not persisting.

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned previously, students who lack adequate academic preparation for college persist to graduation at lower rates than students who are more prepared for collegiate course work (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Kinzie et al., 2008). Additionally, there is a lack of understanding regarding the experiences of academically at-risk students who persist to the fourth year within the broader literature, as well as in the particular context of a small, private, faith-based, Midwestern university. This section will address a local problem of practice, along with discussing the gap in the literature related to this topic.

The growing use of graduation rate as a key performance indicator increases the pressure on individual institutions to retain and graduate as many students as possible (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011). The university serving as the site for this study has a 2009 six-year graduation rate of 50.0%, which is below the national average of 65.4% for four-year private, not-for-profit institutions (U.S. Department, n.d.). When considering graduation rates based on the percent of applicants accepted, which is 90% at the site institution, the institution's graduation rate is consistent with the national average for similar institutions (U.S. Department, 2016).

While the site institution's graduation rate may not be considered low, a review of institutional data regarding persistence and graduation rates revealed that students who are academically at-risk upon matriculation to the first year persist and graduate at noticeably lower rates compared to students who are not academically at-risk (see Table

1). This data is consistent with the research stating that students who are not academically prepared for college persist and graduate at lower rates (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Kinzie et al., 2008). Yet, as reflected by the institutional data, some students who enter this university academically underprepared persist to the fourth year and to graduation even though their high school academic performance indicates that they may struggle to do so (Adelman, 2006; Astin, 1993; Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Attewell et al., 2011; Franke 2012). The institution in this study lacks an understanding of the factors that promote or impede persistence among students who are academically at-risk upon matriculation to their first year, but who persist to their fourth year.

Table 1

Persistence and Graduation Rates for At-Risk (AR) and Not At-Risk (NAR) Students

	First year		Second year		Third year		Fourth year		Graduate in six years	
Cohort	AR	NAR	AR	NAR	AR	NAR	AR	NAR	AR	NAR
Fall 2007	104	302	41 (39.4%)	237 (78.5%)	27 (26.0%)	209 (69.2%)	21 (20.2%)	183 (60.6%)	19 (18.3%)	188 (62.3%)
Fall 2008	123	325	60 (48.8%)	248 (76.3%)	36 (29.3%)	215 (66.2%)	30 (24.4%)	203 (62.5%)	24 (19.5%)	204 (62.8%)
Fall 2009	132	325	73 (55.3%)	240 (73.8%)	47 (35.6%)	204 (62.8%)	43 (32.6%)	194 (59.7%)	36 (27.3%)	194 (59.7%)
Fall 2010	146	289	56 (38.4%)	215 (74.4%)	37 (25.3%)	190 (65.7%)	35 (24.0%)	170 (58.8%)	31 (21.2%)	179 (61.9%)
Fall 2011	130	313	57 (43.8%)	240 (76.7%)	29 (22.3%)	213 (68.1%)	29 (22.3%)	197 (62.9%)	24 (18.5%)	200 (63.9%)
Total	635	1,556	287 (45.2%)	1180 (75.8%)	176 (27.7%)	1,031 (66.3%)	158 (24.9%)	947 (60.9%)	134 (21.1%)	965 (62.0%)

Note. Graduation rate includes associate degrees.

While there is an abundance of literature regarding first-year student retention, there are a limited number of studies regarding the persistence of academically at-risk

students to the fourth year (Nora & Crisp, 2012). Additionally, studies regarding student retention and persistence are most often quantitative. A review of published work yielded very few results related to the purpose of this study. There are two qualitative studies of academically at-risk student persistence to the fourth year at faith-based institutions; however, both studies examine persistence in different ways than this study, specifically in terms of the definition of at-risk, the conceptual framework, and the geographic location of the study. The use of different frameworks results in a distinctively different approach and perspective for those studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Zomer's (2006) study considered the role of mentoring as a part the experiences of academically at-risk students as they persisted to the eighth semester, while Larsen's (2014) study had a component of the study that focused on the role of achievement motivation in at-risk student persistence. Larsen's (2014) study also defined academically at-risk as students who met two at-risk criteria—one that was related to high school academic performance and the other included at least one of three possible additional factors: (a) being Pell-eligible, (b) being a first-generation student, and/or (c) being affiliated with an underrepresented group. Additionally, Larsen's study was conducted in a different region of the United States than that of this study. As a result, little is known, both locally and within the broader research context, about the experiences of students who are considered academically at-risk, based on a combination of their high school GPA and ACT or SAT score, yet persist to the fourth year at a small, Midwestern, faith-based institution.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Much of the student retention and student persistence research has focused on the reasons students leave institutions, rather than the factors that contribute to students remaining enrolled (Tinto, 2012a). While it may seem that understanding student departure provides a sufficient context for student persistence, being aware of reasons students leave does not translate into opportunities to help students persist (Padilla, 1999). In fact, institutions need to understand the experiences of students who persist in order to ensure the use of appropriate institutional actions that promote persistence (Braxton et al., 2014; Padilla, 1999; Tinto, 2012b). Additional research indicated the need to study persistence within the local setting in order to understand the influence of the organizational and peer contexts on persistence at a specific institution (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Reason, 2009).

With the above research in mind, this study fulfills two purposes. First, the study is designed to provide an understanding of the factors that promoted and the factors that impeded persistence for students who entered college as academically at-risk at a small, private, faith-based university in the Midwest. Additionally, this study adds to the body of research regarding the experiences of academically at-risk students who persisted to the fourth year at small, private, faith-based institutions in the Midwest through the lens of an adapted version of Reason's (2009) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence. As a result, the research questions guiding this study were:

- For students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based university as academically at-risk, which factors contributed to their persistence to the fourth year?

- For students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based university as academically at-risk, which factors impeded their persistence to the fourth year?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework serving as the lens for this study is an adapted version of Reason's (2009) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence. Terenzini and Reason (2005) originally developed this model to demonstrate the factors influencing learning and persistence of first-year college students; however, from the initial development of the model, Terenzini and Reason noted that it could be used as a framework to study persistence beyond the first year. The original model focused on how institutional characteristics and the overall student experience influences student outcomes, such as learning and persistence (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

Terenzini and Reason used a combination of the dominant college student retention theories, including Astin (1985, 1993), Tinto (1975, 1993), and Pascarella (1985), along with the seven Foundational Dimensions regarding student success and persistence in the first year, which were developed by the Foundations of Excellence in the First Year of College Project, to develop their model. This section will provide a background for the original model, an explanation of the revisions made by Reason in 2009, a description of the four components within Reasons (2009) model, along with the rationale and explanation of an additional component within the framework specifically for this study.

The basis for the original model was the need to consider multiple factors that influence college student outcomes (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Terenzini and Reason (2005) stated that other models and theories focused on only a few factors related to persistence, while this model attempts to incorporate the breadth of factors identified as

important to persistence. Overall, the model posited that a student possesses a set of traits based on his or her individual characteristics and pre-college experiences (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). The student's college outcomes are then informed by the unique individual he or she is and the way in which he or she interacts within the institution's environment, the formal and informal learning opportunities offered, and the people who make up the institution, both faculty and peers (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

In 2009, the model was revised by Reason (2009) with the emphasis solely on the student outcome of persistence. The focus on the outcome of persistence was due to the desire to make sense of the vast amount of literature regarding college student persistence (Reason, 2009). The other most notable change was the removal of the student precollege characteristics and experience of personal and social experiences and a specified commitment to the concept of student dispositions, which was not as prominent in Terenzini and Reason's original model (Reason, 2009). Reason (2009) cited several studies, such as a meta-analysis by Robbins et al. (2004) and a study by Tross, Harper, Osher, and Kneidinger (2000), regarding the positive relationship between psychological concepts and student persistence as the rationale for the continued inclusion of student dispositions in the model.

The conceptual framework for this study is an adapted version of Reason's (2009) model (see Figure 1). Reason's model consisted of four components that address the factors influencing a student's persistence decisions. The four constructs are: (a) pre-college characteristics, (b) organizational context, (c) peer environment, and (d) individual student experiences. Pre-college characteristics include the traits and experiences a student possesses as he or she begins college (Reason, 2009). These

characteristics include a student's: (a) sociodemographic traits, such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and parental education level; (b) academic preparation and performance, such as individual student grades and test scores, along with the quality of a student's high school curriculum; and, (c) student dispositions, such as a student's goals and achievement motivation (Reason, 2009). Organizational context is primarily focused on organizational behaviors, such as the institutional programs, policies, and overall culture, which all tend to influence student persistence decisions (Reason, 2009). The peer environment component considers the role of the student body's attitudes, perspectives, and values and how they influence a student's integration and sense of belonging (Reason, 2009). The final component, individual student experiences, considers the experiences that are unique to each student and is divided into: (a) curricular experiences, such as the sequencing of courses and the student's choice of major; (b) classroom experiences, such as teaching pedagogies and supportive classroom environments; and, (c) out-of-class experiences, such as involvement in co-curricular activities, study groups, and interactions with faculty, staff, or students outside of the classroom (Reason, 2009).

In order to provide a more comprehensive lens for this study, the researcher added an external factors component to the adapted model. Reason's (2009) model primarily focused on the institutional factors that influence student persistence and included external factors in the out-of-class experiences component. Because external factors, such as the influence of parents, non-college friends, and working off-campus (Tinto 1975, 1993), are separate from the institutional experiences, for the purpose of this study, external factors has been added as an independent component. Braxton, Hirschy, and

McClendon (2004) stated that support from significant people in the lives of college students, along with an awareness of how the decision to be enrolled in college affects the important people in the student's life has an influence on a student's persistence decisions. Weidman (1989) described external factors as two groups—parents and non-college reference groups, such as peers and employers. While, Weidman's research does not directly assess the outcome of student persistence, it provides a context for the parameters of external factors. Additionally, a student's engagement in work, either on-campus or off-campus, is another external factor that also influences the college

Figure 1. A comprehensive model of the factors influencing college student persistence. Adapted from “An Examination of Persistence Research through the Lens of a Comprehensive Conceptual Framework,” by R. D. Reason, 2009, *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), p. 661. *The current researcher added this construct.

experience and enrollment decisions (Mayhew et al., 2016). Models of college student retention by Bean and Eaton (2000), Braxton et al. (2004, 2014), and Tinto (1975, 1993) all include the influence of external factors on student persistence.

The adapted model shown in Figure 1 serves as the basis and lens for this study. As the researcher explores the factors that promoted or impeded persistence to the fourth year of college for academically at-risk students, the data collection tools and the data analysis utilized the model to provide guidance and clarity. Overall, the model provided a foundation in persistence research that allowed the researcher to connect this study and its findings to existing knowledge and to potentially provide an expanded understanding of persistence of academically at-risk students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Design of the Study

This study utilized a qualitative methodology to facilitate an understanding of the factors promoting or impeding the persistence of academically at-risk college students to the fourth year. Padilla (1999) stated that understanding the factors that promote persistence among at-risk students requires the use of qualitative research. Specifically, this study used the basic qualitative method, which is appropriate for this study because its “overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). This section outlines the design of the study by discussing the setting, participants, data collection tools, and data analysis process.

Setting

The setting for this study was a small, private, faith-based university in the Midwestern United States. The institution offers associate, bachelor, master, and

doctoral degrees, with an approximate enrollment of 850 graduate students and 2,600 undergraduate students (Organizational website, 2017). The university has four campuses, with the main campus, which has approximately 1,400 undergraduate students, as the setting for this study (Organizational website, 2017). The institution was formed as a two-year college in the late 1800s, but grew to offer bachelor degrees in the 1960s (Organizational website, 2017). The institution moved from being a college to a university in the early 1980s and currently offers two doctoral degrees, one specialist degree, nine master degrees, and over 60 bachelor degrees (Organizational website, 2017). Throughout its history and to the present day, the university is distinctively Christian with ties to a specific denomination (Organizational website, 2017).

The organizational structure of the university is consistent with a traditional hierarchical bureaucracy, with the board of trustees at the apex, followed by the president, and then an executive cabinet, of which the members oversee the various units that make up the total organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Manning, 2013). Specific to this study, student persistence is the responsibility of the dean of enrollment management (Organizational documents, n.d.). The dean coordinates with other entities on campus, such as the provost and the director of the first-year experience program, regarding the development and implementation of persistence initiatives. Additionally, the student retention coordinator, who reports to the dean of enrollment management, serves as a liaison between faculty, residence life, and students regarding identifying students at-risk of not persisting and coordinating intervention services.

While the responsibility for student persistence is relatively centralized within enrollment management and the first-year experience program, a broader emphasis

regarding the need to foster student persistence has occurred over the past few years. Recently, a new academic program review process and a new provost have increased awareness of the need to use initiatives promoting student persistence within academic programs. Additionally, the president formed a task force solely focused on increasing student persistence through the identification of barriers, the development of intervention strategies, and the identification of opportunities for fostering student engagement. The results of this study provide an understanding of the factors that promoted the persistence of academically at-risk students to the fourth year, along with factors that impeded persistence. This understanding will help the institution make informed decisions regarding the factors within institutional control related to the persistence of this student population.

Participants

The participants for this study were current, full-time students with an institutional scholarship rating (ISR) of 70 or less and who were enrolled in at least their fourth year of college. The participants started their college career at the institution and maintained continuous enrollment. Due to their ISR of 70 or lower, the participants were considered academically at-risk upon entry to the institution.

As is consistent with most qualitative research, the study utilized purposive sampling, due to the need for the participants to fit the specific ISR, continuous enrollment, and years of enrollment requirements (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Maximum variation sampling was used to select the participants for the interview portion of the study. As stated by Seidman (2013), “maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for

interview studies” (p. 56). This type of sampling matches well with qualitative research due to providing the opportunity to gather data from participants with varying perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2012). The interview participants were selected based on the following characteristics: (a) differing high school academic performance, such as a low ACT score with high GPA, low GPA with a high ACT score, a low ACT score with a low GPA, or a high ACT score and GPA for this population of students; or (b) varying sociodemographic characteristics, such as, race, gender, and Pell Grant eligibility.

Individual demographic data was gathered for participants in each of phase of data collection. The demographic data included the student’s gender, race/ethnicity, eligibility for the Pell Grant, and first-generation status. For the interviews, demographic data was gathered through the site institution’s student information system, with the exception of first-generation status, which the researcher collected during the interview. For the participants who completed the survey and reflective writing portions of the study, the data collection instruments had questions that collected the students’ demographic information. A description of the demographic make-up of the participants for each phase of data collection is included in section five.

The participants were involved in at least one of the following forms of data collection: (a) interviews, (b) an electronic survey that included reflective writing, or (c) an electronic survey only. The first phase of data collection involved interviewing eight participants. The 18 students within the population who did not participant in an interview were invited to participate in the second phase of data collection, a qualitative electronic survey, which included the survey and the reflective writing portions of data

collection. Once no more surveys with reflective writing were being completed, the students who had not yet responded were invited to participate in the third phase of data collection, which was the survey only, with the opportunity to opt into the reflective writing portion.

In order to promote participation in the study, the researcher called students to invite them to participate in each phase of data collection (see Appendix A for the recruitment scripts). For the interview portion, the purpose of the call was to invite participation and to schedule the interview; however, for the survey with reflective writing and the survey only, the purpose of the call was to inform the student of the study and to alert him or her about the invitation to participate he or she will receive. The survey and reflective writing and survey only links were delivered to qualifying students through institutional email. Students were reminded of the opportunity to participate in the various phases of data collection through email, text messages, and phone calls.

Data Collection

The first step in the data collection process was to obtain permission to conduct research through the local institutional review board (IRB) and the IRB at the University of Missouri. IRB approval ensures that the rights of human subjects are maintained within the study and that the researcher is aware of the potential risks and benefits to the participants (Creswell, 2012; Seidman, 2013). Additionally, the IRB approval process requires a description of the method the researcher will use to obtain informed consent (Creswell, 2012). In order to ensure participants are aware of the nature of the study and of their rights as participants, informed consent will be collected at the beginning of each phase of data collection (see Appendix B for informed consent; Seidman, 2013).

Once IRB approval is granted, the researcher engaged in data collection. In an effort to answer the research questions, the researcher used multiple tools to gain an understanding of the experiences that influenced student persistence to the fourth year of college (see Appendix C for the data collection tools) (Creswell, 2014). Prior to data collection, the researcher piloted the data collection tools with three to four college students, depending on the tool, who will not be participating in the study. These students were a part of the general population at the site institution and did not meet the criteria for inclusion in this study. The purpose of piloting the tools was to confirm that they were worded in a manner that elicited thorough responses describing experiences that influenced persistence decisions, which helped ensure the participants provided data that allowed the researcher to answer the research questions (Seidman, 2013).

The initial phase of data collection involved individual interviews with participants who were selected through maximum variation sampling. The purpose of individual interviews was to gather data in order to understand and make-meaning of the experiences of academically at-risk students as they persist to their fourth year (Seidman, 2013). The interview protocol used a semi-structured format with open-ended questions that prompted students to discuss their college experiences and the factors that promoted or impeded persistence. Potential follow-up questions were developed using the constructs within the adopted conceptual framework for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The follow-up questions focused on the role of each of the following in student persistence: (a) pre-college characteristics of student disposition, (b) organizational context, (c) peer environment, (d) classroom experiences, (e) curricular experiences, (e) out of class experiences, and (f) external factors. The questioning route included

introductory, substantive, and closing questions (Creswell, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Additionally, the interviews were audio-recorded in order to preserve an accurate record of the participant's experiences (Creswell, 2012). Each participant was interviewed one time, and the interviews lasted from 50 to 70 minutes.

Following the interview portion of the study, an electronic qualitative survey, which also included reflective writing prompts, was emailed to all students who met the study's criteria, with the exception of those who participated in individual interviews. The purpose of the survey was to provide an opportunity for participants to provide descriptions of their feelings and perspectives (Fink, 2017). Most of the survey items were generated using the same constructs of the adopted framework as the interview portion of the study (Creswell, 2012). Additional items asked the participant to identify the factors that most promoted or impeded their persistence, along with one item inquiring about how participants overcame the impediments to persistence. The survey also gathered demographic characteristics of the participants.

The reflective writing prompts were designed to help the researcher understand the experiences that influenced enrollment decisions for students who entered the institution academically at-risk, but who have persisted to at least the fourth year. Reflective writing data was helpful in ensuring the "central phenomena" (Creswell, 2012, p. 223) of the participants is understood. The reflective writing prompts asked the participants to reflect on the factors that fostered persistence for each year of their college experiences, along with the factors that the student had to overcome in order to persist. With this in mind, the participants answered six questions, one regarding the factors promoting persistence and one related to the barriers the participant had to

navigate around in order to persist and how he or she overcame those obstacles for each transition period—first to second year, second to third year, and third to fourth year. The researcher requested that each answer range from 50 to 150 words.

For the third phase of data collection, the same survey that was sent previously was sent again; however, the survey did not include the reflective writing prompts as a part of the survey. The last item on the survey provided the opportunity for students to choose to complete the reflective writing portion of the study, but students could end their participation upon completion of the survey. The purpose of this phase of data collection was to elicit additional survey participation.

Overall, the goal of data collection was to gather enough data to reach saturation (Creswell, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data collection methods employed for this study were designed to gather varying perspectives from the participants so that a clear understanding of what promoted and what impeded persistence emerged (Creswell, 2012).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was designed to allow the researcher to answer the research questions by examining the data and developing themes that communicated the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, the initial data analysis occurred simultaneously with the data collection process (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach allowed the researcher to develop targeted questions for each phase of collection based on data collected in the previous stage (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When reviewing the individual interview data, the researcher developed memos that summarized tentative

themes, listed questions that needed to be answered, and recorded her thoughts and reflections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The information included in the memo was used to revise interview questions and in the development of questions for the survey (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the process of ongoing analysis is “both parsimonious and illuminating” (p. 197).

Upon the completion of the data collection process, this study employed an inductive, constant comparative analysis approach to data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While constant comparative analysis is often associated with grounded theory studies, Merriam & Tisdell (2016) stated that it is used broadly in all methodologies of qualitative research. The data analysis process began with initial, open coding where the researcher looked for segments of data that were connected to the research questions and recorded a word or short phrase that represented that piece of data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After initially coding the data, the researcher engaged in what is referred to by Creswell (2016) as “‘lean’ coding” (p. 158), which allowed the researcher to review the initial codes within the context of bigger segments of the data. This is similar to what Merriam and Tisdell referred to when encouraging researchers to shift between considering the “trees” (p. 208), which are small segments of data, and the “forest” (p. 208), which is the broader picture of what the data portrays. Next was the process of axial coding, which involved grouping the codes based on similarities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The axial coding process resulted in the development of themes that represent the common ideas and experiences that emerged from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the purpose of this study, the codes and

broader themes were factors that promoted or impeded the persistence of academically at-risk students to the fourth year.

The researcher used several validity strategies to promote transferability, credibility, and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014). Providing a detailed description of the setting of the study allowed readers to determine if the results of this study can be transferred to their local context (Creswell, 2013). In order to foster the credibility of the findings, the researcher used triangulation by comparing the data from interviews, surveys, and reflective writings (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, the researcher developed an audit trail to provide specific descriptions of the methods and processes employed during the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Within qualitative studies, the researcher is directly involved in data collection and data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An additional strategy for ensuring the trustworthiness of this study involves sharing the positionality of the researcher, which allows readers to understand the perspective from which the researcher is collecting and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2012, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Upon entry to her undergraduate program, the researcher was not considered an at-risk student. Her ACT score was above the national average, and she graduated in the top ten percent of her high school class. As a result, the researcher most likely does not have the same perspective regarding persisting toward a college degree. As a professional, the researcher has been involved in higher education and served as the administrator for a first-year program designed to foster student success and persistence for the past 13 years. Within that program, the researcher initiated and led the development and implementation of a program designed to provide additional academic support for students who begin their

college career with high school performance indicators that demonstrate they are academically at-risk of not persisting in college. The researcher also serves on a task force related to student success and persistence at the site institution. Due to the level of involvement with retention and persistence initiatives, even specifically for academically at-risk students, the researcher has heard a number of perspectives from students regarding factors that influenced persistence decisions. Through the use of methods that promote trustworthiness, the researcher will make every effort to ensure the findings for this study are credible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations

While the researcher made every effort to develop and conduct a trustworthy study, consistent with all research, this study includes limitations. The first limitation is that the population of participants is small, and as a result, even with the use of maximum variation sampling to select interview participants, the responses cannot be generalized and should only be considered for transferability if the institution is similar in mission, size, geography, and has comparable sociodemographic student characteristics as the participants in this study. A second limitation is the use of the ISR, which is a combination of the student's high school GPA and ACT, or SAT equivalent, score, as the way to identify a student as academically at-risk. The use of an ISR of 70 or lower was used because it will allow for enough participants in the study and because it is the qualifier for the lowest level institutional academic scholarship. While research by Astin and Oseguera (2005), along with Franke (2012), indicated that using a combination of high school GPA and entrance exam scores is a more reliable predictor of student persistence than considering only one or the other, this approach does not consider other

pre-college characteristics that could influence the degree to which a student is academically at-risk as he or she enters college.

Definitions of Key Terms

In order to clearly communicate the nature of this study, key words must be defined. In addition to the conceptual framework components, which were defined within the description of the framework, two additional terms will be defined—persistence and academically at-risk. For the purpose of this study, persistence is referring to a student who remains continuously enrolled at the institution that is the site of this study into at least the seventh semester. Additionally, for this study, academically at-risk is defined as a student who entered the institution with an institutional scholarship rating (ISR) of 70 or less. The ISR uses the combination of a student's high school grade point average (GPA) and ACT score or SAT equivalent score. A student's ISR is determined based on the following formula, which was developed by Ruffalo Noel Levitz: $ISR = (ACT \text{ score} \times 1.389) + (\text{high school GPA} \times 12.5)$ (Organizational communication, July 3, 2017). To provide a point of reference, if a student earns an ACT score of 20, which is the 50th percentile, and has a high school GPA of 3.00, the student's ISR is 65.

Significance of the Study

As mentioned previously, very few qualitative studies exist regarding the persistence of academically at-risk students to the fourth year of college. This study is the first to explore the factors that promoted or impeded persistence to the fourth year for students who are academically at-risk upon their initial enrollment at a small, private, faith-based university in the Midwest using Reason's (2009) adapted conceptual framework. This study contributes new information to the overall body of persistence

research, to the specific institution that is the site of the study, and potentially to institutions that are similar in size, geographic location, mission, and programming.

This study adds to the overall body of literature in several ways. As suggested by Moore (2015), this research uses qualitative methods to provide a multi-dimensional perspective of at-risk student experiences. This study also contributes to the overall body of literature as the first qualitative study at a small, private, faith-based university in the Midwest to explore the factors that promoted or impeded the persistence of academically at-risk students to the fourth year, along with being the first to utilize a modified version of Reason's (2009) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence with external forces added as an influence on student persistence. Furthermore, this study links the specific student experiences through the lens of the framework components, such as classroom experiences and the peer environment, and the existing literature regarding the impact of those components on student success and student persistence.

This study has several implications for the site institution and for practice in general. The outcomes of this study provide an institutional understanding of the factors that promoted at-risk student persistence to the fourth year, along with the factors that impeded persistence. This information is useful to the site institution as leaders make budgetary, facility, programmatic, and personnel decisions regarding the factors that emerged as fostering or hindering persistence for this student population (Braxton et al., 2014; Tinto, 2012b). The results of this study may also allow for transferability to other institutions of similar size, programming, and mission (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Summary

In a time when most institutions are utilizing initiatives to increase student retention and graduation rates, it seems important for institutions to understand the reasons students persist (Padilla, 1999; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Understanding the factors that influence persistence decisions allows an institution to make informed decisions regarding institutional actions designed to promote student success and persistence to graduation (Braxton et al., 2014; Padilla, 1999; Tinto, 2012b). This study provides an understanding of academically at-risk student perspectives regarding factors that promoted persistence to their fourth year, along with factors that impeded persistence. In addition to providing implications for practice within the local institution and similar institutions, this study also fills a gap in the literature regarding factors that fostered or hindered persistence for academically at-risk students at private, faith-based institutions through the lens of Reason's (2009) adapted conceptual framework.

This study utilizes a basic qualitative research methodology in an effort to understand the experiences and perspectives of academically at-risk students who persisted to the fourth year (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of a modified version of Reason's (2009) adapted Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence as the conceptual framework provided a basis from which to develop items in the interview and qualitative survey and as a lens from which to view data collected. Participants in this study were students who started their college career at the site institution as academically at-risk and who have remained continuously enrolled to the fourth year or beyond. The data collected was analyzed using an inductive, constant comparative analysis approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach resulted in the identification of the major

themes that demonstrated the factors that promoted and impeded persistence to the fourth year for academically at-risk students. The researcher utilized several strategies, such as including researcher positionality and using data triangulation, to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results.

SECTION TWO: PRACTITIONER SETTING

This study was conducted at a small, private, faith-based institution in the Midwestern United States. While this provides a general understanding of the setting of this study, in order to allow for the transferability of the study's findings, a more detailed description of the setting is needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A rich description of the research setting is part of what is required in order for readers to be able to determine the degree to which this study's setting is consistent with their context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This section provides the history and background of the site institution, an analysis of the organization and its leadership, and a discussion of the implications of this research at the site institution. Additionally, a review of the institution's structure and operations specifically related to student persistence and retention is also included.

History and Background of the Organization

The site institution was founded in the 1870s and has been distinctively Christian, with deep roots in a specific denomination, since its inception (Organizational website, 2017). Although the institution faced many hardships during its early years, due to local and denominational support, it endured and grew from a two-year college to a four-year, doctoral-granting institution (Organizational website, 2017). Currently, the university has four campuses, with the main campus in a rural, Midwestern town of approximately 10,000 people. One of the additional campuses is located in small city with a population of approximately 150,000 about 30 miles from the main campus, and the other two campuses are located in small, rural towns all of which are in the same region of the state as the main campus. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be persistence within the undergraduate population on the main campus. This section provides an overview of the institution by describing the make-up of the student body, the institution's approach

to academics and to social and spiritual development, along with a description of the institution's retention and persistence initiatives.

The University, which is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, offers associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees in over 80 areas of study (Organizational website, 2017). Approximately 3,700 students attend the institution, of which nearly 1,400 are undergraduate students on the main campus, 1,000 are undergraduate students on the other campuses, 700 are graduate students, and 600 are enrolled through special programs (Organizational website, 2017). The undergraduate student racial/ethnic composition is: (a) less than 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, (b) 4.5% Black, (c) 1.2% Hispanic, (d) less than 1% Native Alaskan/Native American, (e) 73.4% White, and (f) 19.5% unknown (Organizational website, 2017).

Students at the site institution engage in a liberal arts curriculum designed to promote the value of possessing knowledge in a broad range of topics, along with specializing in a specific field of study (Organizational documents, 2013). The liberal arts curriculum consists of a general education block, which includes studies in communication skills, humanities, social sciences, and technical studies, such as life science, computer science, and physical science (Organizational documents, 2017). Additionally, students complete three courses that are specific to the institution's faith-centered approach, along with a health and wellness course (Organizational documents, 2017). Students also complete the course requirements for their specific major. The requirements for majors vary, but typically range from 36 to 60 hours of coursework, which may include internships and/or practicum experiences (Organizational documents, 2017).

The site institution identifies as a teaching institution that places an emphasis on interactions with students in the classroom and through academic advisement (Organizational documents, 2013). Faculty workload typically consists of 12 hours of teaching each semester (Organizational documents, 2017). Additionally, most faculty members serve as academic advisors (Organizational documents, 2013). Due to an emphasis on teaching, the class sizes are intentionally small, with an average of 24 students per class and a student-to-faculty ratio of 16:1 (Organizational website, 2017). Effective teaching practices are supported through the work of the associate provost for teaching and learning, who offers professional development for all faculty each semester, along with being available for individual consultation regarding effective teaching (Organizational documents, 2017). While the institution is focused on teaching, faculty are encouraged to engage in research, although it is not specifically required of all faculty (Organizational documents, 2013).

In addition to promoting the academic growth of students, the site institution encourages the social and spiritual development of students (Organizational website, 2017). The main campus is primarily a residential campus, which provides opportunities for students to develop relationships with each other, along with faculty and staff. Social development is fostered through interactions with other members of the campus community (Organizational website, 2017). These interactions may take place through the residence halls, campus clubs and organizations, faith-based activities, academics, campus activities, or athletic events (Organizational website, 2017). In addition to issues of faith being integrated into individual classes, students also have the opportunity to engage in activities that promote spiritual growth. These activities include several

weekly campus-wide events, small group involvement, along with campus-sponsored service projects that take place locally, nationally, and internationally (Organizational website, 2017). The institution places a high value on student involvement in activities promoting spiritual development and demonstrates that by requiring students to participate in a certain number of activities as a degree requirement (Organizational document, 2017).

In an effort to promote student retention and persistence, the institution developed and implemented several specific programs and positions over the past 20 years. A first-year student transition program was implemented on the main campus in 2002. The faculty members in the first-year area teach two general education courses related to helping students transition to collegiate academics and to the campus community. Additionally, the faculty members serve as academic advisors for first-year students. In the advising role, faculty members ensure students are placed in the correct classes for their intended major, meet with students who have deficient grades, and help students understand their degree and career options. In 2013, the institution also added a student retention coordinator position. This position is responsible for coordinating retention efforts for sophomores through seniors and for gathering and tracking retention data. In the fall of 2016, the first-year program developed and implemented an additional student success support program targeted specifically at first-year students with the lowest high school academic performance indicators. This program provides required academic support for at-risk students using peer mentors to serve as guides and to help students utilize best practices related to studying and learning. During the 2017-2018 academic year, the president developed a task force to explore opportunities to increase student

retention on the main campus. This task force is charged with identifying barriers to student retention, developing interventions for at-risk students, and designing opportunities for increased student engagement.

Organizational Analysis

The organizational structure of the institution is equivalent to a simple hierarchy with the board of trustees at the top of the apex, following by the president, and then the executive cabinet, of which the members oversee the various institutional units (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The president and executive cabinet are responsible for balancing the tension that exists, as it does in all organizations, between differentiation and integration (Bolman & Deal, 2013). As a part of balancing the distinct differences in roles within the organization and the need for collaborative work toward a common mission, the president and executive cabinet work to ensure effective operations and use of resources, manage the institution's interactions within the internal and external environment, and use their understanding of institutional operations and the environment to formulate strategic plans (Mintzberg, 1979/2005).

The executive cabinet members oversee the implementation of the strategic plan through the coordination of institutional units. These units are similar to what Mintzberg (1979) refers to as functional groups, which are developed based on the knowledge or skill of a specific area. Primarily, these units, such as academic colleges or administrative departments, are managed vertically through institutional policies, procedures, and assessment strategies (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

While many of the institutional operations are directed vertically, lateral coordination also occurs within the institution. Faculty and staff both have bodies that

provide for shared governance and give a voice for both entities. Additionally, the use of task forces, university committees, and across-unit meetings all provide an opportunity for the operations of the institutions to be guided by a less hierarchical format (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

With an understanding of the institutional structure provided above, an overall analysis of the institution reveals that the institution is characterized by the interwoven nature of its structure, personnel policies and culture, political landscape, and symbols and traditions (Bolman & Deal, 2013). While units within the institution may have differing priorities and approaches to their work, holistically, the institution is committed to living out its mission. Institutional leadership consistently provides reminders to employees regarding the stated mission, and decision-making processes regularly utilize the mission as a guide. The focus on the institutional mission provides common ground for operations and relationships, but, as an enrollment-driven institution, competition also exists. Much of the competition is based on attempts to gain limited financial resources to fulfill individual unit or program agendas. As a result, it is somewhat common for there to be conflict and contests for power (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

The leadership of the institution recognizes the need for additional resources. As an enrollment-driven institution, the primary way in which financial resources can be augmented is through increased enrollment and retention. The institution operates with a centralized system for overseeing retention and persistence rates, with the dean of enrollment management, who serves on executive cabinet, as the position charged with the overall authority and responsibility. First-year retention rates are specifically the responsibility of the first-year transition program, which is an academic program

designed to assist first-year student in their transition to the institution. The relationship between the dean of enrollment management and the first-year program director is not formally designated by the organizational structure. The interactions between the two positions are an example of the unofficial, loosely coupled relationships that often exist within organizations (Weick, 1978/1983). Retention rates for students who are not in their first year are overseen by a position within enrollment management that is titled, student retention coordinator. The student retention coordinator, who reports directly to the dean of enrollment management, works with sophomores, juniors, and seniors who are considering leaving the institution and coordinates and communicates with faculty and staff regarding students who are demonstrating behavior that puts them at risk of not persisting.

The centralized responsibility for retention and persistence creates a gap in the organizational structure that potentially limits the number and quality of retention and persistence initiatives utilized by the broader campus community (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Manning, 2013). Near the beginning of the 2017-2018 academic year, the university president identified this gap and initiated the development of a task force charged with developing integrated initiatives that foster student success and persistence. To fulfill this charge, the task force is divided into three teams which are each researching and developing a different component of the plan—one for identifying barriers to student retention and ways to overcome them, one for developing interventions for students who demonstrate behaviors or attitudes that may lead to not returning, and one for creating a plan to increase student engagement.

Leadership Analysis

Like most institutions of higher learning, the institution strives to balance the need for centralized authority and standard operating procedures versus decentralized authority and the opportunity for units to function in a way that works best for their unique purpose (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Manning, 2013). As a result, leadership approaches can vary from demanding compliance to giving units, programs, or individual employees a strong voice in determining goals and strategies (Northouse, 2016). Due to the combination of being directive and supportive, situational leadership (Northouse, 2016) is the dominant leadership approach utilized by the president and executive cabinet members.

Specific to persistence, the president's development of the student success and persistence task force, along with his role within the task force, reflects several different leadership approaches. First, the formation of the task force demonstrates the behavior of initiating structure, which involves the leader focusing on a task and providing the structure, context, and responsibilities for task completion (Northouse, 2016). Second, he exhibits the delegating approach within situational leadership by allowing the highly competent and highly committed task force members to drive the discussions and the development of action plans for the three areas within the task force.

As a result of the president using a delegating approach, the dean of enrollment management, who serves as an ex-officio member of all three task force teams, serves as a leader within the task force. The dean's approach to providing leadership within the task force reflects an adaptive approach (Northouse, 2016). He demonstrates this by having a global view of retention and persistence, while also clarifying the challenges associated with developing and implementing more comprehensive retention and

persistence strategies. Additionally, the dean allows the task force members to provide input and keeps each team focused on their specific tasks.

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

This study provided valuable information regarding the factors that promoted and that impeded persistence for students who were academically at-risk upon matriculation to the institution. The findings of this study fills a gap in the institution's understanding of the experiences that lead to student persistence, specifically for academically at-risk students. While the institution routinely collects data regarding the factors that contribute to students leaving the institution, data is not regularly collected regarding the factors that promote persistence. Padilla (1999) suggested that knowing the reasons students leave an institution does not provide insight into the reasons students continue to enroll at that institution. As the site institution seeks to promote student persistence, an understanding of these students' experiences can help the institution make decisions that foster success and retention (Braxton et al., 2014; Padilla, 1999; Tinto, 2012b).

Summary

This section provides a relatively comprehensive understanding of the setting for this study, which should help readers make effective decisions regarding the transferability of the study's findings. The description of the institution reveals that it has a small enrollment, is located in a mostly rural, Midwestern setting, is committed to Christian higher education, and that the undergraduate student population is predominately white. The institution's organization is relatively traditional with a hierarchal structure that also utilizes lateral coordination to ensure shared governance and effective operations. Due to the various needs, relationships, and varying contexts that

are involved in the institution's operations, the top-level administrators tend to use situational leadership to help varying institutional units carry out the strategic plan. As an enrollment-driven institution, part of the strategic plan deals with effectively using institutional strategies that foster student success and persistence.

This section also provided a background in the specific student success and persistence initiatives developed and implemented by the institution over the past 20 years. This study is well timed in that it provides the institution and the student success and persistence task force with insight regarding the factors that promoted or impeded persistence for students who entered the institution as academically at-risk. Because the task force is charged with identifying opportunities to increase student engagement and persistence, the findings have relevance to the task force. As a member of the task force, the researcher has a voice in the task force operations, which allows for the findings to be easily disseminated to the task force team leaders.

SECTION THREE: SCHOLARLY REVIEW

Graduating from college has a number of benefits for the individual and for society as a whole (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Mayhew et al., 2016). Individuals who earn college degrees have higher incomes and better career options (Baum et al., 2013; Habley et al., 2012; Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Mayhew et al., 2016). College graduates also have increased career enjoyment, better health, and more mobility than those who do not graduate (Baum et al., 2013). In addition to the benefits for the individual, society also benefits from its members graduating from college (Baum et al., 2013; Habley et al., 2012; Mayhew et al., 2016). Societal benefits include increased tax revenue, increased levels of civic involvement, and decreased levels of dependence on government (Habley et al., 2012). Additionally, a college-educated workforce allows the United States to remain competitive with other nations (Tinto, 2012a). With an understanding of the benefits of college graduation, it is important to know the rate at which students are graduating from college.

Over the past twenty years, access to higher education has expanded within the United States (Seidman, 2012a; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). This expansion includes increasing numbers of students from underrepresented groups and from lower socioeconomic families (Ma et al., 2016; U.S. Department, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2017), the number of White students immediately enrolling in college after high school has increased by 5% between 2000 and 2015, while the number of Black students increased by 7% and the number of Hispanic students increased by 18% during the same time frame. Additionally, the gap between the percentage of students from low-income families directly enrolling in college after high school and the percentage of students from high-

income families reduced by 10% between 2000 and 2015 (U.S. Department, 2017). The growth in the number of students from underrepresented groups and from lower socioeconomic families is also linked with increased numbers of first-generation students (Chen, 2005). This increase in college access, which has resulted in a more diverse student population, has promoted the development of a number of initiatives to help students be successful and persist to graduation (Seidman, 2012a; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Yet, despite an increased effort to promote success, graduation rates remain relatively constant (Seidman, 2012a; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). A possible reason for the lack of increase in graduation rates is related to the academic preparation of students entering college.

Several studies indicated that the lack of academic preparation for college is a key factor in low persistence rates and low college graduation rates (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). According to ACT (2016), approximately a quarter of 2016 high school graduates who took the ACT demonstrated college readiness in all four content areas assessed on the exam. Conversely, over a third of 2016 high school graduates who took the ACT did not meet college readiness standards in any of the four content areas (ACT, 2016). Overall, research indicated that students who score below the national average on the ACT persist to the fourth year of college at their initial institution at a rate approximately 15% lower than those who scored just above the national average (ACT, 2012).

In addition to students not demonstrating college readiness on the ACT, a study examining the combination of SAT scores and high school GPA found that students with low SAT scores and with low high school GPA were eight times less likely to graduate

from college when compared to students with higher scores (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). However, even with a lower likelihood of persisting, some academically underprepared students do persist (ACT, 2012; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). It is these students that are the focus of this study.

The site of this study is a small, private, faith-based university in the Midwestern United States. The institution's graduation rate is consistent with similar institutions in terms of control and selectivity; however, academically at-risk students, defined by a combination of their college entrance exam score and their high school GPA, persist to the fourth year at less than half the rate of those who have higher entrance exam scores and high school GPAs (U.S. Department, 2016). The institution does not have an understanding of the factors that promote or impede persistence for these academically at-risk students. Additionally, a review of literature related to the persistence of academically at-risk students to the fourth year of college did not yield any published studies that explore the experience of academically at-risk students at a small, private, faith-based institution in the Midwest using qualitative methods.

The purpose of this study is to provide the institution with an understanding of the factors that promoted or impeded persistence to the fourth year for students who initially entered the university academically underprepared. This approach aligns with Heaney and Fisher's (2011) suggestion for institutions to understand the local context regarding the experiences of academically at-risk students so the institution can use that information to inform practice. Additionally, this study will fill the gap in literature related to the experiences of academically at-risk students who persist to the fourth year at a small, private, faith-based university in the Midwestern United States.

A review of literature related to this study is detailed below. In order to understand the persistence of academically at-risk students, the analysis begins with an overview of research related to college student outcomes, which includes an examination of the prominent retention theories and college impact models and theories. After the review of the leading retention and college impact studies, a summary of the salient components found in retention and college impact research leads to a description of this study's conceptual framework. Using the conceptual framework as a guide, a synthesis of the literature regarding the factors that influence college student persistence follows. The review concludes with a description of the factors that influence persistence for academically at-risk college students, which again uses the study's conceptual framework to structure the discussion.

Overview of Research Related to College Student Outcomes

There are a number of studies related to understanding college student outcomes, such as student learning, psychological development, student retention, or degree attainment (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In an effort to make sense of the literature related to student retention and persistence, the following section identifies some of the prominent theories and studies related to retention, persistence, and the impact of college on students. While most college impact studies may not directly assess student retention or persistence, the studies discussed in this section have outcomes that influence student persistence. This section then presents a synthesis of the salient components involved in college student persistence and concludes with a discussion of the conceptual framework that guides this study.

Prominent Retention Research

Vincent Tinto built upon Spady's sociological approach to understanding college student retention by introducing the Interactionalist Theory of College Student Departure in 1975, which he revised in 1987 and again in 1993 (Habley et al., 2012). Tinto's theory evolved into his Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure, which is the most widely utilized theory in studies related to college student retention (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). Tinto's (1993) "model seeks to explain how interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution and the communities which comprise them lead individuals of different characteristics to withdraw from that institution prior to degree completion" (p. 113). This is a predominately sociological model due to its focus on how the formal and informal structures within the social and academic contexts of an institution influence student departure decisions. The decision to remain enrolled or to drop out is informed by individual characteristics and traits, which lead to the student's initial goals and institutional commitments (Tinto, 1993). Upon entering the college environment, the student's commitment to the specific institution and to graduating are revised or affirmed based on the individual student's integration into the institution's academic and social environments, both formally and informally (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, the model also recognized that a student's participation in communities external to the institution also influence a student's departure decisions, both positively and negatively (Tinto, 1993). Overall, within Tinto's model, positive integration experiences affirm and enhance a student's initial goals and institutional commitments, thus promoting persistence, while negative integration experiences have the opposite effect.

Near the same time Tinto was developing his initial student departure model, Alexander Astin was also conducting pivotal retention research. Astin (1975) utilized longitudinal and multi-institutional quantitative data to determine factors that influenced the probability of dropping out of college. The study participants, who were students at one of 358 two- and four-year institutions, included 243,156 students in the freshman sample and approximately 101,000 students four years later (Astin, 1975). The participants completed an initial survey that gathered a number of data points, such as, individual demographics, educational and career plans and goals, study habits, and self-predictions regarding college persistence, in the fall of their freshman year. Four years later, nearly 40% of the original participants received follow-up surveys that gathered information, such as, the student's educational progress, yearly enrollment status, and how they paid for college (Astin, 1975). The findings revealed that, while there are many elements that predict student retention, personal factors and environmental factors were the two categories that contributed the most (Astin, 1975). Based on his understanding of factors that influence student decisions to drop out of college, Astin (1984) developed his Student Involvement Theory. While Student Involvement Theory is categorized as a student development theory, Astin discussed its direct ties to understanding college student retention. Astin explained that for every factor that promoted retention, increased levels of student involvement were required, and conversely, for factors that reduced the likeliness of retention, decreased levels of student involvement were required.

While the model and theory summarized above reflect foundational retention research, several other studies contributed valuable findings related to student retention and persistence. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) conducted empirical research to

test the 13 propositions presented in Tinto's 1975 model of departure. The research utilized the box score approach and involved assessing individual tests of each proposition and determining the level at which each proposition was affirmed (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Propositions receiving strong empirical support demonstrated statistically significant affirmation in 66% or more in at least three studies, while moderate empirical support included studies that resulted in statistically significant affirmation in 34% to 65% in at least three studies (Braxton et al., 2004). The findings demonstrated that five of the 13 propositions received strong empirical support (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). These five propositions revealed the importance of students' initial and ongoing commitment to the institution, with social integration providing an avenue to increase commitment (Braxton et al., 1997). The proposition related to the value of academic integration found moderate empirical support, which weakens Tinto's model (Braxton et al., 2004). As an extension of the research testing Tinto's model, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) developed two models regarding student departure, one for residential institutions and the other for commuter institutions. As Braxton and his colleagues continued research related to Tinto's model, additional theories of student retention were also emerging.

Separate from a focus on the validity of Tinto's propositions, Bean and Eaton (2000) also contributed a model to help explain college student retention. This model, the Psychological Model of College Student Retention, described how psychological processes within a student influences the student's decision to continue to enroll in college (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Bean and Eaton's (2000) perspective is unique in that it

posited that psychological processes are a more dominant factor than sociological factors, which are the basis for most retention models, in student persistence decisions.

Research Regarding the Impact of College on Students

In addition to the prominent retention research described above, a background in research regarding the impact college has on students is important in a study regarding student persistence. While most college impact models are not typically designed to directly study the outcome of student persistence, research demonstrated positive student outcomes, such as learning and developing socially, are strongly correlated with a student's continued enrollment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). There is an abundance of research related to the impact of college on students, including studies on student learning, student development, the experiences of underserved students, and the effects of various institutional initiatives promoting retention (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The following provides an overview of some of the most well-known college impact studies, including: (a) Astin's (1970) Input-Environment-Output Model, (b) Pascarella's (1985) model regarding the factors that influence student learning and cognitive development, (c) Berger and Milem's (2000) model considering the influence of organizational behavior on student outcomes, (d) Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) work considering the various outcomes that result from a student attending college, and (e) the follow-up study to Pascarella and Terenzini's work by Mayhew et al. (2016).

In an effort to bring clarity and to provide opportunities to more effectively research the impact of college on students, Astin (1970) utilized a simple model of college impact called the Input-Environment-Output Model. Astin suggested that a

student's outcomes from college are the result of the student's inputs and the experiences encountered while in college. With this model, the impact of college is determined by comparing the student's outputs after college, with the inputs possessed at the start of college (Astin, 1993). The primary purpose of the model is to evaluate the influence various environmental factors have on student outcomes (Astin, 1993).

Ernest Pascarella (1985) engaged in a meta-analysis of the research related to learning and cognitive development in college students, with an emphasis on recognizing the most prominent institutional factors that promote growth in these two areas (Pascarella, 1985). Based on his analysis, Pascarella developed a general causal model demonstrating the salient factors that influence college student learning and cognitive development. The model suggested that learning and cognitive development result from varying levels of influence and connectedness among the following factors: (a) pre-college traits, such as aptitude and personality; (b) structural and organizational characteristics of the institution, such as percentage of students living on campus and the level of selectivity in admissions; (c) institutional environment; (d) a student's interactions with agents of socialization, primarily peers and faculty; and, (e) the quality of a student's effort while in college. Pascarella suggested that three of the factors, pre-college traits, interactions with agents of socialization, and quality of student effort, all have a direct influence on a student's learning and cognitive development. The other two factors, structural and organizational characteristics of the institution and institutional environment, have an indirect influence on students (Pascarella, 1985).

Berger and Milem (2000) developed a model that explores the influence of organizational behavior on student outcomes. A review of studies regarding

organizational behavior in institutions of higher education, along with an analysis of college impact models revealed a gap in the connection between the two areas (Berger & Milem, 2000). Berger and Milem engaged in research that filled that gap with the development of the Conceptual Model for Researching Organizational Impact on Student Outcomes. This model posited that students' pre-college characteristics, in combination with the organization's characteristics, influence the type of students who attend an institution, which directly informs the institution's peer group characteristics (Berger & Milem, 2000). The characteristics of the peer group, in addition to the organizational characteristics, inform the type and quality of experiences a student has within the institutional setting (Berger & Milem, 2000). The model demonstrated that the characteristics a student brings to college, along with the peer group characteristics and the experiences a student has in college, both of which are influenced by the organizational characteristics, have an influence on student outcomes (Berger & Milem, 2000).

While Pascarella (1985) focused on the specific outcome of student learning and Berger and Milem (2000) focused on the role of organization behavior on student outcomes, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of the broad array of research on the impact of college on students, which included over 2,500 studies. Their first analysis focused on research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, while their second analysis utilized research from the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the very early 2000s (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Both studies demonstrated that students who attend college develop in a broad range of categories, including cognitively, psychosocially, and morally (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The extent of the student's growth in college is

dependent on the environment and opportunities in the student's specific college setting, along with the student's own characteristics, such as the likeliness of engaging with peers, with faculty, and in academic pursuits (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Additionally, the influence of college on a student is due to the interconnected social and academic experiences that promote the development of the student as a whole (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A follow-up study to Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) work reviewed college impact research from 2002 through 2013 (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Mayhew et al.'s (2016) study produced findings that were mostly consistent with Pascarella and Terenzini's 2005 study and emphasized "the complex interplay between precollege characteristics and college experiences" (p. 572). Additionally, this study extended the previous findings by reiterating the way multiple forces interact to foster holistic development in students, along with echoing the importance of creating a challenging and supportive academic environment (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Common Components Within Student Persistence Research

The process of college student persistence is complex and multifaceted (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While there are many approaches to studying college student persistence, a review of the dominant retention research and college impact research revealed the existence of some common components influencing student outcomes. This section provides an overview of those salient factors, which include pre-college characteristics, institutional context, academic experiences, social experiences, and the influence of external factors.

Pre-college characteristics. The research regarding college student retention and the impact of college on students consistently demonstrated that the characteristics and

experiences a student possesses at the beginning of the college experience influence how they interact with the college environment and the outcomes they achieve (Astin, 1970, 1975; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). The category of pre-college characteristics includes a number of different student traits and experiences. The most prominent factor within this category is a student's academic background, which includes a student's high school grade point average (GPA), college entrance exam—such as ACT or SAT—scores, class rank, and the rigor of a student's high school curriculum (Astin, 1975; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 1975, 1993). A student's demographic background, such as parents' education, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, also serves as a pre-college characteristic that influences a student's college experience and outcome (Astin, 1975; Berger & Milem, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Furthermore, research indicated that a student's personality, overall confidence, and motivation also have a role in how a student engages in college-related activities and whether or not the student persists toward degree attainment (Astin, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Institutional context. Several models and studies considered the influence of institutional context on student outcomes (Astin, 1975, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Within the studies, two approaches to considering institutional context emerged. One approach considered the role of the institution's structural and demographic features

on student outcomes (Astin, 1975, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These features, which are often referred to as between-college effects, include institutional characteristics such as the institution's size, selectivity, control, and geographic location (Astin, 1975, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The other approach focuses more on what happens within a specific institution (Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This approach, which is also known as within-college effects, considers the role of organizational policies, practices, and traditions, along with the influence of employee morale, on student experiences and outcomes (Berger & Milem, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Academic experiences. A student's integration into and involvement in the academic component of an institution is another theme that emerged among dominant retention and college impact studies (Astin, 1975, 1984, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012a, 2012b). Research indicated that student learning and academic performance have an impact on student persistence (Astin, 1975, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Several components are involved in a student's academic experiences and performance. Research denoted that a student's interactions with faculty, effort put into academic pursuits, classroom experiences, and the curriculum in which a student engages, all have a role in influencing the student's college outcomes and persistence decisions (Astin, 1975, 1984, 1993; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2012a).

Social experiences. In addition to a student's experiences within the academic realm of the college experience, research indicated that a student's social engagement also plays a role in determining student outcomes (Astin, 1975, 1984, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004, 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012a, 2012b). Social engagement includes a student's involvement with peers and faculty, both in and out of the classroom (Astin, 1993; Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). A student's interactions with other members of the institutional community provides an opportunity for the student to assess the connection he or she has with the institution, which influences the student's subsequent levels of integration (Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993).

External factors. In addition to the individual student's characteristics, the institution's context, and the student's academic and social experiences, external forces have the ability to influence a student's persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Braxton, et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993). External factors, such as parents, work, and non-college peers, may affect the student's ability to integrate into the social and academic aspects of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Bean and Eaton (2000), along with Braxton et al. (2004), discussed that students often have to gain the approval of the important people in their lives in order to continue in college. There are times when the support from family and friends encourages a student to persist; however, there are other instances when a student has a positive college experience, but external forces cause the student to depart from the institution (Braxton et al., 2014; Tinto, 1993).

Conceptual Framework

Based on the review of dominant retention and college impact research discussed above, a revised version of Reason's (2009) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence serves as the conceptual framework for this study. Reason's model, which is a revised version of Terenzini and Reason's (2005) Model of Influences in Student Learning and Persistence, directly incorporates four of the five common components found in the dominant retention and college impact models and theories. The fifth component, external factors, which Reason incorporated into a student's out-of-class experiences, was added by the researcher as an individual component to the framework utilized for this study. The addition of external factors as its own component is based on the literature's description of its role in influencing student outcomes (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004, 2014; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Weidman, 1989). This section discusses the development and design of Terenzini and Reason's original model, the revisions made by Reason, the rationale behind the addition of external factors, and a review of the adapted model utilized in this study.

Terenzini and Reason (2005) developed the Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence as an effort to understand first-year college student learning and persistence. The model was developed using dominant retention and college impact theories, such as Astin (1984, 1993), Tinto (1993), Berger and Milem (2000), and Pascarella (1985). Additionally, the model used the seven Foundational Dimension, which are assumptions and suggestions that underlie the "structures, activities, and cultures of institutions that are effective in promoting the success and persistence of their first-year students" (Terenzini & Reason, 2005, p. 3). The Foundational Dimensions

were developed through the Foundations of Excellence in the First Year of College Project, which was a two year project designed to articulate the varying and interconnected factors that promote learning and persistence among first-year college students (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). The model was designed to provide a comprehensive view of the multiple factors that influence the outcomes for a first-year college student. Terenzini and Reason developed this model as a direct response to Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) conclusion that learning and persistence are influenced by a number of different factors in a variety of settings. Overall, the model postulates that the background characteristics and experiences students possess as they enter college prepare and position them to engage in the college experience, which includes the organizational context, peer environment, and individual experiences, formally and informally, producing varying degrees of learning and change (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).

While the model was originally designed to focus on the first year of college, Terenzini and Reason (2005) indicated that the model could be adjusted to study the college experience through graduation. In 2009, Reason made revisions that extended the use of the model beyond the first year of college and focused the model to only consider the outcome of student persistence. Due to the salient nature of the four constructs used in the design of the original model, Reason (2009) maintained the use of those constructs; however, based on a review of research related to college student persistence, some of the factors within each component were modified. Within the pre-college characteristics construct, Reason continued the use of sociodemographic traits, academic preparation and performance, and student dispositions, but removed a focus on personal and social

experiences. The organizational context construct had a small shift in perspective from the original model. While the structural-demographic characteristics of an institution are still incorporated, the main focus of the revised model is to determine how organizational behavior, as a result of policies and culture, influences student persistence (Reason, 2009). The peer environment construct continues the original model's approach of focusing on the values, beliefs, and attitudes that characterize the institution's student body, rather than concentrating on the influence of more superficial peer interactions (Reason, 2009). Reason delineated this construct by giving consideration to the influence of the campus racial and academic climates. The final construct of individual student experiences maintains the same approach and structure as the original model as it continues to consider the influence of a student's curricular experiences, classroom experiences, and out-of-class experiences on persistence in college (Reason, 2009).

As mentioned previously, Reason's (2009) adapted model of student persistence directly incorporates four of the five common components found within the leading retention and college impact research; however, the fifth common component, regarding the influence of external factors, was incorporated into the out-of-class activities portion of the model. Due to the fact that external factors come from outside the institution, for the purpose of this study, the researcher has revised Reason's model to include a specific construct regarding the influence of external factors during the college experience on student persistence. Based on the common components found within widely known retention and college impact research, such as Bean and Eaton's (2000) Psychological Model of Student Retention, Tinto's (1993) model of student departure, Weidman's (1989) conceptual model of undergraduate socialization, and Mayhew et al.'s (2016)

research regarding the influence of working off-campus or on-campus, the inclusion of external factors as a construct in the conceptual framework provides a more comprehensive lens for this study.

Overall, the conceptual framework adopted for this study, shown in Figure 1, provides a research-based, comprehensive, integrated model regarding college student persistence (Braxton et al., 2004; Habley et al., 2012; Mayhew et al., 2016; and Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While the framework may appear linear in nature, Reason (2009) recognized that student experiences within the college experience do not occur in

Figure 1. A comprehensive model of the factors influencing college student persistence. Adapted from “An Examination of Persistence Research through the Lens of a Comprehensive Conceptual Framework,” by R. D. Reason, 2009, *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), p. 661. *The current researcher added this construct.

a sequential nature. In fact, students' college experiences are often recursive and integrated (Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005). As this study seeks to understand the factors that promote and impede persistence to the fourth year for academically at-risk student, this framework provides a lens for making meaning of student's experiences.

Historically, the study of college student retention has evolved from being focused primarily on the student characteristics that promote success to an understanding that student persistence is a combination of the characteristics of a student and the student's institutional experiences (Astin, 1975, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004, 2014; Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993). The review of literature in this section provided a background regarding the leading retention and college impact theories and approaches and revealed the salient components related to student persistence and how those inform the conceptual framework for this study. While a background regarding the common components involved in student persistence is necessary, to more fully understand student persistence, the research regarding the specific factors that promote persistence must be explored.

Factors Influencing Student Persistence

Student persistence is a complex process based on a number of factors. One of the dominant factors influencing student persistence is the degree to which a student is successful in college (Habley et al., 2012; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Success can have many forms, but often is demonstrated by academic achievement and student engagement in formal and informal activities on campus (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Using the conceptual framework as a guide,

this section discusses the factors that promote student success and persistence in terms of students' pre-college characteristics and the experiences students have as a part of their college experience, including the institutional context, the peer environment, individual student experiences, and external factors.

Pre-College Characteristics

The characteristics a student possesses as he or she enters college significantly influence how the individual engages in the college experience and, ultimately, how successful the student is in college (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As a result, pre-college characteristics influence student persistence (Astin, 1970, 1975; Braxton et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Based on this study's conceptual framework, the following discusses the factors promoting student persistence within pre-college characteristics including students' sociodemographic traits, academic preparation and performance, and dispositions.

Sociodemographic traits. Various sociodemographic traits have an influence on how a student engages in college, such as gender, parental levels of education, socioeconomic status, and race (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Perna & Thomas, 2006). Studies by Astin (1975, 1993) and Astin and Oseguera (2005) indicated that females tend to persist to college graduation at higher rates than males. Additionally, having a parent with the minimum of a bachelor degree is also associated with higher rates of persistence when compared with students who are in their family's first generation to attend college (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Habley et al., 2012; Ishitani, 2006;

Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016). A student's socioeconomic status has a positive relationship with persistence to graduation, including for first-generation students (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006). Additionally, students who are White or Asian American tend to persist toward graduation at higher rates than other racial groups (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Habley et al., 2012; Nora & Crisp, 2012).

Academic preparation and performance. Research indicated that a student's academic success in college is based on the quality of preparation the student received in high school (Adelman, 2006; Habley et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2006; Radunzel, 2016; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). In terms of academic preparation, students who complete more rigorous coursework, such as college preparatory classes and foreign language classes, typically succeed and persist in college at higher rates than those who do not take coursework that is as challenging (Adelman, 2006; Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Burruss et al., 2013; Habley et al., 2012; Horn, Kojaku, & Carroll, 2001; Kuh et al., 2006).

High school academic performance is also a predictor of collegiate success and persistence. The two most common performance measurements in college admissions are college entrance standardized test scores, such as the ACT or SAT, and high school grade point average (GPA). There are mixed findings regarding the relationship between standardized test scores and student success and persistence. Research by Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) and ACT (2012) indicated that higher ACT or SAT scores have a positive relationship with student success and persistence; however, research by Astin and Oseguera (2005) found that ACT and SAT scores are only weakly related to persistence to graduation when other sociodemographic and first-year of college factors are taken into account. The research regarding high school GPA consistently

demonstrates a positive relationship to student success and persistence (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Kuh et al., 2006; Nora & Crisp, 2012). Astin and Oseguera, along with Nora and Crisp (2012), touted high school GPA as the best predictor of the likelihood a student would graduate from college.

Student dispositions. While most persistence research focuses on the institutional factors that influence student growth and progression toward a degree, Tinto (2012a) indicated that some students succeed due to their own willpower and motivation, regardless of the institutional environment. Perna and Thomas (2006) echoed this thought by stating: “At its core, student success is determined by the attitudes and behaviors of individual students” (p. 11). A meta-analysis by Robbins et al. (2004) demonstrated that psychosocial factors, such as achievement motivation, academic self-efficacy, and academic goals, were better predictors of student persistence than the other pre-college factors—sociodemographic traits and academic preparation and performance. A number of other studies espoused the importance of student motivation, effort, and goal setting in relationship to student success and persistence (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Burruss et al., 2013; Habley et al., 2012; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). Additionally, Astin (1993) stated that individual student effort has a positive relationship with persistence, which mirrors Kennedy’s (2013) findings regarding the positive influence of grit, perseverance, and effort on student success. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) describe grit as “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (pp. 1,087-1,088). Grit and the related behavior of follow-through were found to have a greater influence on student

success and persistence than student intelligence or prior academic success (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

The College Experience

Although the category of pre-college characteristics is one of the leading components influencing student persistence, its elements are predominantly out of the control of the institution. As a result, most of the focus regarding student persistence and success is on the experiences and interactions students have within the college setting (Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Institutions are charged with creating multidimensional environments utilizing practices that foster student persistence (Habley et al., 2012; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This section discusses the role of the aspects that make up a student's college experience, which includes the institutional context, peer environment, individual student experiences, and factors external to the institution, on student persistence.

Institutional context. The institutional context provides a basis for student engagement and success (Berger & Milem, 2000; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Berger and Milem (2000) divided the effects of an organization into two groups—one dealing with structural and demographic make-up of the institution and the other with the behavior of the organization. This section discusses the institutional factors that promote student persistence and success, based on Berger and Milem's two categories of influence.

Structural and demographic influences. Structural and demographic influences on student success and persistence consider the differences that exist between institutions in regards to selectivity, control, and size (Berger & Milem, 2000; Reason, 2009;

Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Of these characteristics, research demonstrated that institutional selectivity has the strongest influence on persistence to graduation (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016). Additionally, Astin and Oseguera (2005), along with Ishitani (2006), found that private institutions enjoy higher rates of student persistence, while Mayhew et al. (2016) determined that institutional size does not have an influence on student persistence to graduation.

While the studies discussed above demonstrate that student persistence is influenced by the structure and demographics of the institution, other research indicated that between-college effects have less influence on student outcomes than the internal organizational factors (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Ro, Terenzini, and Yin (2013) conducted a study that yielded modest affirmation of institutional internal factors having more of an influence on student learning than the structure and demographics of the institution. Research by Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) concurred with the idea that the internal function of an institution has a greater influence on student outcomes than the between-college effects.

Institutional behavior. The policies and practices of an institution demonstrate its commitment to student success and persistence (Reason, 2009; Seidman, 2012b). The focus on student success and persistence begins with the top-level leaders, who are encouraged to ensure they are adopting and implementing policies and programs that engage students, faculty, and staff in meaningful ways and that align with the mission of the institution (Braxton, et al., 2014; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Tinto, 2012a). Institutions benefit by using an overall approach that integrates academic affairs and student affairs

so that the units work collaboratively to provide experiences that allow students to grow and to meet their desired goals (Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016).

Student persistence is enhanced when the institution provides clear and consistent messages regarding what is expected of students (Tinto, 2012a). Students knowing “the roadmap to success—the rules, the regulations, and the requirements for degree completion—is central to students’ ability to successfully navigate the path to timely degree completion” (Tinto, 2012a, p. 10). Expectations are shaped and fulfilled by the formal and informal support institutions provide students (Tinto, 2012a). Student success, and thus persistence, is enhanced when the institution has a supportive campus environment, including academic support, emotional support, and systems that connect students to the faculty and staff (Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b).

Institutional support for students can take many forms. Student success and persistence is fostered through the use of institutional programming that assists first-year students in with the transition to college (Habley et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Reason et al., 2006; Tinto, 2012a). First-year programming can included pre-term orientation, extended orientation, and first-year seminars, (Braxton et al., 2004, 2014; Habley et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Reason et al., 2006; Tinto, 1993, 2012a). Additional support that promotes persistence in the first year and beyond includes, academic advising, learning communities, tutoring, supplemental instruction, and other opportunities to engage academically and socially (Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b)

Peer environment. Increased levels of student social connectedness promote persistence (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Astin, 1984, 1993; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a). This concept forms the basis for understanding the factors that foster student persistence within the context of the peer environment. However, based on Reason's (2009) model of student persistence, the influence of the peer environment is more complex than just the interactions students have with peers and extends to the sense of belonging and the institutional commitment the student gains through peer relations.

Interactions with peers reveal the predominant values, worldviews, attitudes, and goals of the student body at an institution (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004). In order for students to develop a sense of belonging, which promotes persistence, students must perceive that they are similar to at least a subpopulation within the peer environment (Braxton et al., 2004). In combination with developing a sense of belonging, peer environments also help a student understand what is expected of him or her, which influences the student's commitment to the institution (Astin, 1993; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Peer interactions help students form their perception of the campus racial climate, which, when positive, encourages persistence (Fischer, 2007). Student interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds promote engagement and student growth, which likely increases a student's commitment to an institution (Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016). A student's sense of belonging and commitment to the institution is negatively influenced by a peer culture where dropping out and transferring are common (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009; Tinto, 2012a).

Individual student experiences. Along with developing a sense of belonging through the peer environment, a student's sense of belonging is also dependent upon the

degree to which the student engages academically and socially (Kennedy, 2013). A higher level of involvement in academics and with faculty, staff, and peers provides the opportunity for students to become more engaged in the campus community, thus promoting persistence to graduation (Astin, 1984, 1993; Burruss et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2012a). Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, and Kuh (2008) found that “student engagement had a positive, statistically significant effect on persistence, even after controlling for background characteristics, . . . academic achievement, and financial aid” (p. 26). It is evident that academic engagement and social engagement are a driving force in student persistence decisions. This section provides a background in curricular, classroom, and out-of-class experiences that promote a student’s academic and social engagement.

Curricular experiences. An institution’s curricular offerings provide an avenue for student engagement in several ways. An engaging curriculum promotes student involvement and success through shaping the learning environment and student interactions with faculty (Kuh et al., 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Reason et al., 2006; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Students are better able to achieve their academic goals, including obtaining a degree, with a curriculum that is aligned and sequenced in a way that allows students to efficiently progress through their academic program (Seidman, 2012b; Tinto, 2012a). Student learning and involvement with faculty is also directly informed by curricular design (Reason et al., 2006; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Curriculum that is designed to engage students and foster persistence should include the following factors: (a) an emphasis on reading and intensive writing; (b) opportunities to learn about diversity; (c) participation in international experiences, such as study abroad or foreign language

classes; and (d) the use of senior capstone or comprehensive exams so that students can synthesize and apply the knowledge and skills they possess (Kuh et al., 2011).

While an engaging, aligned curriculum provides an avenue to success for all students, additional curricular offerings focus on specific groups of students. Research indicated that the use of first-year seminars as a required part of a student's curriculum promotes student engagement and persistence (Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, an institution's curricular design should include the use of assessments to ensure first-year students are placed in courses that match their current ability (Habley et al., 2012). For the students who are not academically prepared for college-level course work, the use of developmental courses provides an avenue for underprepared students to build skills that promote success (Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012b).

Classroom experiences. The classroom is the centerpiece for student learning and for the institution's promotion of student success (Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). While opportunities to engage with faculty and other students outside of class varies among institutions and among students, the classroom is the guaranteed place where students participate with faculty and with other students in the learning process (Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). In addition to the classroom serving as the central place for student interactions with faculty and peers, the learning that takes place is positively related to persistence, even when controlling for individual student characteristics (Tinto, 1993). Due to the importance of student learning, an understanding of what promotes learning in the classroom is necessary.

There are several course design and delivery practices that promote student learning and success. Setting high expectations for student academic work promotes student engagement and learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Faculty expectations for students must be consistent across all aspects of the course, including course documents and the faculty member's teaching and grading methods (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 2012a). Using high quality teaching pedagogies that engage student in active and collaborative learning also promotes student engagement and success (Braxton et al., 2004; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Dwyer, 2015; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Reason et al., 2006; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Active and collaborative learning pedagogies encourage interactions among individuals and their peers, thus fostering academic and social engagement (Kuh et al., 2011; Tinto, 2012a). Another practice that promotes learning and student success is the use of regular and timely feedback regarding student performance in the classroom (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). As students recognize the need for academic help, whether through faculty feedback or through self-reflection, it is important that there be academic support within the classroom so that the student can improve their performance (Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a).

Academic success in college has a direct relationship with persistence to graduation (Astin, 1975, 1993; Habley et al., 2012; Nora & Crisp, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2012a; Titus, 2004). In fact, a student's academic performance in college is a strong, if not the strongest, predictor of persistence (Astin, 1975; Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Mayhew et al. (2016) recently

determined that a student's grades, regardless of how long a student has been in college, influence student persistence decisions. Therefore, students' classroom experiences, along with out-of-class activities, have a meaningful influence on student performance and persistence.

Out-of-class experiences. Outside of the class setting, student engagement and persistence is fostered by a variety of activities (Astin, 1984; Braxton et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012b, Titus, 2004). While there is not a clear delineation between activities that promote academic integration and those that promote social integration, because many activities do both, for the purpose of this discussion out-of-class experience will be divided into those two categories. This section concludes with a discussion of specific institutional initiatives that promote student success and persistence.

Academic activities that foster student engagement include: (a) working on coursework alone, with peers, or with a faculty member; (b) meeting with an academic advisor, (c) participating in internships or other cocurricular activities; and (d) experiences with diversity. Student learning is enhanced when students work on coursework with peers outside of the regular class setting (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh et al., 2011; Nora & Crisp, 2012). This includes study groups and peer tutoring (Kuh et al., 2011). There is also a direct relationship between a student's interactions with a faculty member outside of class and the student's academic success (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A meta-analysis by Mayhew et al. (2016) regarding the influence of student and faculty interaction on student persistence yielded mixed results. Positive interactions

between faculty members and students seem to promote persistence, while negative interactions likely discourage persistence (Mayhew et al., 2016). Student internships, cocurricular activities, and community service, especially when the service is linked to a specific course, promote student engagement and success (Kuh et al., 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a). Furthermore, out-of-class experiences with diversity also promote learning and student engagement (Kuh et al., 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016). While student learning and academic achievement is enhanced by these activities, often, so is a student's social integration.

Student involvement in social activities tends to foster increased levels of student engagement. The primary institutional factors that promote social engagement are living in a residence hall and participating in extracurricular activities (Astin, 1993; Braxton et al., 2014; Mayhew et al., 2016). Living in a residence hall provides an opportunity for students to increase the number of interactions students have with other students and may enhance student perceptions and satisfaction with the college experience (Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016). Additionally, living in a residence hall is also associated with the likeliness of participating in extracurricular activities, such as campus-based clubs or organizations (Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016). Mayhew et al. (2016) indicated that increases in student persistence rates are often positively linked with participation in extra-curricular activities.

As mentioned previously, a supportive institutional environment tends to enhance student persistence (Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016; Reason et al., 2006; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Academic advising is an institutional factor that provides the opportunity for student's to engage academically and socially (Habley et al., 2012; Kuh

et al., 2011). Student engagement is often promoted through the development of a one-on-one relationship with a faculty member or staff member who helps the student make sense of his or her college experience through increasing the student's understanding of the institution's formal and informal expectations (Tinto, 2012b). Advisors also work with students to clarify and develop a plan that allows them to accomplish their goals (Habley et al., 2012). Student engagement is also often enhanced by initiatives that provide academic and social support to students, such as first-year transition programs, opportunities to receive counseling or mentoring, and diversity offices (Tinto, 2012a, 2012b). Overall, a student's involvement in activities that connect the student to campus tend to promote persistence to graduation, while involvement in activities that are external to the campus tend to be associated with lower rates of persistence (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

External factors. Factors external to the institution influence student engagement and student persistence decisions (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Ishitani, 2006; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Tinto, 1993). According to Tinto (1993), external factors influence a student's ability to engage socially and academically with the institution, which potentially revises the student's commitment to the institution. Tinto went on to say that students could have a positive college experience and, due to external factors, choose to leave an institution. Conversely, support from those outside the institution can encourage student persistence, even if the student has not engaged in the institution (Tinto, 1993).

The factors influencing student persistence outside of the institution are significant people in the lives of students, such as family members, and

employment. Significant people in the lives of students can either discourage student persistence or promote it (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). Ishitani (2006) found that when the parents of a student have unclear educational expectations for the student, persistence rates are typically lower. Additionally, research found that working off-campus from 15-hours a week to full-time tends to reduce student persistence (Astin, 1975; Nora & Crisp, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Yet, working part-time on-campus is associated with positive influences on persistence to graduation (Astin & Oseguera, 2005).

As can be seen by the literature reviewed in this section, there are a number of factors that influence college student persistence. As institutions seek to engage students in meaningful ways that foster student persistence to graduation, it is important they understand that “the impact of student success is multiplied when institutions create these conditions and expose students to a variety of synergistic, effective, educational practices” (Kuh et al., 2011, p. 24). The process of promoting student success becomes even more challenging given the number of academically underprepared students who are entering college during this time. Due to the purpose of this study, it is important to gain an understanding of the factors that specifically influence persistence for academically at-risk students. The following section focuses on those factors.

Factors Influencing Persistence for Academically At-risk Students

Students who enter college inadequately prepared for collegiate course work succeed and persist at lower rates than students who are adequately prepared (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, & Martinez-Garcia, 2013; Kinzie et al., 2008). As a result of being underprepared for college coursework, students encounter

more barriers to success (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). To help students overcome the barriers they confront, it is necessary to understand the factors that influence the persistence of academically at-risk college student (Mattson, 2007). Continuing to use the adopted conceptual framework as a guide, this section provides a review of the factors that influence persistence for academically at-risk college students in relationship to students' pre-college characteristics, the experiences they have while enrolled in college, including the influence of the institution, peer environment, and individual student's experiences, and external factors.

Pre-College Characteristics

Only 26% of 2016 high school graduates who took the ACT demonstrated college-readiness in all four areas assessed on the exam, while 34% did not meet the college-readiness benchmarks in any of the four areas (ACT, 2016). Although it is important to note that academically at-risk students often lack the background knowledge needed for success in college, they also may lack the non-cognitive factors that tend to promote success, such as attending class regularly and maintaining concentration while studying (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). With the understanding that cognitive factors and non-cognitive factors both affect student outcomes, this section discusses sociodemographic traits, academic preparation and performance, and student dispositions that influence the persistence of academically at-risk college students.

Sociodemographic traits. The research related to sociodemographic characteristics revealed the role of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on academically at-risk student persistence. Overall, the influence of sociodemographic traits yield mixed results. Laskey and Hetzel's (2011) study of at-risk student retention

found that race did not influence the persistence of students, while Stewart, Lim, and Kim (2015) found a difference in at-risk student persistence based on race, with Asian/Pacific Islanders persisting at the highest rate, followed by Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, and Native Americans, respectively. Mixed results were also found in the research regarding the influence of gender on the persistence of academically at-risk students. Mattson (2007) found that females demonstrated better academic performance, which typically leads to increased persistence rates, while Stewart et al. found no significant difference in the persistence of academically at-risk students based on gender. Additionally, Stewart et al. found no significant impact of family socioeconomic status on at-risk student persistence. The variations in findings indicate that more research is needed in order to fully understand the role of sociodemographic traits on the persistence of academically at-risk college students.

Academic preparation and performance. Persistence and other college outcomes are often related to a student's academic performance and experiences in high school. Several studies researched the significance of the student's high school GPA and ACT score on academically at-risk student performance and persistence (Adebayo, 2008; Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Mattson, 2007; Stewart et al., 2015). The findings regarding the role of high school GPA and ACT score were mixed. Several studies found a positive relationship between high school GPA and academically at-risk academic performance and persistence (Adebayo, 2008; Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Mattson, 2007; Stewart et al., 2015). Yet, a study by Laskey and Hetzel (2011) found that high school GPA was not a predictor of success or persistence in academically at-risk college students. Laskey and Hetzel and Adebayo (2008) found that a student's ACT

score was not a good predictor of college success or persistence, while Stewart et al. (2015) found ACT scores to have a positive, but weak, correlation to persistence. Additionally, Astin and Oseguera (2005) found that the students with low high school GPA and low college entrance exam scores were 61% less likely to graduate from college in four year than those who had the highest high school GPA and college entrance exam scores. Aside from high school GPA and ACT score, taking college preparatory or advanced placement scores in high school was a positive predictor of persistence for academically at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

Student dispositions. A student's actions and mindset often have a role in the success and persistence of academically underprepared students. Several characteristics related to student disposition were found to promote success in academically at-risk college students. Similar to the findings regarding factors influencing persistence for all college students, academically at-risk students who possess internal motivation persist at higher rates than those who depend on external motivators (Barbatis, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011). In fact, Heaney and Fisher (2011) found that academically at-risk college students who were motivated by career or educational goals persisted at rates of 55% to 60%, while those who were unable to clearly articulate the root of their motivation to attend college persisted at rates of 0% to 33%. Studies revealed that other traits promoting persistence and success for academically at-risk college students include: (a) neuroticism, which is believed to put a student's focus on success; (b) the use of metacognition and time management strategies; (c) the ability to realistically self-evaluate; and (d) the ability to deal with racism (Adebayo, 2008; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). Conversely, the trait of extraversion was found to decrease

persistence and academic performance in academically at-risk students (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). Laskey and Hetzel (2011) posited that the social nature of extraversion distracts students from academic work.

The College Experience

Based on the findings regarding the influence of student disposition on the persistence of academically at-risk students, student motivation and the possession of behaviors that promote academic success are important characteristics. In fact, the combination of motivation for being in college and integration into the social and academic environments of an institution have a greater influence on persistence of academically at-risk students than their high school academic performance (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). This indicates that academically at-risk student college experiences are important in their persistence toward graduation. This section discusses the influence of the components of a student's college experience, including: (a) the influence of institutional context, (b) peer environment, (c) individual student experiences, and (d) factors external to the institution, on the persistence of at-risk students.

Institutional context. As discussed previously, the culture, practices, policies, and structure of an institution form the foundation for student engagement and success (Kuh et al., 2006, 2011; Tinto, 1993). While Berger and Milem (2000) considered the institutional context by dividing it into two categories, the structural and demographic make-up of the institution, along with organizational behavior, the research regarding the influence of an institution on the persistence and success of academically at-risk students only speaks to the behavior of an organization. As a result, this section will not include a discussion of the role of an institution's structure and demographics on at-risk student

persistence, but will describe what actions institutions can take to promote at-risk student success and persistence.

Institutions can influence the success of academically at-risk students by ensuring they have resources and systems that are designed to meet the needs of at-risk students (Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2011). For students who enter their first year of college academically underprepared, a key to success is the availability of transition programs that help new students understand the institution's expectations and explain how students can utilize the support services and other resources available to provide assistance (Kuh et al., 2011; Stewart et al., 2015; Tinto, 2012a). Student assistance can come in the form of faculty or peer mentors or the use of first-year seminar courses (Kuh et al., 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016). A supportive campus environment helps at-risk students build the skills, especially time management skills and effective study habits, that will lead to increased levels of success (Barbatis, 2010; Kinzie et al., 2008). As a part of a supportive campus environment, early warning systems provide support and allow for earlier interventions for academically at-risk students (Habley et al., 2012; Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2006). Additionally, institutional processes that ensure faculty and staff provide academically underprepared students with an understanding of institutional expectations also promote success (Barbatis, 2010; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kinzie et al., 2008). Overall, it is vital for institutions to recognize that a supportive campus environment enhances outcomes for lower ability students to a greater degree than it does for their higher ability peers (Kuh et al., 2006).

Peer environment. Based on the conceptual framework utilized in this study, the peer environment component of a student's college experience is specific to the student's

development of a sense of belonging with peers who share similar values and perspectives (Reason, 2009). A review of literature did not yield any findings related to the development of sense of belong through interactions with peers specifically for academically at-risk students; however, Heaney & Fisher (2011) indicated that social integration is important for at-risk students. In fact, Kuh et al. (2006) stated that high quality relationships are more important to students with lower academic ability when compared to those with higher abilities. Furthermore, simply having a positive perception of social interactions promoted persistence for academically at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Based on this information, it is evident that positive relationships with peers is associated with increased benefits for academically at-risk students.

Individual student experiences. In the same way that student engagement is an essential component for any successful student, “for academically underprepared students in particular, engagement appears to help offset the other negative effects of lower academic skills” (Tinto, 2012a, p. 66). In fact, recent research demonstrated that academically at-risk students receive increased benefits from engaging in a variety of experiences (Mayhew et al., 2016). Taking that understanding into consideration, this section explores the roles the curriculum, the classroom, and out-of-class experience have on the success of and persistence decisions of academically at-risk students.

Curricular experiences. The institution’s curricular offerings and the student’s experience within the curriculum contribute to a student’s persistence decisions (Habley et al., 2012; Heaney & Fisher, 2011). Academically at-risk students who recognize the connection between their college curriculum and their future goals persist at higher rates

than those who do not identify that connection (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). This demonstrates the importance of correctly placing students into courses that are the most appropriate for the individual student's skill level (Habley et al., 2012). Institutions should use multiple sources of data to ensure that course placement allows students to be challenged, but does not position them so that they are incapable of successfully completing courses (Habley et al., 2012). Many institutions utilize curricular programming, such as developmental education or summer bridge programs, as opportunities to help underprepared students gain the knowledge and skills necessary for success (Habley et al., 2012).

The use of developmental coursework is associated with increased success and persistence for academically at-risk students (Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a). While this encourages the use of developmental education, some studies yielded mixed results regarding the outcomes of developmental education. Developmental education was found to produce positive results in research by Laskey and Hetzel (2011), who determined that developmental courses helped academically at-risk students increase their critical thinking skills, and Bettinger and Long (2009), who demonstrated that enrollment in developmental coursework had a positive impact on student persistence. Conversely, some studies indicated that student placement in developmental coursework was associated with lower persistence rates (Adelman, 2006; Burruss et al., 2013; Nora & Crisp, 2012). Additionally, Kinzie et al. (2008) found a negative relationship between the number of developmental courses a student takes and persistence rates. As a possible solution to the mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of developmental education, Tinto (2012a) suggested that institutions should evaluate the

effectiveness of their developmental courses, the connection the courses have with the general education curriculum, and the efficiency with which a student can progress through them.

Summer bridge programs use the summer prior to the first year of college to provide academically at-risk students with orientation to the institution and preparation for academic coursework (Habley et al., 2012; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a). A review of studies seeking to determine the influence of summer bridge program on at-risk student persistence to graduation yielded mixed results (Mayhew et al., 2016). Mayhew et al. (2016) stated that curricular interventions, such as developmental education and summer bridge programs, hold promise for positively influencing the academic performance and persistence of at-risk students, but that their effectiveness may be dependent on delivering them in an integrated, rather than separate, manner.

Classroom experiences. Academically at-risk students benefit from active and supportive classroom experiences that promote learning, to an even greater degree than academically prepared students (Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a). Mayhew et al. (2016) stated that the use of effective teaching practices are even more important to academically at-risk student than to higher ability students. This includes the use of pedagogies and practices that foster student learning and success through meeting the individual needs of underprepared students (Hlinka, 2017; Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2011). An important classroom practice is the use of activities that provide support for learning, which is linked to increasing at-risk student self-efficacy and success (Hall & Ponton, 2005; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Tinto, 2012a). Increases in the persistence of academically at-risk students is also positively linked with students perceiving higher

degrees of faculty concern for student success (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). The importance of engaging and supportive teaching pedagogies is highlighted with the understanding that academically unprepared students who earn higher GPAs in the first semester of college tend to persist at higher rates than those with lower GPAs (Stewart et al., 2015).

Out-of-class experiences. While little information specifically related to the social integration of academically at-risk students was found in the literature, there are a number of ways an at-risk student can promote success through engagement in academics outside of the classroom. The predominant strategies for fostering out-class-experiences included tutoring, supplemental instruction (SI), peer mentoring, and academic advising. It should be noted that these strategies not only provide opportunities for academic engagement, but also provide opportunities for at-risk students to build social connections with faculty and peers.

Academically at-risk student participation in tutoring is linked to increases in success and persistence, along with building relationships with faculty, staff, and peers (Habley et al., 2012; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). In the same vein, student participation in SI is also associated with increases in student success (Habley et al., 2012; Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a). Heaney and Fisher (2011) found that SI has a positive effect on persistence rates for academically at-risk students. Along with tutoring and SI, at-risk student involvement in peer mentoring promotes increased levels of academic performance and social integration (Morales, Ambrose-Roman, & Perez-Maldonado, 2016; Salinitri, 2005). Additionally, at-risk students tend to receive increased benefits from meeting with an academic advisor (Habley et al., 2012; Stewart et al., 2015).

External factors. As discussed previously, factors outside of the university influence a student's ability to engage academically and socially, which influences persistence decisions (Ishitani, 2006; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Tinto, 1993). A review of literature yielded two studies considering the role of external factors in the persistence decisions of academically at-risk students. Successful at-risk students attribute some of their positive outcomes to the support they received from family and other significant people in their lives, such as high school friends and high school teachers (Barbatis, 2010). Additionally, academically at-risk students who indicated they did not miss home much were more likely to persist than those who indicated they missed home considerably (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). In a loosely related study of factors influencing the persistence of traditional students at a rural Appalachian community college, Hlinka (2017) revealed that the strongest influence on student success is perceived family support. Overall, while there is not an abundant amount of research regarding the role of external factors in the persistence of academically at-risk students, the existing research indicates that significant people in the lives of the students influence persistence decisions (Barbatis, 2010; Hlinka, 2017).

This section provides a perspective on the factors that tend to foster success and persistence among academically at-risk students. Research indicated that students who begin college underprepared for the academic rigors of collegiate course work demonstrate lower levels of academic performance and lower rates of persistence to graduation (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, & Martinez-Garcia, 2013; Kinzie et al., 2008). A supportive and engaging campus community provides the best opportunity for these students to have improved outcomes (Kuh et al.,

2006). This includes a campus system that helps students recognize the connection between their personal goals and the opportunities available in college, provides the appropriate student-level programming, and offers resources that encourage learning and fosters relationships.

Summary

A review of prominent retention and college impact theories and approaches revealed the salient components associated with an engaging college experience that leads to student growth, success, and persistence. The components—student pre-college characteristics, institutional context, academic experiences, social experiences, and external factors—formed the basis for the conceptual framework of this study, which is an adapted version of Reason’s (2009) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence. Using the constructs within the framework as a guide, this review examined the factors that promote persistence among college students in general. The review demonstrated that there are number of factors that promote persistence and student success, such as student disposition, a supportive campus environment, engaging teaching pedagogies, and the opportunity for students to develop a sense of belonging with peers and the institution. Narrowing the focus of the review based on the academically at-risk population considered in this study, additional research considered the factors that contribute to the persistence of academically at-risk college students. The factors promoting persistence among academically at-risk college students mirrored the findings regarding all students, but indicated that academically at-risk students tend to improve their performance and persistence by engaging more—with more support, more

resource, and more interactions. This understanding provides a meaningful background that helps inform this study.

SECTION FOUR: CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

To be presented to the site institution's key stakeholders in student success and retention, including: (a) the dean of enrollment management, (b) the university president, and (c) the leaders of the three student success task force teams. The presentation will be in a presentation model much like what is used at professional conferences and will include an Executive Summary and a PowerPoint. The presentation will take place within one month of my dissertation defense.

Executive Summary: Academically At-Risk College Students at a Small, Private, Faith-Based University: A Qualitative Study of Factors Promoting Persistence to the Fourth Year

Statement of Problem: There is a lack of understanding regarding the experiences of students who begin college as academically at-risk, yet persist to the fourth year.

Purpose of the Study: This study provides a greater institutional understanding of the factors that promoted and the factors that impeded persistence for students who entered college as academically at-risk at the site institution.

Research Questions: For students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based university as academically at-risk, which factors:

- contributed to their persistence to the fourth year?
- impeded their persistence to the fourth year?

Review of Literature/Conceptual Framework

- Conceptual framework is an adapted version of Reason's (2009) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence, which incorporates the five common components influencing college student persistence found in a brief review of prominent retention and college impact theories
- Reviewed factors that promote persistence for college students in general and specifically for those who are academically at-risk, using the components of the framework as the structure

Design of the Study

- Methodology: Basic qualitative
- Participants: Eighteen current students who entered as academically at-risk, persisted to at least the fourth year; began college at institution, remained continuously enrolled
- Data collection tools: Individual interviews, open-ended survey, reflective writing
- Data analysis: Inductive, constant comparative analysis; open coding, lean coding, axial coding; emerging themes answering both research questions
- Trustworthiness: Description of setting; data triangulation; audit trail; peer review; researcher positionality

Findings

- Research Question 1: *Four themes:* Caring and supportive environment, Campus connections, Non-campus people, A refusal to quit
- Research Question 2: *Three themes:* Academic barriers, Non-academic institutional impediments, Personal obstacles

Recommendations for Practice:

- Continue to cultivate a culture of caring and support for academically at-risk students
- Continue to provide and strengthen the academic support resources available to students, especially in the first two years
- Provide opportunities for students who enter as academically at-risk to consider and revise their mindset and actions regarding the value of college and their approach to academics

Limitations:

- Small population of participants, so can only be transferred to similar institutions
- Method for identifying participants as academically at-risk uses high school performance indicators and does not consider other factors that may characterize at-risk students

Academically At-Risk College Students at a Small, Private, Faith-Based University: A Qualitative Study of Factors Promoting Persistence to the Fourth Year

Introduction

- Despite the increase in initiatives designed to promote student persistence to graduation, college graduation rates remain relatively unchanged over the past 20 years (Seidman, 2012a, 2012b; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b).
- A possible reason for the negligible change in six-year graduations rates is the number of academically unprepared students entering college (Chen, 2005).
- The lack of adequate academic preparation for college contributes to reduced levels of student persistence and to lower college graduation rates (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

- There is a lack of understanding regarding the experiences of students who begin college as academically at-risk, yet persist to the fourth year.
 - Local context
 - From fall 2007 to fall 2011, students who entered the site institution as academically at-risk persisted to the fourth year at a rate of 24.9%, while those who were not academically at-risk upon entry persisted to the fourth year at a rate of 60.9%.
 - The site institution does not gather data to inform an understanding of factors that influence persistence decisions for students who entered the institution as academically at-risk.

Purpose of the Study

- Research demonstrated a need to understand the experiences of persisting students, within the local context (Braxton et al., 2014; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Padilla, 1999; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 2012b).
- This study is designed to provide an institutional understanding of the factors that promote and the factors that impede persistence for students who entered college as academically at-risk at the site institution.
- Overall, this study fills a gap in knowledge at the institutional level.

Research Questions

- For students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based university as academically at-risk, which factors *contributed* to their persistence to the fourth year?
- For students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based university as academically at-risk, which factors *impeded* their persistence to the fourth year?

Review of Literature

- Student Retention and College Impact Research
 - Brief review of dominant retention and college impact theories and approaches
- Common Components within Persistence Research
 - Pre-College Characteristics
 - Institutional Context
 - Academic Experiences
 - Social Experiences
 - External Factors

Conceptual Framework

Adapted from Reason (2009)

Conceptual Framework

Adapted from Reason (2009)

- **Conceptual Framework Components**
 - **Pre-College Characteristics**
 - Sociodemographic Traits, Academic Preparation and Performance, Student Dispositions
 - **Institutional Context (referred to as Organizational Context in the framework)**
 - A focus on what the institution does (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).
 - **Peer Environment**
 - Considers interactions with peers that establishes a student's understanding of the expectations, attitudes, and values of the student culture (Terenzini & Reason, 2005).
 - **College Experiences**
 - Curricular Experiences, Classroom Experiences, Out-of-Class Experiences
 - **External Factors**
 - This component was added to Reason's model by the researcher
 - Reason included external influences as a part of out-of-class experiences; however, based on a review of literature, the researcher included it as a separate component of the framework.
 - Parents and non-college reference groups, such as peer and employers (Weidman, 1989); student engagement in work off-campus (Mayhew et al., 2016)

Review of Literature

- Reviewed the factors promoting persistence within each framework component for college students in general and then academically at-risk college students.
 - Academically at-risk students
 - Pre-College Characteristics
 - Often lack background knowledge and non-cognitive skills (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011).
 - Internal motivation, goal-orientation, self-management, and the ability to self-evaluate all promote persistence (Adebayo, 2008; Barbatis, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011).
 - Institutional Context
 - Persistence is fostered by a supportive campus environment that helps students manage time, learn study strategies, has early alerts and interventions, and that provides academic assistance (Barbatis, 2010; Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2011).
 - Peer Environment
 - At-risk students benefit more from high quality relationships than students who are not at-risk (Kuh et al., 2011).
 - A positive perception of social interactions promoted persistence (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

Review of Literature

- Academically at-risk students continued
 - Individual Student Experiences
 - Benefit more from active and supportive classroom experiences than students who are academically prepared (Mayhew et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012a).
 - The perception of higher degrees of faculty concern for student success are linked with increases in persistence for at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).
 - Tutoring, peer mentoring, and meeting with an academic advisor are all associated with positive outcomes for at-risk students (Habley et al., 2012; Morales et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2015).
 - External factors
 - Successful at-risk students attribute some of their success to support they receive from family and others outside of the institution (Barbatis, 2010).
 - At-risk students who did not struggle with homesickness persisted at higher rates (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

Design of the Study

- **Methodology**
 - Basic qualitative
- **Setting**
 - Private, Faith-based, Midwestern University
 - Approximately 1,400 undergraduate students on the main campus
- **Participants**
 - Current (Spring 2018), full-time students continuously enrolled at institution through at least the fourth year (seventh semester)
 - Institutional Scholarship Rating (ISR) of 70 or lower (lowest level of academic scholarship)
 - ISR is calculated using a combination of a student's ACT (or SAT equivalent) score and high school grade point average (GPA)
- **Sampling**
 - Purposive Sampling due to ISR and enrollment criteria
 - Maximum variation sampling for interview participants
 - ACT and high school grade point average (GPA) – high/low combinations
 - Demographics – gender and race

Design of the Study

- **Data collection**
 - Three tools
 - Individual interviews – 8 participants; semi-structured format
 - Explored factors promoting and factors impeding persistence throughout college experience
 - Electronic open-ended survey – 10 participants
 - Gathered participant demographic information
 - Gathered perspectives of factors promoting and impeding persistence utilizing the items related to the conceptual framework
 - Electronic reflective writing – 5 participants (also completed survey)
 - Explored the factors promoting and the factors impeding persistence at yearly transitions (e.g.-first to second year, etc.)
 - Requested participants write 50- to 150-word responses
 - Recruitment
 - The eight individual interview participants were invited to participate through a phone call, with a follow-up email
 - Survey and reflective writing
 - All of the students who qualified for the study, but were not interviewed, were invited to participate.
 - Invitations and follow-up invitations were extended through phone calls, emails, and text messages.
 - Informed Consent was provided at the beginning of each phase of data collection

Design of the Study

- **Data analysis**

- Initial data analysis occurred while collecting data
 - Allowed the researcher to ask targeted questions during each phase of data collection (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
- Upon completion of data collection, the researcher used an inductive, constant comparative approach to analyzing the data, which is used in many types of qualitative analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
 - Open coding ➡ Lean coding ➡ Axial coding ➡ Themes and categories

Design of the Study

- **Trustworthiness**

- Several strategies were utilized to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of this study:
 - A rich description of the research setting to help determine if findings are transferrable
 - Triangulation of data from three different collection tools
 - Audit trail that provides a description of the methods and processes used by the primary researcher
 - Peer review of findings where the researcher collected and analyzed data, while members of the research team reviewed processes and findings
 - The researcher shared her positionality regarding personal experiences with at-risk college students and student persistence, in order to provide an understanding of her perspective

Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

Themes →	Caring and supportive campus	Campus connections	Non-college people	A refusal to quit people
Subthemes	Caring people, especially professors	Relationships with peers	Encouragement and support of family	Adjusted mindsets
	Success-oriented institution	Campus involvement	Family pressure or expectation	Adjusted actions
	Positive campus environment	Connection to academic program	To make family proud	Pivotal moments
		Being known as a person	Encouragement and support of non-college friends and co-workers Seeing struggle of non-college friends	

Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

- Caring and supportive campus
 - 17 of the 18 participants discussed that a caring and supportive environment was a factor in their continued enrollment.
 - Caring people, especially professors
 - 16 participants felt the campus community cared and encouraged their success, with caring professors as the most common factor.
 - Success-oriented institution
 - 13 participants describe how their success was fostered through effective teaching strategies, opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, and through the sequencing of their courses.
 - Positive campus environment
 - 11 participants shared that the institution provided a positive context for care and support through its faith-based commitment, policies, approach to teaching and learning.

"I love the small college feel. It is nice to have the open door policy...If I needed anything, my professors and advisor were always there. It felt like one big family. I really don't know if I could have had a better experience anywhere else!"

Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

- Campus Connections

- All but one of the 18 participants cited a connection to campus that influenced their decision to continue to enroll.
 - Relationships with peers
 - 14 participants shared about the enjoyment they received from spending time with friends, and how they wanted to persist in order to continue those relationships.
 - Campus involvement
 - 10 participants described how their involvement allowed them to make friends and fostered a sense of belonging.
 - Connection to academic program
 - 6 participants also discussed how connections to their academic program promoted their persistence.
 - Being known as a person
 - 6 participants expressed the positive influence of feeling like they were known, rather than just being a number or a face in the crowd.

"I can't wait to come back and see them and hang out with them again."

Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

- Non-campus people

- 17 of 18 participants expressed that people who are not a part of the campus community had a role in helping them persist.
 - Family encouragement and support
 - 12 participants shared that family members have provided ongoing support and encouragement that has helped them persist.

"Biggest factor, number one is my mom – continuous support and encouragement. She always says, 'Yeah, it's going to be hard, but you'll get it done.' There's never been a question of it. It's 'You will get this done, no matter how long it takes, no matter how hard it is.'"

- Family pressure or expectation
 - 6 participants discussed family expectations, such as a value of,
"once you start something, you finish it",
or the pressure to complete a degree, as seen by the following participant comment:
"It's not really been an option not to do it."

Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

- Non-campus people
 - Additional subthemes
 - To make family proud
 - 6 participants expressed that they want to graduate in order to make their family members proud.
"I want to make my grandparents proud."
 - Encouragement and support of non-college friends and co-workers
 - 5 participants shared that they received encouragement and support from friends who do not attend the institution or from co-workers.
"It's just the fact that, alright, other people will actually want to see me graduate as well. It's not just my parents."
 - Seeing struggle of non-college friends
 - 4 participants also discussed that seeing their non-college friends struggle with low-paying jobs and less than ideal life circumstances caused them to want to continue enroll.
"What they're doing now doesn't even compare to being here...It makes me just come back. "

Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

- A refusal to quit
 - During their college experience, 16 of the participants had to make changes in their mindset or actions, in order to persist.
 - Adjusted mindsets
 - 15 participants shared that they developed and/or utilized internal motivation, grit, or self-efficacy in order to persist.
"I just want to be able to say, 'I did this. I stepped through it. I was – I was able to persevere and get through the hard situations.'"
 - Adjusted actions
 - 9 participants described how they increased their effort toward academics or used academic support resources in order to continue to enroll.
"I learned...just ask for help. I was so embarrassed to ask for help. And, I was – I felt dumb going to math tutoring. I literally just felt so dumb, but it helped so much."

Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

- A refusal to quit
 - Pivotal moments
 - 8 participants encountered a single moment that was critical to their persistence:
 - One participant discussed an encounter where a member of the campus community doubted his ability to be successful. The participant told the individual:

“In four years, when I can graduate, I’ll come back to you, and I’ll tell you I did it. Kind of just say too bad – you were all wrong.”

- Another participant discussed receiving a letter saying she would need to appeal to continue to receive financial. She said:

“It was like that light bulb moment...This is my future. This is how I want things, you know, I want all these kids, and I can’t do that working a minimum wage job. So...after I got the letter, it was like the life you want versus the life you’ll have...I’ve just got to. That was the biggest moment... That was the turn-around.”

Findings: Factors Impeding Persistence

Themes →	Non-academic institutional impediments		
	Academic barriers	Non-academic institutional impediments	Personal obstacles
Subthemes	Struggles with coursework	Cost of tuition	Individual student attributes
	In-class obstacles	Negative peer experiences	Non-college issues
	Academic programming issues	Barriers with campus offerings	
	Out-of-sequence courses	Trivial rules	
	Lack of preparation for college	Actions misaligned with mission	

Findings: Factors Impeding Persistence

- Academic barriers
 - 15 participants shared some type of academic barrier they had to overcome, which makes this the most common factor impeding persistence.
 - Struggles with coursework
 - 14 participants cited struggling with the rigors of academic coursework.
 - In-class obstacles
 - 6 participants shared about issues with teaching styles or the pace of instruction.
 - Academic programming issues
 - 5 participants discussed a barrier with academic programming, such as the lack of a specific major or their view that the general education courses lacked relevance.
 - Out-of-sequence course
 - 3 participants expressed the hurdle of taking courses out of order.
 - Lack of preparation for college
 - 2 participants describe how they were not prepared for college course work in high school.

"My grades suffered my first year and a halfish here... Just because I thought, I guess, it would be easier...In high school, I mean, I had decent grades. I had all As, but, I mean, I didn't have to try super hard for them."

Findings: Factors Impeding Persistence

- Non-academic institutional experiences
 - 13 participants cited issues with institutional experiences not related to academics.
 - Cost of tuition
 - 8 participants shared that the institution's cost was a barrier.

"Money's been a massive obstacle."

- Negative peer experiences
 - 6 participants' encounters with peers created a hurdle, due to peers being unkind or a recognition of differing values.

"Their work ethic doesn't match mine."

Findings: Factors Impeding Persistence

- Non-academic institutional experiences continued
 - Additional subthemes
 - Trivial rules
 - 5 participants discussed that institutional rules, specifically within the residence halls had to be overcome in order to persist.
“The really annoying rules and fines for everything.”
 - Barriers with campus offerings
 - 4 participants discussed a barrier with the institution’s offerings, which included a lack of activities and the cafeteria food.
 - Actions misaligned with mission
 - 2 participants expressed issues with what they observed as a lack of alignment between actions of the institution and its stated mission.

Findings: Factors Impeding Persistence

- Personal obstacles
 - 15 participants identify obstacles to persistence due to their personal perspectives or due to non-college influences.
 - Individual student attributes
 - 12 participants discussed impediments caused by internal issues, such as lack of sense of belonging, homesickness, lack of motivation, negative perspectives, or lack of direction.
“Being an average student and feeling inadequate to be here.”
 - Non-college issues
 - 9 participants shared about how family issues, relationships with peers outside the institution, or the enticement of other opportunities presented hurdles to their persistence.
“Being away from my family, watching my family pass away and go to jail has made college quite difficult. I feel like I can prevent a lot of things back home, but I am here.”

Discussion

- Overall, the findings revealed that:
 - the components of the framework are factors in at-risk student persistence.
 - at-risk student persistence is typically dependent upon a combination of influences, which is consistent with a number of frameworks, theories, or models regarding college student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993).
 - the multi-factor nature of the findings confirms the complexity of at-risk college student persistence (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Discussion

- Specifically, the findings revealed:
 - The importance of a caring and supportive campus environment
 - The value of institutional support and high quality relationships (Kuh et al., 2006).
 - Faculty play a vital role in supporting at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Kuh et al., 2011; Mayhew et al., 2016).
 - Peer encouragement, support, and friendship promoted persistence among at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006).
 - In contrast to Reason's (2009) discussion of the peer environment, participants did not directly reveal that shared values and worldviews were the foundation to a positive peer environment.
 - The connection between their future goals and the value of college aligned with research by Heaney and Fisher (2011).

Discussion

- Specific findings, continued:
 - Pre-college characteristics
 - The changes in mindset and actions extend beyond the inclusion of pre-college characteristics in the framework and more fully reflect the psychological adjustments students make during their college experience, as outlined in Bean and Eaton's (2000) Psychological Model of College Student Retention:
 - mindset changes are the result of a revised internal locus of control
 - behavioral adjustments allow the student to adapt in a way that fosters success and persistence

Discussion

- Specific findings, continued:
 - Pivotal moments in the experiences of some participants is similar to the concept of a disorienting dilemma, which is the initial step in transformational learning (Mezirow, 1978).
 - A disorienting dilemma causes individuals to consider their own assumptions, critically reflect on the situation, and then take action (Mezirow, 1997).
 - Likewise, the pivotal moments encountered by participants required them to:
 - consider their own values and goals
 - analyze their situation
 - respond in a way that promoted their persistence in college

Discussion

- Specific findings, continued:
 - Findings related to factors impeding persistence
 - The most common barrier to persistence being academic struggle was not surprising and is consistent with studies that indicate that a lack of academic preparation tends to negatively influence persistence (ACT, 2012; Habley et al., 2012; Kinzie et al., 2008).
 - The most frequently cited non-academic barriers within the institution related to the cost of tuition, negative experiences with peers, and the rules within residence life, which may be viewed as issues that do not reflect a caring environment (Kuh et al., 2006).
 - The influence of negative peer relationships on continued enrollment extend Heaney and Fisher's (2011) findings regarding the link between positive social interactions and high persistence rates by adding that negative interactions are a barrier to continued enrollment.
 - While Mayhew et al. (2016) found that effective instruction increases success for academically at-risk students, the findings of this study go beyond that to indicate that the lack of effective classroom instruction is a barrier to at-risk student persistence.

Recommendations for Practice

- Based on the findings of this study, the researcher has the following recommendations for practice for the site institution:
 - Continue to cultivate a culture of caring and of support for academically at-risk students.
 - Share student testimonies with faculty regarding the value of:
 - Making a personal connection with students
 - Being available to students outside of class
 - Using teaching pedagogies that involve students in the learning process
 - Consider partnering with families of at-risk students
 - Communicate with families on a regularly basis, especially during the first two years, which are when participants indicated they faced the most barriers
 - Ensure families have up-to-date contact and support structure information

Recommendations for Practice

- Due to the academic struggle many of the participants shared, it is recommended the institution:
 - Continue to provide and strengthen the academic support resources available to students, especially in the first two years
 - Consider additional early warning indicators
 - Provide opportunities for students who enter as academically at-risk to consider and revise their mindset and actions regarding the value of college and their approach to academics
 - Provide professional development for faculty and select staff (those who have a lot of contact with students) regarding the best ways to help students reflect on their mindset and actions and then make needed adjustments

SECTION FIVE: CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

Article Title: Persistence to the Fourth Year for Students Beginning College

Academically At-Risk

To be submitted to the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, &
Practice*

Abstract

This study explored the factors that promoted and the factors that impeded persistence to the fourth year for students who entered college as academically at-risk. Eighteen participants took part in this basic qualitative study, which utilized three forms of data collection: (a) interviews, (b) open-ended survey, and (c) reflective writing. Data analysis involved the use of inductive, constant comparative analysis to identify emerging themes. The findings indicated persistence is fostered by care and support from within and outside the institution and through participants making connections to the campus and adjusting in ways that demonstrates a refusal to quit. The barriers for participants were academic struggles, non-academic institutional impediments, and personal obstacles. The findings highlight the need for policies and practices that foster a supportive and caring campus culture, including capitalizing on the importance of family support for this population of students.

Keywords: persistence, fourth year, academically at-risk, and qualitative

Persistence to the Fourth Year for Students Beginning College Academically At-Risk

Over the past couple of decades, enrollment in higher education has increased by approximately six million students (U.S. Department, 2015a). The growth in enrollment includes more students from diverse backgrounds, such as students from underrepresented groups and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (U.S. Department, 2015b). As access to higher education has increased and created a more diverse student population, institutions, foundations, state governments, and the federal government have invested resources into programming designed to promote student persistence to college graduation; however, over the past 20 years graduation rates remain relatively unchanged (Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012a, 2012b).

A likely contributing factor to the negligible improvement in graduation rates is the number of academically unprepared students entering college, including students from underrepresented groups, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and first-generation college students (Chen, 2005). Students entering college with low standardized test scores and a low high school GPA are eight times less likely to graduate from college than those with high test scores and a high GPA (Astin & Oseguera, 2005). Research from ACT (2012) revealed that 44% of students with a below average ACT score persisted to the fourth year of college at the same institution which they entered, which means this group of students persists to the fourth year at a lower rate than the national average for six-year graduation at all Title IV receiving institutions, which was 59.6% (U.S. Department, 2016). At the institution that is the site for this study, approximately 25% of the students who enter as academically at-risk persist to fourth year, which is lower than the approximate 61% persistence rate of their peers who were not

academically at-risk upon entry. It is evident that students who enter institutions as academically at-risk have unique needs and experiences, which institutions should seek to understand more fully (Moore, 2015).

Much of the student retention and student persistence research has focused on the reasons students leave institutions, rather than the factors that contribute to students remaining enrolled (Tinto, 2012a). Additionally, Nora and Crisp (2012) stated that, while research regarding first-year student retention is ubiquitous, institutions should seek to understand the factors that promote persistence and those that are barriers to persistence for individual students beyond the first year. With this in mind, along with the understanding that students who enter institutions as academically at-risk persist at lower rates, this study focuses on the experiences of students who persisted to at least the fourth year of college even though, based on high school GPA and ACT or SAT score, they entered college at-risk of not persisting and is designed to answer the following research questions:

- For students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based university as academically at-risk, which factors contributed to their persistence to the fourth year?
- For students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based university as academically at-risk, which factors impeded their persistence to the fourth year?

Literature Review

With higher education's increased focus on student retention to graduation, there is a wealth of literature regarding factors that influence student retention and college student outcomes in general. Leading the retention theory research, Vincent Tinto's work

in the late 1900s resulted in his Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure (Berger, Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012). This model considers how an individual student's enrollment decisions are influenced by the interactions of that unique student within the formal and informal social and academic components of an institution (Tinto, 1993). Along with Tinto's principal research, Alexander Astin also provided valuable research through the development of Student Involvement Theory, which was the result of research related to characteristics that promoted student persistence, along with the impact of college on students (Astin, 1984). Student Involvement Theory posited that a student's likeliness of continued enrollment is directly related to the student's involvement in factors that promote retention (Astin, 1984). While Tinto's and Astin's works are considered to be some of the leading retention research, others made significant contributions to the field, as well, including: (a) Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997), who tested Tinto's 1975 model of student departure; (b) Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), who developed two models of student retention—one for residential institutions and one for commuter institutions; and, (c) Bean and Eaton (2000), who formulated the Psychological Model of College Student Retention, which focused on the role of psychological processes in students and how they influence student enrollment decisions.

Along with the prominent retention research discussed above, others were researching the various impacts college has on students, such as research related to student learning, student development, and organizational context and behavior (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While college impact models do not typically directly explore the outcome of student persistence, research indicated positive student outcomes, such as learning and social development, are strongly correlated with

continued enrollment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Some of the well-known college impact models include: (a) Astin's (1970) Input-Environment-Output Model, (b) Pascarella's (1985) model of factors influencing student learning and cognitive development, (c) Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) meta-analysis of the various outcomes related to college attendance, and (d) the follow-up to Pascarella and Terenzini's work by Mayhew et al. (2016), which reviewed more recent research regarding outcomes for college students.

A review of the leading retention and college impact models revealed five common components exist among the various models and theories related to college outcomes and student persistence. The first common component is the role of the individual student's pre-college characteristics, which is related to the varying traits, abilities, and background experiences a student possess as he or she begins college (Astin, 1970, 1975; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). The second component is role of institutional context on student outcomes and persistence decisions (Astin, 1975, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Within institutional context, two approaches exist—structural-demographic features, such as size and selectivity, and institutional behaviors, such as the policies, practices, and traditions that guide an institution (Astin, 1975, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The academic experience of a student, including his or her integration and involvement in the academic environment of an institution, is the third common component (Astin 1975,

1984, 1993; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012a, 2012b). This includes a student's classroom and curricular experiences, interactions with faculty, and overall academic effort (Astin 1975, 1984, 1993; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2012a.). The fourth component is the social engagement of the student, with both peers and faculty, in and out of the classroom (Astin, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993). And, the final component is the role of external factors, such as parents, friends not attending the institution, and work (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

The salient nature of these components and their role in student persistence informs the conceptual framework utilized in this study, which is an adapted version of Reason's (2009) Comprehensive Model of Influences on Student Learning and Persistence (see Figure 1). Reason's original model, which was designed to reflect the complexity and scope of the factors identified as important to student persistence, directly incorporated four of the five prominent components, including the individual student's pre-college characteristics, the organizational context, the peer environment, and the individual student's academic and social experiences. The fifth component, external factors, was added as a component by the primary researcher. Reason's original model predominantly focused on the institutional factors that influence student persistence and included external factors in the individual student's out-of-class experience portion of the model. Because external factors are separate from the student's institutional experience (Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993), it was included as its own component.

Figure 1. A comprehensive model of the factors influencing college student persistence. Adapted from “An Examination of Persistence Research through the Lens of a Comprehensive Conceptual Framework,” by R. D. Reason, 2009, *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), p. 661. *Added for this study.

With the research and framework clarifying the five main components influencing student persistence, it is important to consider how these components influence persistence for academically at-risk students. In terms of pre-college characteristics, students who enter college underprepared for collegiate course work persist at lower rates than students who are academically prepared (ACT, 2012; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, & Martinez-Garcia, 2013; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008). Additionally, academically at-risk students tend to not only lack the background knowledge necessary for college success, but may also suffer from deficits in

non-cognitive factors that often promote success (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). These non-cognitive factors involved student behaviors, such as attending class regularly and maintaining concentration, along with student mindsets, including conscientiousness and openness to experiences (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). Academically at-risk students with higher levels of internal motivation and goal-orientation, persist at higher rates than those who depend on external motivators or who cannot articulate their goals and sources of motivation (Barbatis, 2010; Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

While academic preparation and individual student perspectives have an effect on the persistence of academically at-risk students, the organizational context, which is also referred to as institutional context, forms a foundation for student involvement and success (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Previously two areas of institutional context were discussed, the structural-demographic traits of the institution and the institutional behaviors. The research related to the influence of the institutional context on the persistence of academically at-risk students only refers to the institutional behaviors. Institutions can influence the success of academically at-risk students by ensuring the needs of the students are met through the policies and practices of institution (Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2011). This includes providing resources and systems within a supportive campus environment, which help at-risk students develop skills that promote success, such as time management and effective study habits (Barbatis, 2010; Kinzie et al., 2008). The presence of a caring and encouraging campus environment enhances outcomes for at-risk students to a greater degree than it does for higher ability students (Kuh et al., 2006).

Along with a supportive campus environment, the peer environment also plays a role in the persistence of academically at-risk students. Heaney and Fisher (2011) found that social integration is an important component of an at-risk student's experience. In fact, quality relationships may be more important to at-risk students than they are to higher ability students (Kuh et al., 2006). The research demonstrated that positive social interactions are linked with higher persistence rates, which is a component of the variety of engagement experiences that foster continued enrollment among at-risk students (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

In addition to social involvement with peers, individual student experiences within the college setting have an influence on at-risk student persistence. In terms of curricular experiences, Heaney and Fisher (2011) found that at-risk students who recognized the link between their curriculum and their future goals persisted at higher rates than at-risk students who did not identify that connection. Additionally, classroom experiences also influence student enrollment decisions. Academically at-risk students benefit more from effective teaching practices than their higher achieving peers (Mayhew et al., 2016). This includes the use of teaching and learning strategies that meet the individual needs of at-risk students (Hlinka, 2017; Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2011), along with faculty who demonstrate care and concern for students and their success (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). In terms of out-of-class experiences, involvement in academic support resources, such as tutoring, peer mentoring, or academic advising also promote persistence through increases in academic success and through building relationships with faculty, staff, and peers (Habley et al., 2012).

The components of a student's college experience discussed above are all institutional factors that influence enrollment decisions for academically at-risk students. As discussed before, factors outside of the institution also play a role in the persistence of at-risk students (Ishitani, 2006; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Tinto, 1993). Successful at-risk students gave some credit for this success to the support they received from family members and other significant people in their lives (Barbatis, 2010). Additionally, at-risk students who indicated they were homesick persisted at lower rates than those who indicated they did not miss home (Heaney & Fisher, 2011).

As can be seen through this review, the process of college student persistence is complex and multifaceted (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The review of prominent retention and college impact research yielded an understanding of the five common components influencing student persistence, which are included in the conceptual framework guiding this study. Additionally, the research related to at-risk student persistence revealed the ways in which the five components contribute to at-risk student persistence.

Method

This study utilized a qualitative methodology to facilitate an understanding of the factors promoting or impeding the persistence of academically at-risk college students to the fourth year. Padilla (1999) stated that understanding the factors that promote persistence among at-risk students requires the use of qualitative research. Specifically, this study uses the basic qualitative method, which is appropriate because its "overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). This section outlines the design of the study by

discussing the study context, the participants and sampling, data collection tools, and data analysis, along with the limitations of the study and methods used to ensure trustworthiness.

Study Context

Within qualitative research, a rich description of the research setting is part of what is required in order for others to be able to determine the degree to which this study's setting is consistent with their context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study was conducted at a small, private, faith-based institution in the Midwestern United States. The University, which is distinctively Christian with ties to a specific denomination, is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, offers associate, bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees in over 80 areas of study (Organizational website, 2017).

Approximately 3,700 students attend the institution, of which nearly 1,400 are undergraduate students on the main campus, 1,000 are undergraduate students on the three other campuses, 700 are graduate students, and 600 are enrolled through special programs (Organizational website, 2017). The undergraduate student racial/ethnic composition is: (a) less than 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, (b) 4.5% Black, (c) 1.2% Hispanic, (d) less than 1% Native Alaskan/Native American, (e) 73.4% White, and (f) 19.5% unknown (Organizational website, 2017).

The site institution identifies as a teaching institution that places an emphasis on interactions with students in the classroom and through academic advisement (Organizational documents, 2013). Faculty workload typically consists of 12 hours of teaching each semester (Organizational documents, 2017). Due to an emphasis on teaching, the class sizes are intentionally small, with an average of 24 students per class

and a student-to-faculty ratio of 16:1 (Organizational website, 2017). Additionally, most faculty members serve as academic advisors (Organizational documents, 2013).

Students at the site institution engage in a liberal arts curriculum designed to promote the value of possessing knowledge in a broad range of topics, along with specializing in a specific field of study (Organizational documents, 2013). The liberal arts curriculum consists of a general education block, along with three courses that are specific to the institution's faith-centered approach and a health and wellness course (Organizational documents, 2017). Students also complete the course requirements for their specific major. The requirements for majors vary, but typically range from 36 to 60 hours of coursework (Organizational documents, 2017).

Participants and Sampling

The participants for this study were current, full-time students considered academically at-risk upon entry to the institution due to an institutional scholarship rating (ISR) of 70 or less and who started their college career at the institution and maintained continuous enrollment to at least their fourth year of college. The ISR is calculated using a combination of a student's high school grade point average (GPA) and ACT score or SAT equivalent score. A student's ISR is determined based on the following formula, which was developed by Ruffalo Noel Levitz: $ISR = (ACT \text{ score} \times 1.389) + (\text{high school GPA} \times 12.5)$ (Organizational communication, July, 2017).

As is consistent with most qualitative research, the study utilized purposive sampling, due to the need for the participants to fit the specific ISR, continuous enrollment, and years of enrollment requirements (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). Maximum variation sampling was used to select the participants

for the interview portion of the study. This type of sampling matches well with qualitative research due to providing the opportunity to gather data from participants with varying perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2012). The interview participants were selected based on the following characteristics: (a) the four combinations of low or high GPA and ACT scores for this population; and (b) varying sociodemographic characteristics, such as race and gender. Of the 26 students who met the study criteria, eight were selected for interviews. The remaining 18 were invited to participate in the survey and reflective writing portions of the study, of which 10 participated in the survey, with five of those 10 completing the reflective writing, as well. A summary of the demographics of all participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Summary by Data Collection Tool

Demographic Factor	Percentage of total participants	Number of participants			
		Total	Interview	Survey	Reflective writing
Gender					
Male	55.6%	10	4	6	3
Female	44.4%	8	4	4	2
Race/Ethnicity					
Black	16.7%	3	2	1	1
Hispanic/White	5.6%	1	0	1	0
White	77.8%	14	6	8	4
Pell Eligible					
Yes	77.8%	14	7	7	3
No	22.2%	4	1	3	2
First-Generation Student					
Yes	33.3%	6	3	3	1
No	66.7%	12	5	7	4

Note. All reflective writing participants also participated in the survey.

Data Collection

Prior to contacting potential participants and collecting data, the primary researcher obtained permission to conduct the study through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the site institution. Multiple tools were used to gain an understanding of the experiences that influenced the participant's persistence to their fourth year of college (Creswell, 2014). The three methods of data collection were interviews, a survey with open-ended questions, and reflective writing.

The interviews lasted for approximately 50 to 70 minutes and utilized a semi-structured format. The questioning route included introductory questions, substantive questions, and closing questions (Creswell, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Unscripted follow-up questions, which varied from participant-to-participant, were used to clarify and gain a deeper understanding of factors influencing persistence, along with exploring the ways students overcame barriers in order to persist. Additionally, scripted follow-up questions, which included questions that were developed using the components of the adopted conceptual framework, were also utilized. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in order to ensure an accurate record of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2012).

The students who met the study criteria, but who were not interviewed, were invited to participate in the electronic open-ended survey and the reflective writing portions of the study. The survey items gathered the demographic characteristics of participants and included items reflecting the constructs of the conceptual framework, concluding with summary items asking for the factors that played the biggest role in promoting or impeding the participant's persistence. The reflective writing items asked

participants to provide a 50- to 150-word response regarding the factors that promoted and impeded persistence for each yearly transition. This portion included six questions, two for each transition. Initially, the survey and reflective writing were combined into one collection tool, which five participants completed. When it became evident that no additional participants were going to complete the combined tool, it was modified so that the survey was the only part of the tool, but participants were given the option of opting into the reflective writing as well. In this format, five additional participants completed the survey, but none participated in reflective writing.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was designed to answer the research questions through the examination of data and the development of emerging themes (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The initial data analysis occurred simultaneously with the data collection process (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach allowed the primary researcher to develop targeted questions for each phase of data collection based on the data collected in the previous stage (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While reviewing data and adjusting the data collection tools, the primary researcher recorded the process utilized, along with her thoughts and questions in a memo. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the process of ongoing data analysis provides clarity regarding the process of gathering data and for the data itself, along with making the process more efficient.

Upon completion of the data collection process, inductive, constant comparative analysis was utilized as the approach to data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While constant comparative analysis is often associated with grounded theory studies, Merriam

and Tisdell (2016) stated that it is used broadly in all methodologies of qualitative research. Data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti 8 software, which allowed for the recording and categorization of codes, as well as the development of networks of related data. The data analysis process began with open coding where the primary researcher looked for segments of data connected to the research questions. For each of these segments, the primary researcher recorded a word or short phrase that represented the data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Upon the completion of initial coding, the primary researcher engaged in what Creswell (2016) refers to as “‘lean’ coding” (p. 158), which allowed her to review the initial codes within the context of the broader picture of what the data portrays (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During this process, the primary researcher was able to ensure the coded data directly answered one of the research questions, and provided an opportunity to begin to group codes into similar categories, which was the beginning of axial coding. The axial coding process, resulted in emerging themes for factors promoting and factors impeding persistence.

Trustworthiness

The research team used several validity strategies to ensure the findings are transferrable, credible, and trustworthy (Creswell, 2014). In order for readers to determine if the findings are transferrable, a description of the study setting was provided earlier (Creswell, 2013). The credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were enhanced through the use of three different data collection tools, which allowed the data to be triangulated (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peer review was utilized in that the primary researcher collected and analyzed the data, while the rest of the research team reviewed the analysis and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The

primary researcher also developed an audit trail that provides a description of the methods and processes employed during data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016.) Additionally, since the primary researcher collected and offered initial interpretations of the data, sharing her positionality allows readers to understand her perspective (Creswell, 2012, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In her own educational experiences, the primary researcher was never considered academically at-risk, so it is likely that her perspective regarding factors promoting or impeding persistence may differ from that of the participants. Professionally, for the past 13 years she has served as a faculty member and program director for a first-year program designed to foster student success and persistence. Within that work, she initiated and led the development and implementation of a program designed to provide additional academic support for students who enter her specific college as academically at-risk. Due to her level of involvement with retention initiatives, the primary researcher has heard a number of perspectives from students regarding factors promoting or impeding persistence. The research team helped mitigate any bias of the primary researcher through methods that promote trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Findings

The analysis of data revealed themes that answered the research questions guiding this study. For the first research question, regarding the factors promoting persistence for students who entered a small, Midwestern, private, faith-based institution as academically at-risk, four themes emerged, each with a three to five subthemes. Concerning the second research question, regarding factors impeding persistence, three themes emerged, each with two to five subthemes. It should be noted that due to differences in the

numbers of participants who identified varying factors, the subthemes are not all of equal weight, which is explained below.

Factors Promoting Persistence

The factors promoting persistence included positive influences that had a direct effect on the participant's enrollment decisions, along with the influences that allowed participants to overcome the barriers that impeded their persistence. Overall, these factors shared more in common among participants than the factors impeding persistence, with some responses that were more specific to the individual as well. The themes and subthemes are shown in Figure 2.

Themes →	Caring and supportive campus	Campus connections	Non-campus people	A refusal to quit
	<hr/>			
Subthemes	Caring people, especially professors	Relationships with peers	Encouragement and support of family	Adjusted mindsets
	Success-oriented institution	Campus involvement	Family pressure or expectation	Adjusted actions
	Positive campus environment	Connection to academic program	To make family proud	Pivotal moments
		Being known as a person	Encouragement and support of non-college friends and co-workers	
			Seeing struggle of non-college friends	

Figure 2. Themes and subthemes for factors promoting persistence. The subthemes are listed by order of prevalence, top to bottom.

Caring and supportive campus. Of the 18 participants in this study, 17 discussed that a caring and supportive environment was a factor in their continued enrollment. The data within this theme revealed that 16 participants felt that others in the

campus community cared for them and encouraged their success, with caring professors being the most common response. Specifically, 13 participants cited that professors helped them be successful in their coursework, while several others discussed the care and support professors provided. Thirteen participants also described how their success was fostered through effective teaching strategies, opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, or through the sequencing of their courses. Additionally, 11 participants shared that the institution provided a positive context for care and support through its faith-based commitment, policies, approach to teaching and learning. Overall, a participant summarized this theme by stating:

I love the small college feel. It is nice to have the open door policy....If I needed anything, my professors and advisor were always there. It felt like one big family.

I really don't know if I could have had a better experience anywhere else!

Campus connections. All but one participant also shared that a connection to campus was a factor that influenced their decision to continue to enroll. The predominant subtheme was the connection to peers, with 14 participants sharing about the enjoyment they received from spending time with friends, and how they wanted to persist in order to continue the relationships they have with peers. It should be noted that this is different than what was discussed in the caring and supportive campus theme. Within that theme peers provided encouragement and support, while within this theme, peers provide a connection that promotes persistence. One participant stated, “I can’t wait to come back and see them and hang out with them again,” in reference to their friends, while another shared, “I became lifelong friends....I’ve lived with them....They were in my wedding. I mean, that’s one of the main reasons I’ve stayed.”

Additional themes included involvement in campus activities, which included 10 participants describing how their involvement allowed them to make friends and fostered a sense of belonging. Six participants also discussed how connections to their academic program promoted their persistence. Furthermore, six participants also shared about the positive influence of feeling like they were known at the institution, rather than just being a number or a face in the crowd.

Non-campus people. Again, 17 of the 18 participants expressed that people who are not a part of the campus community had a role in helping them persist. Twelve participants shared that family members played pivotal roles in providing ongoing support and encouragement that helped them continue as a college student. In fact, seven participants identified family as the biggest factor in their continued enrollment. For example, one participant said:

Biggest factor, number one is my mom – continuous support and encouragement. She always says, ‘Yeah, it’s going to be hard, but you’ll get it done.’ There’s never been a question of it. It’s ‘You will get this done, no matter how long it takes, no matter how hard it is.’

Family expectations or pressure promoted persistence for six participants. This included participants sharing that their family had a value of, “once you start something, you finish it,” along with others expressing that they felt pressure to earn a degree from family members. One participant shared that her family has expressed to her that there’s “not really been an option not to do it.” In contrast to the expectations or pressure participants felt from family, six participants expressed that they want to graduate in order to make their family members proud.

In addition to family members, non-college friends and co-workers were also a factor in promoting persistence for the participants in this study. Five participants shared that they received encouragement and support from friends who do not attend the institution or from co-workers, which helped them make the decision to stay in college. Four participants also discussed that seeing their non-college friends struggle with low-paying jobs and less than ideal life circumstances caused them to want to continue pursuing their degree.

A refusal to quit. All of the participants shared that they have the goal of earning a degree. That goal may have been something that they entered college with, but for most participants, they have made choices or developed motivation as a part of their college experience. The most discussed concept within this theme was related to adjustments in mindsets made by 15 of the participants, such as increases in internal motivation and attitudes related to grit. Several participants shared how their struggles during their college experience helped them realize they really did want to graduate. One participant shared: “I just want to be able to say, ‘I did this. I stepped through it. I was—I was able to persevere and get through the hard situations.’” Another discussed how her motivation to complete a degree originally came from her family, but transitioned to internal motivation, which allowed her to be willing to make sacrifices in her own life to continue in college. Additionally, three participants specifically discussed the way their motivation grew when they recognized the connection between completing a college degree and their personal goals. One student stated: “I finally figured out what...it would be like, after college...and, then that pushed me to...keep coming back. So, I can learn more and get a degree and be more...eligible for different jobs and stuff.” Five

participants also indicated that the progress that they made toward their degree made them want to persist, while three shared that their self-efficacy regarding their academic success was a factor in their continued enrollment.

Nine participants discussed the adjustments in behavior they made in order to continue to persist. While the mindsets discussed above are internal, this subtheme is related to actions students took, such as increasing their effort in academics and using study strategies and academic support resources. One participant shared about overcoming what she perceived to be a negative perception regarding asking for help from academic support resources. This participant stated: “I learned...just ask for help. I was so embarrassed to ask for help. And, I was—I felt dumb going to math tutoring. I literally felt just so dumb. But, it helped so much.”

This theme also includes a subtheme related to pivotal moments that some participants encountered, which often promoted internal motivation within the participant. While not every participant shared a single moment that was a critical to their persistence, the eight who did had quite compelling stories. For example, one participant discussed an encounter where a member of the campus community doubted his ability to be successful as a student. This encounter was very hurtful to the student, but the student used it as a point of motivation. He told the individual, “In four years, when I can graduate, I’ll come back to you, and I’ll tell you I did it. Kind of just say too bad—you were all wrong.” Another participant discussed receiving a letter stating that she was no longer eligible for financial aid due to poor academic performance and that she would need to appeal to continue to receive aid. She describe that moment in the following way:

It was like that light bulb moment...and it was like, this is my future. This is how I want things, you know, I want all these kids, and I can't do that working a minimum wage job. So...after I got that letter, it was like, the life you want versus the life you'll have. And, it was kind of, which one's going to win, and in that moment it was like, no...I've just got to. That was the biggest moment. It was the biggest moment. It was the turn-around.

Factors Impeding Persistence

The factors impeding persistence for participants were experiences, issues, and perspectives that created obstacles to continued enrollment. While the factors promoting persistence were much more shared among participants, the factors impeding persistence were more specific to the individual; however, the individual experiences were similar enough to be categorized into themes. The themes and subthemes are shown in Figure 3.

Themes →			
	Academic barriers	Non-academic institutional impediments	Personal obstacles
Subthemes	Struggles with coursework	Cost of tuition	Individual student attributes
	In-class obstacles	Negative peer experiences	Non-college issues
	Academic programming issues	Barriers with campus offerings	
	Out-of-sequence courses	Trivial rules	
	Lack of preparation for college	Actions misaligned with mission	

Figure 3. Themes and subthemes for factors impeding persistence. The subthemes are listed by order of prevalence, top to bottom.

Academic barriers. The most common barrier to continued persistence for the participants in this study was encountering an issue within academics. Out of the 18 participants, 15 discussed some type of academic issue that was a barrier they had to overcome. The most frequently shared barrier overall was the subtheme related to the struggle with academic coursework, which was expressed by 14 participants. Five of the 14 participants specifically shared that their academic struggles took place in the first or second year of college; however, one participant noted that his struggle lasted even into the fourth year:

So, for my first three and half years, I thought [name of institution] was the hardest, just the hardest thing I ever did in my life, honestly, because, coming from high school, I didn't do homework, I didn't study, I didn't even go to class, it was just like, you do enough to maintain and you're good. But, here it's like, you do enough to maintain, and you're on academic probation.

Five other participants echoed similar stories and discussed that they thought they could be successful in college by using the same approach they did in high school, which they found was not an approach that led to success. One participant shared, "It was tough. I came in thinking I could just do... it without studying....I was able to do that in high school."

Six participants encountered obstacles to persistence due to experiences they had in the classroom. These obstacles primarily included the teaching style of professors or the pace of instruction. Five participants discussed encountering issues with academic programming, which included the lack of a desired program or participant views' that the general education courses lacked relevance. Three participants shared about obstacles

created by taking classes out of order, while two participants discussed the negative influence of the lack of college preparation, meaning they felt unprepared for college course work from their high school.

Non-academic institutional impediments. In addition to the academic issues that participants had to overcome, participants also shared about ways their non-academic experiences sometimes created barriers to persistence. Thirteen participants cited issues with the institutional policies and practices and with out-of-class experiences. The predominant subtheme was the cost of the institution, which eight participants cited as an impediment. When asked about the factors they had to overcome in order to continue to enroll, one participant stated, “the tuition being one of the main ones,” and another participant shared that “money’s been a massive obstacle.”

Six participants related stories of negative experiences with peers and how they had to overcome those in order to persist. These experiences included peers being uncaring or demonstrating different values than the participants. One participant shared that his peers, “aren’t willing to listen to others’ sides”, while another stated, “their work ethic doesn’t match mine.” Things the campus had to offer, such as the amount of activities, the demands of activities, and the cafeteria food also presented barriers to six participants. Five participants cited obstacles to continued enrollment due to what they perceive as trivial institutional rules, which were primarily associated with the rules within residence life, such as curfew and fines for things that the participants do not see as issues. Four participants discussed a barrier with the institution’s offerings, which included a lack of activities and the cafeteria food, while two participants expressed

issues with what they observed as a lack of alignment between actions of the institution and its stated mission.

Personal obstacles. In addition to the barriers that existed within the institutional experience, 15 participants referred to obstacles to persistence caused by personal issues. Twelve participants discussed internal attributes specific to the individual that created impediments to persistence, such as lack of sense of belonging, homesickness, lack of motivation, negative perspectives, or lack of direction. One participant specifically communicated the relationship between his academic performance and his sense of belonging in college by saying that, “being an average student and feeling inadequate to be here” was the main factor he had to overcome in order to persist. Another participant expressed a barrier to persistence regarding her motivation when she said, “sometimes, I just don’t want to do school.”

The other subtheme revealed how the presence of issues outside of the institution presented obstacles to participants. Nine participants shared about how family issues, relationships with peers outside the institution, or the enticement of other opportunities presented hurdles to their persistence. The family issues included, the death or sickness of family members, family members being incarcerated, or unexpected pregnancies for family members. One participant shared the conflict that family issues created for him: “Being away from my family, watching my family pass away and go to jail has made college quite difficult. I feel like I can prevent a lot of things back home, but I am here.” Others relayed that relationships with peers outside of the institution caused them to struggle with the decision to reenroll. This included hearing of friends’ experience at other institutions, the struggle with romantic relationships where the other person was not

at the institution, and wanting to see friends from high school. Additionally, opportunities other than college caused some to consider whether they should continue to enroll at the site institution. Examples of these external enticements included perceived opportunities at other institutions and connections at a home church.

Discussion

This qualitative study adds to the understanding of the factors that promoted and impeded persistence for students who, despite entering college as academically at-risk, persisted to at least the fourth year of college at a small, private, faith-based, Midwestern University. The findings demonstrated that the components of the conceptual framework are indeed factors in at-risk student persistence. Additionally, the findings of this study revealed that student persistence is dependent upon a combination of influences, as is reflected in the framework guiding this study, along with a number of other retention models, such as those by: (a) Tinto (1993), (b) Bean and Eaton (2000), and (c) Braxton et al. (2004). The multi-factor nature of the findings confirms the complexity of at-risk college student persistence (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The factors promoting persistence reflected the importance of each component of the conceptual framework. Participants related the positive influence of a caring and supportive campus community and environment, coinciding with research by Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) regarding the value of institutional support and high quality relationships. The findings demonstrated that caring and helpful faculty play a vital role in promoting persistence for academically at-risk students, which is consistent with research by Heaney and Fisher (2011), Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2011), and Mayhew et al. (2016). Similar to research by Kuh et al. (2006) and Heaney

and Fisher (2011), peers at the institution were also identified as factors that promoted persistence, through their encouragement, support, and friendship; however, in contrast to Reason's (2009) discussion of the peer environment, participants did not specifically reveal that shared values and worldviews were the foundation of a positive peer environment. Additionally, a few participants reflected similar findings to Heaney and Fisher's (2011) regarding the positive influence of recognizing the connection between their future goals and the value of college. Interestingly, the role of family, along with friends and co-workers outside of the institution, validates the inclusion of external factors as its own component in the framework.

When considering the component of pre-college characteristics, the findings revealed the role of student disposition is more complex than just the internal motivation or goal-orientation a student possesses at the beginning of his or her college career. The participants' experiences demonstrated that many of them had to overcome obstacles that required them to revise their mindsets, along with adjusting their actions, such as time management and study habits. These significant responses more fully reflect the psychological adjustments students make during their college experience, as outlined in Bean and Eaton's (2000) Psychological Model of College Student Retention. The mindset changes are the result of a revised internal locus of control, and behavioral adjustments allow the student to adapt in a way that fosters success and persistence.

The subtheme related to pivotal moments in the experiences of some participants is similar to the concept of a disorienting dilemma, which is the initial step in transformational learning (Mezirow, 1978). Merriam and Bierema (2014) referred to a disorienting dilemma as an important life event that creates a crisis in the individual's

life. A disorienting dilemma causes individuals to consider their own assumptions, critically reflect on the situation, and then take action (Mezirow, 1997). Likewise, the pivotal moments encountered by participants required them to consider their own values and goals, analyze their situation, and then respond in a way that promoted their persistence in college.

The findings for the factors impeding persistence also reflected the components of the conceptual framework. The most common barrier to persistence was the struggle to be academically successful. Because the participants entered college with the designation of academically at-risk, this finding is not surprising and is consistent with studies by ACT (2012), Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012), and Kinzie, Gonya, Shoup, and Kuh (2008). It may be helpful to note that most of the participants' academic issues were in the first two years of their college experience.

While the participants' academic struggle reiterates the importance of a supportive campus environment and caring faculty (Kuh et al., 2006; Mayhew et al., 2016), the participants' non-academic institutional experiences also created barriers to persistence. The most frequently cited barriers within this theme related to the cost of tuition, negative peer experiences, and the rules within residence life, all of which may be viewed as issues that do not reflect a caring environment (Kuh et al., 2006). The influence of negative peer relationships on continued enrollment parallels Heaney and Fisher's (2011) findings regarding the link between positive social interactions and high persistence rates; however, this finding extends previous research to specifically indicate that negative peer interactions may create barriers to continued enrollment. Likewise, the participants' views of negative in-class experiences demonstrated the importance of

effective teaching practices for at-risk students. While Mayhew et al. (2016) found that effective instruction increases success for academically at-risk students, the findings of this study go beyond that to indicate that the lack of effective classroom instruction is a barrier to at-risk student persistence. Other impediments to persistence revealed in this study, such as personal obstacles, were also consistent with the components of the framework of this study.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

While the research team made every effort to develop and conduct a trustworthy study, consistent with all research, this study includes limitations. The first limitation is that the population of participants is small, and as a result, even with the use of maximum variation sampling to select interview participants, the responses cannot be generalized and should only be considered for transferability if the institution and participants are similar to those in this study. A second limitation is the use of the ISR, which is a combination of the student's high school GPA and ACT score, or SAT equivalent, as the way to identify a student as academically at-risk. The use of the ISR does not consider other pre-college characteristics that could influence the degree to which a student is academically at-risk as he or she enters college. Despite these limitations, this research enhances the understanding of the factors promoting and impeding persistence for students who enter college as academically at-risk.

This study revealed the opportunity for additional studies that could advance the understanding of factors contributing to or impeding persistence for students who enter college academically at-risk. Due to the small population of participants, along with the faith-based nature of the institution, similar studies could be conducted at institutions

with a larger population of students or with differing missions. Additional studies, which focus on different factors that contribute to being academically at-risk, could also be conducted. These studies could include factors such as internal motivation at the beginning of college, first-generation status, socioeconomic status, or other demographic or student disposition factors. Because this study was a comprehensive study of persistence, other studies could also focus on one of the components of the framework and how that factor more deeply influenced persistence decisions.

Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this study have several implications for institutional policies and practices. Institutions should be aware that persistence is likely enhanced from the care and support of those around them, both institutionally and externally, for students who enter college as academically at-risk. As a result, it is suggested that institutions review policies and practices for faculty and staff to determine if there are ways to enrich a culture of concern for academically at-risk students. These policies and practices may include those related to: (a) faculty availability to students outside of class; (b) academic advising, (c) classroom practices, such as attendance and grading, (d) out-of-class activities, and (e) academic support resources. Additionally, due to the prominent role of family support in at-risk student persistence, institutions could consider how to effectively partner with families in supporting students who enter the institution as academically at-risk (Barbatis, 2010). Additional ways to ensure institutions provide a caring and supportive environment may include providing comprehensive and accessible academic support, especially for the first two years, along with helping students consider ways to adjust their mindsets and behaviors in order to foster success and persistence.

In a time when accountability for student persistence to graduation is increasing, this study provides an understanding of the factors that promoted persistence to the fourth year of college for students who entered college as academically at-risk at a small, private, faith-based, Midwestern University. The understanding of these factors can help institutions work toward utilizing policies and practices that promote persistence and reduce the influences that tend to be barriers to persistence (Braxton et al., 2014; Padilla, 1999; Tinto 2012b). The findings of this study support the consideration of the components of the conceptual framework guiding this study, along with providing opportunities for students to effectively adjust their perspective and actions in ways that foster success and ultimately persistence.

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SECTION SIX: SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

Prior to entering the Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership program, I was not familiar with the term scholarly practitioner; however, I knew I wanted to pursue a degree that helped me grow in my ability to improve practice. During my time as a doctoral student, I gained an understanding of what it means to be a scholarly practitioner. Schultz (2010) describes scholarly practitioners as “educational leaders who utilize scholarship via inquiry of, in, and for practice” (p. 53). My journey as a doctoral student, especially through the dissertation-in-practice, has allowed me to develop my understanding of scholarship and how to use it effectively as a practitioner. This section provides a description of the ways in which the dissertation process has changed me as an educational leader, both in practice and in scholarship.

Influence on Practice

The dissertation process allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to embrace a problem of practice and use research findings to determine potential strategies for improvement. In my professional role, I am known for consistently looking for ways to make my department more effective; however, I am guilty of often making decisions using anecdotal evidence, which may or may not be accurate. Completing my dissertation has allowed me to have a better understanding of the need for empirical research and deeper insights. Overall, engaging in the process of designing research, reviewing literature, collecting and analyzing data, giving meaning to the findings, and developing recommendations for practice has helped me evolve as an educational leader. This section discusses the ways in which I have grown as a practitioner, including: (a) possessing a deeper value of reflective inquiry, (b) recognizing the importance of using data to inform practice, (c) understanding the significance of listening to others’ stories,

(d) establishing an enhanced commitment to ethical leadership, and (e) valuing the opportunity for increased communication with stakeholders.

Value of Reflective Inquiry

In my professional role, I teach an Introduction to Critical Thinking course to first-year college students. One point of emphasis in the class is the process of asking meaningful questions regarding issues encountered in life. Similarly, the dissertation process revealed the value in asking important questions about the problems of practice I encounter. While my questions regarding my dissertation topic were addressed through data collection and analysis, that process also caused me to consider additional issues outside of my research focus, such as wanting to know more about the experiences of minority students and wondering how the outcomes of my study might be different if my participants were first- and second-year college students. This desire to know more about issues I encounter in my work is a key component in fostering a culture of organizational learning (Gill, 2010; Nonaka, 1991, 1994; Schultz, 2010). Overall, I now recognize more fully that, as an educational leader, it is my responsibility to participate in and ensure a culture of reflective inquiry, which leads to gathering and utilizing data to improve practice and contributing to institutional learning (Gill, 2010; Schultz, 2010).

Importance of Using Data to Inform Practice

As discussed previously, I am, much like Bensimon (2004) described, guilty of often relying on anecdotal information to assess causation regarding issues of practice. This approach seems to be common in educational settings and one that I have encountered during my career as an educator, in both secondary and post-secondary settings; however, my doctoral coursework and the dissertation process provided insight

regarding the importance of utilizing data to make informed decisions. The findings of my dissertation revealed the scope and depth of factors influencing persistence for my participants, and they are much more insightful than what anyone could have guessed. As a result, I now more fully recognize the power of data, and its use in understanding issues and in making decisions regarding ways to improve practice (Kowlaski, 2009). Additionally, I have a greater understanding of how data can provide a connection between practice and policy in a way that facilitates effective change, and, as an educational leader, I am committed to the use of data in decision-making (Petrides, 2003).

Significance of Listening to Others' Stories

The data I collected for my dissertation provided a rich understanding of the factors influencing persistence for the participants. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I found the stories and experiences of many of the participants quite compelling. The participant experiences in telling their stories provided an opportunity for understanding and an opportunity for me to exhibit care. During several interviews, the participants made comments like, "I've never thought about this before" or "I didn't realize this about myself until now." These comments demonstrate the way that telling our stories helps us make sense of our experiences, along with allowing us to develop empathy and grow in self-understanding (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). I found that this process had a humanizing effect on me as the researcher. I did not anticipate the way that hearing the participants' stories would cause me to care about them as individuals and as students. This experience makes me want to know the stories of others, in relationship to problems of practice.

As I just mentioned, the opportunity to demonstrate care to the participants was not something I had considered prior to my dissertation. I was surprised and honored by the fact that some participants shared experiences that were very personal in nature. For example, one participant shared about an injustice that he encountered as a student, to which I was able to express empathy. A few weeks later, the same participant contacted me to tell me that he had another similar experience. During that conversation, he mentioned that he felt comfortable telling me about his experiences because he knew I cared. My experience in listening to the stories of others helped me more fully understand why Schultz (2010) identified care as one of the core values of a scholarly practitioner.

Enhanced Commitment to Ethical Leadership

With the vulnerability shown by some of the participants as they told their stories, I found that the dissertation process reenergized my commitment to being an ethical educational leader. I say reenergized my commitment because my Strengths Finder results revealed a strength of belief, which allows me to function from a core set of values that promote ethical behavior (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006). From a practitioner perspective, the most notable potential ethical dilemma in my study is considering how the recommendations for practice may influence other people. Mihelic, Lipicnik, and Tekavcic (2010) shared that ethical leadership involves considering how the decisions made by leaders may affect stakeholders, which with my study may include students, staff, faculty, and administrators. As a result, my role as an educational leader should reflect integrity and consider the implications of recommendations and actions on stakeholders. Stefkovich and Begley (2007) discussed the importance of making

decisions that reflect the best interest of students, not just my own interests or those of the institution. This idea can be extended beyond students to include other stakeholders, as well, such as faculty and staff, since they may have a role in implementing the improvements in practice.

Opportunity for Communication among Stakeholders

Because the stakeholders may be involved in carrying out or participating in the recommendations for practice, it is important that I communicate the findings and recommendations to stakeholders in a clear and effective manner (McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorne, 2013). I have been surprised by the interest expressed by others at my institution regarding the findings of my study. Much like the value of reflective inquiry, sharing the findings and recommendations from my study presents the opportunity to engage in and promote the concept organizational learning (Gill, 2010). The presentation of the outcomes of my study allows for conversations and the development of ideas that could benefit the institution. During the dissertation process, I realized that my institution could be more effective in sharing knowledge in order to develop innovative and effective solutions to problems across multiple departments. (Bennett & Jessani, 2011; Nonaka, 1991, 1994). I recognized that I can be a leader at my institution by sharing information and initiating conversations that will hopefully lead to improved practice.

Overall, the dissertation process helped me grow in my understanding of and commitment to being an educational leader who addresses problems of practice by using information and communication to promote improvement. In my discussion, a commitment to foster a culture of organizational learning was discussed several times and

is the overriding take-away for me from this experience. Additionally, I recognize the value of communication with others, through listening to the stories of participants and communication with stakeholders, along with the importance of a foundation in ethical leadership. This is tied together with the concept of being a hopeful leader who believes that improvements in practice will make things better for all stakeholders (Helland & Winston, 2005).

Influence on Scholarship

The dissertation process was the first time I participated in the entire research process as the sole researcher. Throughout my doctoral coursework, we completed a research project each term; however, the projects were always completed in groups, so there were others that were contributing ideas, helping carry the workload, and assisting with writing the report. I found that working through the dissertation process on my own allowed me to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the concept of scholarship, along with helping me grow and change as a scholar. This section describes the ways in which completing my dissertation has changed my perspective on scholarship, including: (a) the revision of my research paradigm, (b) understanding the value in reviewing literature, (c) recognizing the importance of sharing new knowledge, and (d) the need for ethical and trustworthy methods.

Revised Research Paradigm

This dissertation experience caused me to adjust my research paradigm. When I started the doctoral program, I was confident in my positivist views; however, through the coursework and the data gathered through my qualitative study, I find that I have moved toward social constructivism. A positivist paradigm is the belief that reality is

objective and shared by all, while social constructivism is based on the belief that reality is defined by a person's own interpretation rather than common qualities and that a shared understanding of reality is developed through the analysis of various interpretations (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). Hearing the varying experiences of the participants helped me to understand that for an issue regarding perception and individual experience, I lean toward agreeing that a sense of reality emerges through the examination of multiple perspectives; however, I maintain my positivist perspective in regard to more scientific processes.

Value of Literature

Within the components of the dissertation-in-practice, I was most intimidated by formulating and writing a review of the literature related to my research topic. I am a detail-oriented person, so in the process of reviewing resources, I am guilty of often getting caught up in what could be trivial information, rather than considering the bigger picture. This made me dread the review of literature; however, after completing my literature review, conducting my research, and then making sense of my findings, I recognize the value in being steeped in the literature related to a research topic. As Creswell (2012) shared, the review of literature has multiple purposes: (a) it helps you determine the significance of your study, (b) provides the background knowledge needed for the study, and (c) allows for comparing the findings of your study to those of others. My experience helped me see that the review of literature forms the foundation of the study, from informing the purpose to providing points of comparison for my findings. As the researcher, I found myself thinking about the literature while I was collecting and analyzing data. Overall, my perspective regarding the value of literature grew as a result

of the dissertation process, and made me want to contribute to the overall body of literature.

Desire to Share Knowledge

The desire to share my findings with the research community grew as I engaged in dissertation research. Previously, I never endeavored to publish, but the process of conducting my own research study created an aspiration to do so. The progression of using the review of literature to identify a gap, then conducting research in an attempt to fill the gap, motivates me to disseminate the findings to the research community. Bennett and Jessani (2011) described publishing research findings as a required step in making the information useful and allowing it to be transformed to knowledge by the readers. Sharing my findings allows me to contribute new information to the field, which can hopefully be utilized by others to more fully understand factors influencing persistence for students who enter college academically at-risk. I appreciate that my doctoral program utilized a dissertation format that required the development of a dissemination-ready journal article. I believe the process of writing the journal article is the point where my motivation to publish increased.

Importance in Ensuring Ethical and Trustworthy Methods

As I mentioned in the section regarding the way the dissertation influenced me as a practitioner, I am committed to ethical practices. While the emphasis for a practitioner is the impact of recommendations for practice on stakeholder, within scholarship, the need for ethical and trustworthy methods was highlighted through my dissertation process. The nature of scholarly research incorporates ethics into the methods through gaining approval of Institutional Review Boards and obtaining informed consent;

however, the actual implementation of ethical processes is more complicated than completing those tasks. During data collection, I struggled to get participation for my open-ended, electronic survey. As a result, I had to contact potential participants and invite them to take the survey more times than planned. The increased invitations to participate caused me to reflect on the processes I was using and ensure that I used language that invited participation rather than coercing participation or exploiting any power imbalances (Seidman, 2013). Additionally, through out data collection and in reporting my findings, I was intentional about protecting the identity of the participants, which is what I committed to in the informed consent (Seidman, 2013). I was surprised by the weight of responsibility I felt in protecting the participants. Upon reflection, I see that this experience demonstrates the complex nature of ethical practice.

In addition to protecting participant rights during recruitment, data collection, and data reporting, I also recognized the need to use trustworthy methods in my research. Again, in theory, I knew that this was necessary; however, in reality, the process required a level of intentionality that I did not anticipate. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) shared that researcher integrity is the key to ethical research and trustworthy findings. During data collection and data analysis, I made efforts to not ask leading questions, to remove my own perspective, and to consistently focus on attempting to answer the two research questions. Overall, the dissertation process caused me to come to a deeper understanding of my role in ensuring my research study utilized ethical and trustworthy methods.

As I consider how completing my dissertation has influenced me as a scholar, my prevailing conclusion is that I am motivated to do more empirical research studies, which I was uncertain about prior to participating in this process. Due to the shift in my

research paradigm, I lean toward continuing to utilize a qualitative methodology so that I can make meaning of the experiences of participants. I also desire to learn more from current research regarding the research topics I pursue, and then to provide information that deepens the understanding of the topic in the research community. Additionally, I have a better understanding of the importance of ethical research practices and trustworthy methods, to ensure the protection of participants and the credibility of the findings. I hope to utilize this newfound motivation and understanding to continue to grow as a scholar.

Conclusion

As I mentioned in the introduction to this section, I entered the doctoral program with the desire to be equipped to improve practice. Through my experiences in the coursework and the dissertation, I recognized the value of being a scholarly practitioner. As Dirkx (2006) suggested, scholarship and practice should be married together in order to address problems and inform theory. The equal emphasis on scholarship and practice provides a reciprocal relationship with research generating knowledge that can be applied to problems of practice, which can then be refined through additional research (Schultz, 2010). I finish the doctoral program not just with the ability to improve practice, but with the skills and understanding of scholarship that will allow me to address problems of practice with scholarly research.

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Appendix A

Appendix A includes the recruitment scripts for the individual interviews and the electronic survey and reflective writing.

Interview Invitation

Phone Call

Hello! Am I speaking with <insert student's name>? (Assuming it is the correct student)...This is Dana Steward, the <insert title and institution name>. How are you today?

As a part of my role at <insert institution>, I have access to student data and use that data to analyze factors that may influence a student's decision to continue to enroll here. <Institution> has given me to permission to contact you to see if you would be interested in participating in a research study that explores the experiences of students like you...who progressed to at least the fourth year of college. You have a unique perspective, and I would like to understand the experiences you have had as a student, specifically related to the factors that helped you be successful and the things that you might have had to overcome to be successful.

I would love to interview you, so I can learn more about your experiences as a college student. The interview will last approximately an hour and a half and can be scheduled at a time that works best for you between [insert date range]. Would you be willing to participate?

<If so>

Great! What day and time would work best for us to meet the week of April 2 or April 9? <Schedule interview time> Interviews will be held in the <insert office name> Conference Room, which is located in the <insert office area> in the <insert building name> building. Do you know where that is?

I will email your institutional email address with the date, time, and location of the interview, along with an informed consent document that explains the study and your rights as a participant. If you have a chance, please review that form prior to the interview. You do not need to bring anything with you to the interview. I will have a paper copy of the informed consent form for you to read and sign at that time.

I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences as a persisting college student! Have a great day! Good bye!

<If no>

That's okay. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today. If you consider my offer and decide you would like to participate, please let me know by calling <insert phone number>.

Have a great day! Good bye!

Confirmation Email

Email Subject: Persisting College Students – Interview Reminder and Info

Hello, <insert student's name>! Thanks again for your willingness to be interviewed as a part of my research regarding persisting college students. As we discussed on the phone, your interview is scheduled for <date> at <time> in the <insert area> Conference Room, which is located in the <insert office> in the <insert building name> Building. Please plan on the interview taking approximately an hour and a half.

I have attached a copy of the informed consent document that I will give you prior to the interview. If you have the opportunity, please review the document before you come to the interview. It provides information related to the study and to your rights as a participant. As outlined in the informed consent document, your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. Additionally, your name and other identifying information will not be shared in the results of the study. Unless you tell others, I will be the only person who will know you are participating in the study.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. I look forward to learning about your unique experiences and perspectives.

See you on the <date> at <time> in the <insert office name>!

Dana Steward

Survey and Reflective Writing Invitation

Survey and Reflective Writing Preview and Invitation – Phone Call

Hello! Am I speaking with <insert student's name>? (Assuming it is the correct student)...This is Dana Steward, the <insert title and institution name>. How are you today?

I am calling to notify you that you will be receiving an email in your institutional account that invites you to participate in a survey regarding a research study I am completing. As a part of my role at <insert institution>, I have access to student data and use that data to analyze factors that may influence a student's decision to continue to enroll here.

<Institution> has given me to permission to contact you to invite you to participate in a research study, which explores the experiences of students like you...who progressed to at least the fourth year of college. You have a unique perspective, and I would like to understand the experiences you have had as a student, specifically related to the factors that helped you be successful and the things that you might have had to overcome to be successful.

I would love for you to complete the survey so that I can learn more about your experiences as a college student. The survey is online and will take you approximately 30 minutes to complete. You will receive the survey on [insert date] and it will close at the end of the day on [insert date]. I will send a reminder email on [insert date] regarding the availability of the survey.

You do not have to commit to taking the survey at this time. This call is purely to alert you that you are invited to participate in the survey. Do you have any questions about the study or the survey that I can answer at this time? If you have questions in the future, please feel free to call me at <insert phone number> or by replying to the email invitation.

Again, I would appreciate you completing the survey so that I can learn about your unique experiences as a college student. Have a great day! Good bye!

Survey and Reflective Writing Invitation - Email

Email subject: Persisting College Students – Survey Invitation

Hello <insert name>!

I am completing research regarding the experiences of college students, like you, who progressed to at least the fourth year of college. You have a unique perspective, and I would like to understand the experiences you have had as a student, specifically related to the factors that helped you be successful and the things that you might have had to overcome to be successful.

The following link connects you to a survey that asks a series of questions related to you – your demographics, your disposition, and your college experiences. The survey begins

with informed consent, which explains the purpose of the study and your rights as a participant. If you agree to voluntarily participate, after reading the informed consent page, continue on to begin the survey. The survey should take approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete.

Survey link: <insert survey link>

The survey results do not identify you by name, so I will not know whether you've taken the survey or not. If you choose to complete the survey, please know that I truly appreciate you taking the time to do so.

If you have questions or concerns about this survey or my research, please feel free to contact me by replying to this email.

I wish you much success as you continue your education.

Sincerely,

Dana Steward

Survey and Reflective Writing Reminders

Email Reminder 1

Email subject: Persisting College Students – Survey Invitation

Hi <insert name>! This is a reminder that the survey for my study is still available. If you would like to complete the survey, please click on the link in the email below. The survey will close at the end of the day on Friday.

As you know, I am studying the factors that helped students at SBU continue to enroll and the factors that had to be overcome to continue to enroll. So, I would love to know about your experiences and gain insight about the factors that influenced your continued enrollment.

Like I said in my previous email, the results do not identify participants by name, so if you have already completed the survey, please ignore this email and receive my sincere thanks for taking the time to do so.

If you have any questions about the survey or my research, please do not hesitate to ask by responding to this email.

Again, I wish you much success as you continue your education.

Thanks,

Dana Steward

Email Reminder 2

Email subject: Persisting College Students – Survey Invitation

Hello <insert name>! Just a reminder that the survey for my study continues to be open. If you have not yet completed it and wish to do so, you can access the survey through the following link: <insert link>

As I've stated previously, the results do not identify participants by name, so if you have already completed the survey, please ignore this email and know that I am grateful for your participation.

Please be in touch if you have any questions about the survey or my research.

Best regards,

Dana Steward

Survey and Reflective Writing Invitation (with optional Reflective Writing)

Survey Invitation (with optional Reflective Writing) - Text Message

Hi <insert student's name>! I am conducting a research study regarding the factors that promote/impede student persistence in college. I am inviting you to participate in my study by completing a short survey (shorter than the one I emailed you about previously). The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete

The survey can be accessed at: <insert link>

If you choose to complete the survey, please know I appreciate you taking the time to do so. If you have questions about my research, you can reach me at this number or at: <insert researcher's email address>.

Thanks,

Dana Steward

<insert researcher's position at institution>

Survey Reminders (with optional Reflective Writing)

Phone Call Reminder

Hello! This Dana Steward am I speaking with <insert student's name>? (Assuming it is the correct student)...Great! I am a faculty member at <insert institution> in the <insert department name> and, as you may know, <insert institution> has given me permission to conduct a research study and to contact you as a potential participant. The study explores the factors that help students persist to the fourth year of college and the factors that were barriers that students had to overcome in order to persist. I am only asking a small number of students to share their experiences with me and you are part of that small group. So, your feedback on the survey is important to me.

I know I have contacted you several times inviting you to participate. The most recent invitation was a text to complete a shorter survey than what I have emailed about previously. I sent that text on Tuesday. The reason I have contacted you so many times is due to my need to have a certain amount of data from the small group of potential participants I have identified.

When you access the survey, you will see that the first section has a lot of text, which may be a barrier to you participating. I want to take a moment to share what that text communicates. That page is informing you of your rights as a potential voluntary participant. The key points are that you have a right to choose whether or not to participate, that you can withdraw your participation at any time, that you have the option to not answer some questions, and that your identity will remain anonymous, meaning that I will not identify you individually in the findings of my study. I encourage you to review the information in the survey, but wanted to provide the highlights for you over the phone. If you are willing to participate, you can click next at the bottom of the first page and begin the survey.

The survey will likely take around 20 minutes to complete. If you are interested in participating, but would prefer to complete the survey by phone or in person, I'm happy to set up a time to do that or we can complete it right now if you have the time. Is that something you are interested in doing?

If so: set up time or begin survey

If not:

Okay. I appreciate you taking the time to consider whether you would like to complete the survey I have sent. Would it be helpful to you if I sent the survey to an email account? If so, what account?

Do you have any questions about the survey or about my research? If you have questions in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Again, please know that your experiences and perspectives about the factors that have influenced your decision to continue to enroll are important to me. Thank you for your willingness to consider participating in my survey. I wish you the best as you finish up this semester!

Good bye!

Email Reminder 1 (for those who did not answer phone)

Email subject: Shorter Survey Invitation – Persisting College Students

Hi <insert student's name>! I just let a voicemail for you, but in case you have not had a chance to listen to it, I want to let you know why I continue to contact you and invite you to participate in a survey. That survey is one of the ways I am collecting data from

students regarding the factors that promoted or impeded their continued enrollment at <insert institution>. I am only asking a small number of students to share their experiences with me, and you are part of that small group, which is why I continue to contact you and is why your feedback on the survey is important to me.

The survey will likely take around 20 minutes to complete. This is a link to a shorter version of the survey (from what I sent previously): <insert survey link>

If you access the survey, you will see that the first section has a lot of text, which may seem a bit overwhelming. That page is informing you of your rights as a potential voluntary participant. The key points are that you have a right to choose whether or not to participate, that you can withdraw your participation at any time, that you have the option to not answer some questions, and that your identity will remain anonymous, meaning that I will not identify you individually in the findings of my study. I encourage you to review the information in the survey, but wanted to provide the highlights for you. If you are willing to participate, you can click next at the bottom of the first page and begin the survey.

If you are interested in participating, but would prefer to complete the survey by phone or in person, I'm happy to set up a time to do that. So, please contact me at <insert number> or respond to this email.

Please be in touch if you have any questions about the survey or about my research.

I hope the beginning to the end of the semester is going well for you!

Blessings,

Dana Steward

Additional Email Reminders (sent two time)

Email subject: Shorter Survey Invitation – Persisting College Students

Hi <insert name>! I just wanted to remind you that you still have the opportunity to complete the survey for my study. Again, you are a part of small group of students who I am asking to complete the survey. I need a few more students to participate, so if you are willing to take the survey, I would sure appreciate it!

Here's the link to the survey: <insert link>

As a reminder from my previous survey, the first page of the survey has a lot of text. It is informing you about my study and your rights as a voluntary participant, along with explaining that your identity will not be shared in my findings.

Please be in touch if you have any questions about my research or my study.

Thanks so much!

Dana Steward

Text Message Reminders (sent two times)

Hi <insert name>! The survey related to my study of persisting college is still available. I need a few more students to complete the survey, so if you're willing to take it, I sure would appreciate it!

Here's the link to the survey: <insert link>

It will likely take about 15-20 minutes to complete. Please be in touch if you have any questions!

Thanks,

Dana Steward

<insert title at institution>

Appendix B

Appendix B includes the informed consent documents for the individual interviews and the combined electronic survey and reflective writing.

Informed Consent - Interview

This form is designed to provide you with an understanding of the purpose of the research being conducted and of your rights as a potential voluntary participant. If you volunteer to participate, this form will serve as the record of your agreement to participate.

Research Study: College Students at a Small, Private, Faith-Based University: A Qualitative Study of Factors Promoting Persistence to the Fourth Year

Researcher: Dana Steward, <insert title>, <insert institution>
Office: <insert office location>
Phone: <insert cell number> Email: <insert address>

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in an individual interview where you will be asked to share how your personal characteristics and the various experiences you have had in college influenced your decision to continue enrolling.

The interview will be face-to-face with the researcher and will be held at a mutually agreed upon location. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure the researcher has an accurate record of your responses. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 90 minutes to complete.

Research Uses

The data collected for this study will be utilized by the researcher to complete the dissertation requirements for a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of Missouri. Participants may request to view the results by contacting the researcher (in person or <insert phone number> or <insert email address>).

Participant Rights

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to not participate or you may withdraw from participation at any time. Additionally, you may choose to not answer all of the interview questions. Your decision to not participate, to withdraw, or to not answer all of the questions does not affect your relationship with the researcher or the institution in any way.

Risks

Participation in the interview may cause participants to reflect on themselves and their college experiences, as a result, it is possible that participants could experience varying

degrees of emotional discomfort. The researcher will make every effort to minimize any such discomfort.

Benefits

Participants may receive benefits from completing the interview, such as, learning more about themselves and how their college experience influenced their decision-making.

Costs/Payments

There are no costs or payments for your voluntary participation in this study.

Participant Confidentiality

Your identity and personal information is strictly confidential, unless law requires disclosure. Audio files and transcripts of the interview, along with the compiled results of the study, will be kept on a password-protected computer. Any paper copies of results will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Participant responses may be quoted in the results, but no student identifiers will be included. The results shared in the researcher's dissertation will not include student names or specific identifiers.

Contact Information

You may ask the researcher any questions you have regarding this study prior to consenting to participate, during the interview, or after the interview is complete. If you wish to withdraw from this study, you may do so at any time. During the interview, you can let the researcher know you wish to withdraw. After the interview, you may contact the researcher to withdraw. Please direct your questions or request to withdraw to Dana Steward at <insert phone number>.

This project has been reviewed by the University of Missouri's Institutional Review Board and by <insert institution name> Research Review Board for research and research-related activities involving human subjects. If you have questions regarding this research or the review process, please call the University of Missouri's Office of Research at 573-882-3181 or <insert institution information> Research Review Board Chair, at <insert RRB phone number>.

If you choose to voluntarily participate in this study, please sign this form. By signing this form, you are communicating that you understand the contents of this form, the research study, and the associated risks and benefits. Additionally, by signing this form, you are agreeing to voluntarily participate in this study.

You will notice you have two forms, if you agree to voluntarily participate, please sign both forms. You will keep one form for your records, and the researcher will keep the other.

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Informed Consent – Survey and Reflective Writing

This information is designed to provide you with an understanding of the purpose of the research being conducted and of your rights as a potential voluntary participant.

Research Study: College Students at a Small, Private, Faith-Based University: A Qualitative Study of Factors Promoting Persistence to the Fourth Year

Researcher: Dana Steward, <insert title>, <insert institution>
Office: <insert office location>
Phone: <insert cell number> Email: <insert address>

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in an electronic survey where you will be asked to share how your personal characteristics and the various experiences you have had in college influenced your decision to continue enrolling.

The survey, which follows this information, is offered through Google Forms. It is anticipated that the survey will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete. (Or, with the reflective writing as optional, approximately 20 minutes to complete.)

Research Uses

The data collected for this study will be utilized by the researcher to complete the dissertation requirements for a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of Missouri. Participants may request to view the results by contacting the researcher (in person or <insert phone number> or <insert email address>).

Participant Rights

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to not participate or you may withdraw from participation at any time. Additionally, you may choose to not answer all of the survey questions. Your decision to not participate, to withdraw, or to not answer all of the questions does not affect your relationship with the researcher or the institution in any way.

Risks

Participation in the survey may cause participants to reflect on themselves and their college experiences, as a result, it is possible that participants could experience varying degrees of emotional discomfort. The researcher will make every effort to minimize any such discomfort.

Benefits

Participants may receive benefits from completing the survey, such as, learning more about themselves and how their college experience has influence their decision-making.

Costs/Payments

There are no costs or payments for your voluntary participation in this study.

Participant Confidentiality

Your identity and personal information is strictly confidential, unless law requires disclosure. Individual and compiled survey results will be kept on a password-protected computer. Any paper copies of results will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Participant responses may be quoted in the results, but no student identifiers will be included. The results shared in the researcher's dissertation will not include student names or specific identifiers.

Contact Information

You may ask the researcher any questions you have regarding this study prior to consenting to participate, during the survey, or after the survey is complete. If you wish to withdraw from this study, you may do so at any time. During or after the survey, you can let the researcher know you wish to withdraw. Please direct your questions or request to withdraw to Dana Steward at <insert phone number>.

This project has been reviewed by the University of Missouri's Institutional Review Board and by <insert institution name> Research Review Board for research and research-related activities involving human subjects. If you have questions regarding this research or the review process, please call the University of Missouri's Office of Research at 573-882-3181 or <insert institution information> Research Review Board Chair, at <insert RRB phone number>.

If you choose to voluntarily participate in this study, please continue to begin the survey. By beginning the survey, you are communicating that you understand the contents of this form, the research study, and the associated risks and benefits. Additionally, by beginning the survey, you are agreeing to voluntarily participate in this study.

Note: The instructions for the reflective writing portion had the following "The informed consent provided at the beginning of this survey also applies to this portion of the survey."

Appendix C

Appendix C includes the data collection protocols for each type of data collection: (a) individual interview, (b) electronic survey, and (c) reflective writing.

Individual Interview Protocol

Project: Academically At-Risk College Students at a Small, Private, Faith-Based University: A Qualitative Study of Factors Promoting Persistence to the Fourth Year

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Dana Steward

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee: Student

Share the following with participants: *Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Let's start by reviewing the informed consent form (give them time to review it). Please note that your participation in this study is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time. Also, please note that you will not be identified as a participant in this study and your participation is confidential. Do you have any questions? (Have them sign the informed consent form, if they wish to do so.)*

The interview will consist of questions that allow you to share your experiences and perspectives as a persisting student at <institution name>. I am going to try to not give you any feedback, verbal or non-verbal, during the interview, so don't take my lack of non-verbal feedback as a negative. I will likely ask follow-up questions related to things you say so that I can gain a better understanding of your experiences. Additionally, it may be good for you to know that I am also interviewing six or seven other students. My goal is to determine if there are common factors that emerge as things that helped you persist or that you had to overcome to persist.

I will be audio recording our time together to ensure that I have an accurate record of our conversation. I'll begin recording now.

Questioning Route:

Introductory Questions

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself – Where are you from?, What is your major?, What do you want to do as a career?
- 2) What is the highest degree earned by either of your parents?
- 3) Why did you choose to attend <institution name>?

- 4) Why do you want to earn a college degree?
- 5) Tell me about your experience at <institution name>.
- 6) When you think about your time as a student at <institution name>, what things have helped you to continue to enroll?
- 7) What barriers have you had to overcome in order to stay in college?

Potential Follow-up Questions

- 8) What about <institution name>, as an institution, has helped you stay in college? (i.e. – mission, policies and practices, culture, structure)
 - Made it hard for you to stay in college?
- 9) How have other students at <institution name> helped you stay in college?
 - Made it hard for you to stay in college? (i.e. – other students’ attitudes, values, and beliefs)
- 10) How has the sequencing (order) of your courses helped you stay in college?
 - Made it hard for you to stay in college?
- 11) How has the approach to teaching and learning in the classroom helped you stay in college?
 - Made it hard for you to stay in college?
- 12) How have your out-of-class experiences at <institution name> – both academic and social – encouraged you to stay in college?
 - Discouraged you from staying in college?
- 13) How have factors outside of the institution, such as family, non-<institution name> friends, or work, encouraged your continued enrollment?
 - Discouraged your continued enrollment?
- 14) Describe your academic journey at <institution name>.
- 15) Please describe the factors that played the biggest role in encouraging you to continue to enroll at <institution name>.
- 16) Please describe the main things you had to overcome in order to continue to enroll at <institution name>.

Closing Question

17) Is there anything else you would like to share that you have not yet shared?

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and to share your perspectives and experiences. I wish you the best as you continue to pursue your educational and life goals.

Survey Protocol

Project: Academically At-Risk College Students at a Small, Private, Faith-Based University: A Qualitative Study of Factors Promoting Persistence to the Fourth Year

Format: Electronic survey through Google Forms

Delivery: Invitations to participate and link to the survey will be sent through institutional email or text messages.

Date: Initial invitation: April 17, 2018; Final invitation: May 14, 2018

Participants: The survey will be sent to all students in the population at the site institution, with the exception of those who participated in the interview portion of the study.

The first page of the survey will provide informed consent information. Students who voluntarily participate will demonstrate their consent by participating in the survey.

Survey Items:

1. Please select your gender: Female, Male, Other (optional fill-in)
2. Please select your race/ethnicity: Asian, Black, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native Alaskan/Native Indian, White, Multiple, Other (optional fill-in)
3. Do you currently receive or have you ever received the Pell Grant as a part of your financial aid? Yes No
4. What is your cumulative <institution name> GPA?
5. Please select the highest degree earned by either of your parents: High School Diploma, Associate, Bachelors, Masters, Doctoral, Other (optional fill-in)
6. How motivated are you to earn a college degree? (Likert scale responses 1-6; highly unmotivated to highly motivated)
Please explain your rating by describing:
 - a. What motivates you to earn a college degree?
 - b. What about you, as a person, helped you stay in college?
 - c. What about you, as a person, made it difficult to stay in college?
7. Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: (Likert scale response 1-6; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

<institution name>, as an institution, helped me stay in college.
Please explain your rating by describing:
 - a. What about <institution name>, as an institution, helped you stay in college?

- b. What about <institution name>, as an institution, made it challenging to stay in college?
8. Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: (Likert scale response 1-6; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Other students at <institution name> helped me stay in college.

Please explain your rating by answering:

- a. In what ways, if any, have other students at <institution name> helped you stay in college?
 - b. In what ways, if any, have other students at <institution name> made it difficult for you to stay in college?
9. Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: (Likert scale response 1-6; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

The sequencing (order) of my courses helped me stay in college.

Please explain your rating by answering:

- a. In what ways, if any, has the sequencing (order) of your courses at <institution name> helped you stay in college?
 - b. In what ways, if any, has the sequencing (order) of your courses at <institution name> made it difficult for you to stay in college?
10. Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: (Likert scale response 1-6; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

The teaching and learning that have taken place in the classroom at <institution name> helped me stay in college.

Please explain your rating by answering:

- a. In what ways, if any, have your classroom experiences at <institution name> helped you stay in college?
 - b. In what ways, if any, have your classroom experiences at <institution name> made it difficult for you to stay in college?
11. Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: (Likert scale response 1-6; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

My out-of-class experiences at <institution name> – e.g., studying, group projects, involvement in campus activities, etc. – helped me stay in college.

Please explain your rating by answering:

- a. In what ways, if any, have your out-of-class experiences at <institution name> helped you stay in college?
- b. In what ways, if any, have your out-of-class experiences at <institution name> made it difficult for you to stay in college?

12. Rate your level of agreement with the following statement: (Likert scale response 1-6; strongly disagree to strongly agree)

Factors outside of the institution – e.g., family, friends, or work – helped me stay in college.

Please explain your rating by answering:

- a. In what ways, if any, have factors outside of <institution name> helped you stay in college?
 - b. In what ways, if any, have factors outside of <institution name> made it difficult for you to stay in college?
13. As you reflect on your experience at <institution name>, please describe the factors that played the biggest role in encouraging you to continue to enroll at <institution name>.
14. As you reflect on your experience at <institution name>, please describe the things you had to overcome in order to continue to enroll at <institution name>.
15. For each of the things you had to overcome in order to continue to enroll at <institution name> (your answer to #14), please describe how you overcame each.
16. *Are you interested in answering additional, reflective questions regarding the factors that encouraged you to stay in college and the factors that were obstacles to you staying in college? (Yes or No)
- If no, the survey is submits and closes.
 - If yes, the participant is sent to the Reflective Writing section of the survey.

* This item was only available to students from May 3 to May 14. Prior to May 3, the reflective writing portion automatically appeared as section 3, without the participant selecting it.

Reflective Writing Instructions and Prompts (within survey)

Format: Electronic using Google Forms

Delivery: Available as the third section of the electronic survey, but with differing access (see below)

Date: Initial invitation: April 17, 2018; Final invitation: May 14, 2018

Participants: The opportunity to participate will be sent to all students in the population at the site institution, with the exception of those who participated in the interview portion of the study.

Accessing the reflective writing prompts:

- April 17 to May 2, the reflective writing prompts are the third section of the survey. Other than the regular nature of voluntary participation, participants do not have to opt in to complete the reflective writing. The following are the instructions and method for informed consent:

Instructions: Thank you for being willing to be answer a set of reflective writing prompts as a part of my research regarding persisting college students. These writing prompts are designed to gather a broader view of your experiences as a student. Specifically, you will be asked to write a 50 to 150-word response for six questions. The questions will ask about the factors that fostered your persistence as a college student and the factors that were barriers to your persistence during the points of transition from one year of college to the next. The informed consent provided at the beginning of this survey also applies to this portion of the survey.

- May 3 to May 14, the reflective writing portion is available to participants, if they choose to complete it, through the following item:
Are you interested in answering additional, reflective questions regarding the factors that encouraged you to stay in college and the factors that were obstacles to you staying in college?
 - Yes (sent them to section 3, with the reflective writing prompts)
 - No (submitted the survey results, without participating in the reflective writing)

Reflective Writing Prompts:

1. As a first-year student, what factors encouraged you to continue to enroll at <institution name>?
2. As a first-year student at <institution name>, which factors did you have to overcome in order to continue to enroll at <institution name>? (In other words, what hindered you or were obstacles to you staying in college as you transitioned from the first year to the second?) Please include how you overcame those obstacles so that you could continue as a student at <institution name>.

3. As a second-year student, which factors encouraged you to continue to enroll at <institution name>?
4. As a second-year student at <institution name>, which factors did you have to overcome in order to continue to enroll at <institution name>? (In other words, what hindered you or were obstacles to you staying in college as you transitioned from the second year to the third?) Please include how you overcame those obstacles so that you could continue as a student at <institution name>.
5. As a third-year student, which factors encouraged you to continue to enroll at <institution name>?
6. As a third-year student at <institution name>, which factors did you have to overcome in order to continue to enroll at <institution name>? (In other words, what hindered you or were obstacles to you staying in college as you transitioned from the third year to the fourth?) Please include how you overcame those obstacles so that you could continue as a student at <institution name>.

VITA

Dana Steward was raised near El Dorado Springs, Missouri. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology, with certification to teach high school, from Southwest Baptist University. She served as a high school biology teacher at Buffalo High School, in Buffalo, Missouri, for eight years. While teaching, she earned her Master of Science in Educational Administration from Southwest Baptist University. Upon completion of her master's Steward moved in a new role as the junior high and high school principal and K-12 curriculum director at Halfway R-III Schools in Halfway, Missouri. She served in that role for two years, and then accepted a position as the director of the University Success Center and instructor of University Studies at Southwest Baptist University. She has served in that role, which includes teaching and advising first-year students, along with administrative duties, for 13 years. In 2015, Steward's administrative responsibilities expanded to include serving as the department chair for the Dutile Honors Program, Career Services, Study Abroad, Dual Credit, Special Services, and Interdisciplinary Studies, along with the Success Center. She has a passion for fostering student success through the implementation of effective instruction and through student support services. Steward plans to continue to work in higher education.