Factors Inhibiting Completion of a Program of Study
at a West Virginia Community and Technical College

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Abstract

This study was conducted to identify personal and institutional barriers preventing community college students from completing their education goals, whether that was a degree program, diploma program, or credentialing program. It was also conducted to identify strategies that can be used to assist these students in overcoming these barriers.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students at one West Virginia Community and Technical College who dropped out of their programs of study. The study sought to identify actions and events that contributed to students choosing to drop out and strategies that can be used to reduce their dropping out.

Understanding the students' perspectives concerning their decisions to drop out will assist community college personnel to evaluate the on- and off-campus factors influencing these decisions. This qualitative study sought to directly ask students about their personal lives and also about the people and events on campus that influenced their decision to drop out of Thompson Community and Technical College (pseudonym).

The study contains three major research questions:

1. What personal factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?
2. What institutional factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?
3. What strategies can one West Virginia Community and Technical College implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates?

The basic qualitative research design of conducting one-on-one qualitative interviews was used for this study. Criterion and purposeful sampling were utilized to identify participants. Semi-structured interviewing and document reviewing was utilized to gather data to discover rich information from the participants' lived experiences. Participants were suggested by current or former faculty or staff members at one of the West Virginia Community and Technical College campuses in the state of West Virginia. They were students who had already attended for at least one semester and who had subsequently dropped out of their programs of study. Fifteen participants were interviewed for the study.

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General Audience Abstract

This study tried to find out if there were specific personal reasons or specific college reasons why students did not finish school and graduate from their community college. It also tried to find out if students had suggestions for what might have kept them in college. Finding out this information could maybe help colleges figure out how to help students stay in school and graduate.

Fifteen former students were interviewed face-to-face by the researcher for this study. Each person had finished at least one semester at a West Virginia Community and Technical College, but then had left before they graduated. Three of them left for only personal reasons. Twelve of them left because of what happened at the college. They shared many stories and gave many suggestions for improvement. They also shared good experiences.

Dedication

To Dewayne. When, after 32 years of marriage, this new journey began, you never batted an eye. You just moved me up your prayer list. Thanks for the absolute loyalty and love.

To Sons Nathan and Thomas and their precious wives and now children. Your faces were always with me. Thanks for being proud of me.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

For many Americans, life dreams and career plans begin with a desire for higher education. Community colleges may help to fulfill that dream for the 12 million enrolled this year (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018). Community colleges across the nation pride themselves on their local, high-quality programs open to all who will come at a price the students can afford. Community colleges are "so dedicated to their communities that they commit to empower the latent potential in every member of the community through open enrollment" (Mullin, 2017, p. 5). Community colleges have "long provided access to higher education for Americans who would not otherwise be able to attend college" (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2008, p. 1). With open arms they welcome all types of people, hoping to train them to enter the workforce, in order to meet the needs of local employers.

Community colleges also prepare students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities to continue their plan of study if necessary. Community colleges are the "primary means of entry into the higher education system" (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2008, p. 2), and community colleges are also considered a "post-secondary safety net" (Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011, p. 854) if the four-year college experience fails to work out. As they attempt to produce a trained workforce to build the economy by offering transfer and workforce education, developmental education, and career and technical education, the West Virginia Community and Technical College system's specific mission is to "promote and provide high-quality, accessible, and responsive education and training opportunities that maximize student learning, improve the standard of living for West Virginians, and contribute to the economic vitality and competitiveness" of the state of West Virginia (Community and Technical College System of

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West Virginia, 2015, p. 1), and they are doing so for approximately 20,000 students every year (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2017).

Community college students are not traditional students – straight out of high school, living in a dorm, focused only on classes and a social life. A great number of community college students are single with children, attending school part-time, financially independent, older, poorer, and often from underrepresented minorities (Mullin & American Association of Community Colleges, 2012). All of these groups have their distinct challenges, but what binds them together is the challenge of higher education.

College is difficult. Academic studies are difficult. To begin their journey, many community college students enter with low math, writing, and reading skills (Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016; Crisp & Delgado, 2014), which means they start from insufficient preparedness and must catch up.

The hurdles are infinite. "Too many students do not make it successfully through remedial programs into college-level courses, and too many do not complete their programs because of insufficient financial support or poor institutional or state policies or practices" (Boggs, 2012, p. 37). Also, many community college students enter with less than high levels of motivation and perseverance (Tinto, 2016), which makes it difficult for them to invest the time and energy required to begin to catch up.

Added to academic challenges is the confusion of learning to function within the secret and frightening world of forms and requirements and paperwork and deadlines. Many community college students are first-generation college students (Gulf Coast Community College, 2011), and without parents to help with financial aid forms and immunizations and the

calming influence of loved ones who know the system, they are left alone to struggle with navigating the bureaucracy.

When academic and bureaucratic obstacles begin to mount, many students do not assimilate into the community college, making it easy for them to drop out and give up their short-lived dreams. For them, community college was an experiment, and it failed. The failure cost the students their dreams, and it also cost the United States approximately $4 billion from 2005-2010 in national, state, and local funding for students who did not return to community college for year two of their programs (Schneider & Yin, 2011).

If this scenario could change, dreams could be fulfilled for many of the students who think they have failed. If steps could be taken by the faculty, staff, and institution to construct an environment in which students can succeed academically, socially, and within the larger organization and also more fully learn why students leave their programs of study, then perhaps student dropout numbers would fall. "Better ways are needed to ensure that the students who enter a community college expecting to earn an associate's degree or a certificate finish the first lap and ultimately cross the finish line" (Schneider & Yin, 2011, p. 2).

Background of the Study

Community college education has been a viable sector of higher education in the United States since it was established in 1901. Community college graduates are able to obtain employment or transfer to a four-year institution of higher learning. The mission of community colleges is to prepare students for four-year studies, teach job skills, and offer community enrichment courses (Brint, 2003). Even as community colleges attempt to stay ahead of workforce demand, they also ride on the ebb and flow of the economy. If jobs are tight, more

students enroll in college, and as four-year degrees get more expensive, more students enroll in community colleges (Zeidenberg, 2008).

Since the beginning of interest in the dropout rates of community colleges in the 1990s (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015), student dropout rates have continued to stay elevated (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Almost half of every class has left during their first year (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014, p. 981) and only about 25% of them ever finished their program of study (NCES, 2017). The public community colleges in the State of West Virginia have similar dismal statistics, with less than 25% of the entering class of 2013 graduating within 3 years, the traditional governmental completion measure (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission & West Virginia Council for Community and Technical College Education, 2015). Collectively, the system must strive to do better than that. There must be specific patterns of reasons why students are leaving their programs of study, and to discover those reasons – and fix them – could make a difference in the lives of many people.

Nine colleges currently comprise the West Virginia Community and Technical College system which was established in 2004 by the state legislature: Blue Ridge, BridgeValley, Eastern, Mountwest, New River, Northern, Parkersburg, Pierpont, and Southern. Because the system is so new, little to no research has been undertaken to document student views on the reasons they have dropped out of school at the community college level in the state of West Virginia. This study did just that.

Statement of the Problem

Typical community college students are older, working, family-involved students. They are often from poverty, minority, and underserved populations (Crosta, 2008). These students enter college with characteristics different from their four-year peers such as low high school

grade point average and low priority value on education. They often have low self-esteem, no

study skills, few social skills, and unrealistic goals (Bickerstaff, Barragan & Rucks-Ahidiana,

2012). To keep such students in school requires special understanding, special commitment, and

special programs on the part of the community college. The problem that was addressed in this

study was twofold. First, it was conducted to identify personal and institutional barriers

preventing community college students from completing their education goals, whether that was

a degree program, diploma program, or credentialing program. Secondly, it was conducted to

identify strategies that can be used to assist these students in overcoming these barriers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students from one West

Virginia Community and Technical College who have dropped out of their programs of study.

The study sought to identify actions and events that contributed to students choosing to drop out

and strategies that can be used to reduce their dropping out.

Understanding the students' perspectives concerning their decisions to drop out will

assist community college personnel to evaluate the on- and off-campus factors influencing these

decisions. This qualitative study sought to directly ask students about their personal lives and

also about the people and events on campus that influenced their decision to drop out of

community college.

"Students' sense of place within the institutional community, their involvement in that

community, and how they fit into that community are all important in retaining students in

school" (Travers, 2016, p. 55). Community colleges can try to understand the personal lives of

students. They can also try to view college from the student perspective in an effort to

understand dropout decisions. In higher education, many studies on student success have

focused on the students' characteristics before college, and have largely ignored the role the school personnel and schools themselves might have on student success. Student success might be a "learning problem of practitioners and institutions" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 446) instead of completely a student characteristic problem.

This study aimed to discover any significant personal factors or institutional factors that community colleges might possess or actions their employees might exhibit which helped or hindered students on their path to completion. "It is far more likely that practitioners will attribute inequality in educational outcomes to student deficiencies than question their own practices" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 456). Every aspect of the community college must be examined to find strengths and weaknesses.

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Importance of the Study

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Discovering personal factors and institutional factors that influence students' decisions to drop out are paramount to increasing retention rates and decreasing dropout rates. "Questions remain about the best ways to structure the community college environment so as to foster students' sense of belonging and promote behaviors that are associated with success" (Bickerstaff, Barragan & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012, p. 1). The guiding principle for this structure should be to remove "barriers that impede success regardless of what or why those barriers have occurred" (Troyer, 2015, p. 1). Information gleaned from this study can assist community college personnel in determining ways to improve retention and completion rates for their students.

In addition, research on factors influencing dropout rates for four-year colleges and universities is abundant; but "an absence of community college research from educational journals effectively marginalizes community colleges and limits the chances of findings being

used by the broader education community to improve educational outcomes, including but not limited to, enrollment in college and vertical transfer to 4-year institutions" (Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016, p. 776). Postsecondary education research would also benefit immensely from studies involving students who have dropped out of community college without earning a degree, diploma, industry credential, or transfer credits (Bickerstaff, Barragan & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). Findings gleaned from this study will provide much-needed, research-based information to assist in gaining an understanding of community college success and dropout rates. This study will add to the body of community college retention research, including Appalachian community college retention research, in order to help find answers to the perennial dropout problem.

Research Questions

The phenomena driving this research study are factors that influence the retention and dropout rates of students at one West Virginia Community and Technical College. The study contained three research questions:

1. What personal factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

2. What institutional factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

3. What strategies can one West Virginia Community and Technical College implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates?

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The Tinto model (1975) of college persistence – A Conceptual Schema for Dropout from College – has been researched, studied, and modified by Tinto and others for over 40 years. In 2017 Davidson and Wilson added one more facet to the Tinto model: the institution itself, and

called their idea the Collective Affiliation Model (p. 521). Davidson and Wilson posit that "community college student dropout is not rooted in the student's inability to integrate into the life of the institution," but that "student dropout is the institution's inability to collectively affiliate with the student" (p. 518). They admonish readers to see the dropout phenomenon as being centered in the college instead of in the student. They believe that the college is just one of the many relationships that are formed by the student throughout a lifetime, and that the student does not need to (and won't) give up old relationships when attending college. The student will want to "holistically maintain engagement in each community" (p. 521), so the college needs to fit itself into those relationships and those communities.

The Davidson and Wilson model asserts that the life circumstances of students are constantly changing, and the community college must help students through those times. It also asserts that the community college must be ready to welcome students back when their situations change and they are able to return. Since the students must be able to balance all of their commitments simultaneously, the college must not only offer meaningful classes, but the college must welcome families, offer child care and playground equipment, supply work-study positions, and creatively assist students in all facets of their lives. College employees and policy must genuinely care about the lives of students and partner with the students by connecting them with support services and easy routes to solving nonacademic problems. The community college must integrate into the community to help the students persist to graduation or goal completion (Davidson & Wilson, 2017). High dropout rates are caused by the student and also by the institution. A more detailed discussion of this theoretical framework is presented in Chapter Two – The Literature Review.

Methodology

The basic qualitative research design of conducting one-on-one qualitative interviews was used for this study. "Interviewers ask open-ended questions and probe for in-depth responses about people's experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" (Patton, 2015, p. 36). Criterion and purposeful sampling were utilized to identify participants. Semi-structured interviewing and document reviewing were utilized to gather data to discover rich information from the participants' lived experiences. Participants were suggested by current or former faculty or staff members at one West Virginia Community and Technical College campus located in the state of West Virginia. They were students who had already attended for at least one semester and who had subsequently dropped out of school. Fifteen participants were interviewed for the study.

This study was exploratory and descriptive. Data were compared at all phases during the research, and memos and field notes were continually used to enrich the process and summarize findings. Data were meant to be used to gain insights into the thought processes of students regarding dropping out of school in order to fulfill the research objective. The data may or may not be generalizable to larger populations; they only serve to give rich descriptions of the lived experiences of this particular set of participants. A detailed presentation of the methodology used to conduct this study is presented in Chapter Three.

Definition of Terms

Academic Program: An educational program leading to a degree, diploma, certificate, or transfer credits.

Completion: Earning a formal degree, diploma, certificate, or transfer credits.

Dropout: A student who left a declared academic program before finishing it.

Retention: The college count of the students who return the next semester or year to continue their studies.

Transfer: Enrolling in another school after taking credits at one school.

Limitations

One limitation for this study was that the researcher has taught for almost 40 years, 10 years at the community college level, and perhaps has ideas that are too deeply imbedded in the fibers of her being. The researcher is also biased toward thinking that everyone should finish what they have begun. The researcher, therefore, made every effort to be extremely reflexive during every phase of this study.

Another limitation is that the participants, who were purposefully selected, may have biases related to interviewing, sharing with the researcher, or discussing the institution which they attended. Member checking and peer debriefing will be used to validate the findings of this research study.

Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to students who had not returned to community college after at least one semester of enrollment at one West Virginia Community and Technical College. The sample consisted of only those students whom staff members identified as having every intention of returning after one semester, and then did not return. The literature for this study was limited to only research completed in the United States.

Further delimitations were related to the use of interviews at only one of the nine public Community and Technical College sites in West Virginia. Because of needing to limit the number of interviews for practical purposes, the rich data were nonetheless bounded. The one campus was chosen as being representative of programs and enrollment throughout the state.

Data in this research study were limited to data collected from interviews with 15 participants who attended one West Virginia Community and Technical College for at least one semester and then dropped out of school.

Chapter 1 Summary

Community colleges have an important place in the fabric of the educational system of the United States. They serve to educate citizens close to home at affordable cost (Dougherty, Lahr & Morest, 2017). They "provide access to, and opportunity for, education through courses that serve as the foundation for a career, a new life, or a new perspective" (Mullin, 2010, p. 3). They are open access, welcoming to all who wish to enter their doors. Open access institutions are a "manifestation of our society's commitment to educational opportunity, and they reflect a common understanding of postsecondary education as the foundation for economic growth and upward mobility" (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015, p. 1).

Special challenges come with such access. Not all students are equipped, emotionally or educationally, to withstand the rigors of higher education and so they drop out. Sometimes institutions construct obstacles over which these students cannot or will not jump and so they drop out.

This study sought to interview community college dropouts to discover the factors and experiences that led them to drop out of their intended programs of study at one West Virginia Community and Technical College.

Chapter 2

Literature Review Summary

Introduction

Chapter Two summarizes the literature relevant to this study. Dropout theories, including the theoretical framework for this research study, are provided in the first section. A brief history of community colleges is presented in the second section. Next, financial considerations of community colleges are described, followed by characteristics of community college students. Programs which have been attempted in order to help the dropout problem are then reviewed. Finally, information on the West Virginia Community and Technical College system is presented.

The primary search term for this study was *community college dropouts*, in empirical, theoretical, and practitioner literature. Ancestral searches were then conducted to locate as much relevant literature as possible.

Dropout Theories

Since all levels of higher education were flourishing during the 1950s and 1960s, dropout research was not necessary. It did not matter if students left or not – another student was ready to step in and take that place. But as William G. Spady became captivated by the urban riots in the summers of the sixties, he began to explore college attendance and completion by socio-economic status and race. He was the first major contributor to the current field of dropout research by providing an empirical basis to study the patterns of college attendance by American males for the preceding 40 years. He found that for all races, even though college enrollment and completion numbers themselves had increased significantly, the chance of a low-status student actually finishing college had significantly decreased during these years (Spady, 1967).

During the 1960s, Spady built on Durkheim's suicide theory that people must be involved in life or they will end it all, and from that developed a theory about college dropouts. He posited that if a person does not share the college's values or feel some affiliation toward the college, the person will leave that college (Hader, 2011).

Building on Spady's theory was Vincent Tinto (1975), another product of the 1960s revolution in America. Tinto gave credit to Spady's work – they were graduate school seminar classmates at the University of Chicago (Tinto, 2013) – and attempted to add to it to give a "predictive rather than descriptive theory of dropout behavior" (p. 91). His early premise put forth that the entry characteristics of a student combined with commitment to the school and commitment to graduation will contribute to academic and social integration, and all of that together contributes to dropout decisions. He used family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling as the measurable entry characteristics. He theorized that students need two types of college integration, and explained *academic* integration as grade performance and intellectual development (p. 104) and *social* integration as developing friendships within the college social system, including faculty, staff, and other students (p. 109). He posited that integration into the academic system of the college directly affects goal commitment, and integration into the social system of the college affects institutional commitment. Both commitments together influence dropout decisions (p. 110).

Tinto's theory grew to paradigmatic status over the next 40 years, and as the years progressed, he included additional transition problems to his model such as finances and transfer considerations (1982), and referred to it collectively as the problem of "student departure" (1988, p. 450). In 1993 he posited that academic reasons account for only 20% of the dropouts and the other 80% were problems with adjustment, goals, commitment, or integration (Saret, n.d.). He

explored how community college classrooms as living communities contributed to student persistence, and constructed a model linking classrooms, learning, and persistence (Tinto, 1997).

By 1998, Tinto stated that "one thing we know about persistence is that involvement matters" (p. 168) and he concluded that since almost half of all dropouts leave after the first year, involvement must matter the most during the first year (p. 169). His research found that academic integration is fundamental to persistence (p. 175). In 1999, Tinto stated that student attributes were actually out of the control of the college, but that the college could control the clear and high expectations given to students for their academic programs, how much academic and social support the students receive, the amount of feedback given to faculty, staff, and students, the level of engagement students are involved in with faculty, staff, and other students, and could make sure the students actually learn while in school (Tinto, 1999). He championed the concept of the learning community (Tinto, 1999). He changed his model in 2000 to include the importance of the classroom experience for college students, especially commuters, and urged classroom teachers to make their classrooms more engaging so that students might connect with academics and classmates in the classroom to stay in college (Tinto, 2000). In 2000 he also proposed evaluating the academic environment to see if schools should reorganize the physical settings (Tinto, 2000). In 2013 he explained that for his lifetime he tried to purport "the power of educational community to cross the borders of subjects and disciplines and advance the critical notion that we all learn better when we learn together" (Tinto, 2013, p. 2).

Other research of the dropout phenomenon began to flourish in the 1980s. Models were born to "explain, describe, or predict student dropout in higher education" (Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh, 2007, p. 523). Bean (1981) combined models from educational, psychological, and sociological studies to develop a new model. He used a model of turnover in work organizations

because he thought that "students and employees are members of an organization who may leave" (Bean, 1981, p. 12). Bean's model included 7 background variables of the students which influenced 20 student interactions with the school, which influenced 6 attitude measures and absenteeism. This all culminated in the student's intent to stay at school, which meant the student was less likely to drop out. He then added 4 personal determinants and 6 environmental variables. His goal was to predict a student's intent to leave school (Bean, 1981).

In 1984 Alexander Astin developed a theory because he had done student development research for 20 years and wanted to "bring some order into the chaos of the literature" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). He stated that he was "increasingly bewildered by the muddle of findings" (p. 518) that had arisen from even his own research, and in an effort to simplify the field he developed his "Student Involvement Theory" (p. 528). He defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). This definition was active, it described behaviors, and it encompassed what the student *does* instead of what the student feels or thinks. He concluded that student involvement was crucial for student persistence. He also concluded that "community colleges are places where the involvement of both faculty and students seems to be minimal" (p. 524), because community college students traditionally commute and leave right after classes are over, and also because of the large proportion of part-time students, as well as part-time faculty, who are not particularly involved in the college (p. 524).

By now, colleges were scrambling to fill seats and fill dorms, so the college buzzword was retention, and theory was building on many fronts. Pascarella and Terenzini "developed operational measures of the core constructs from Tinto's model" (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p 20). In 1995 Terenzini claimed to have offered the very first empirical evidence to "support long-held

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theoretical beliefs that college's effects on students learning are holistic, that learning is shaped *both* by students' formal, classroom experiences and by their out-of-class experiences" (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella & Nora, 1995, p. 40).

Scholars attempted to add to the constructs of the Tinto model in areas of finance, psychology, sociology, environment, and institution. Halpin (1990) confirmed the academic integration aspect of the Tinto model. Berger and Braxton (1998) found strong support for including institutional attributes as a way to get the students socially integrated.

The 1990s and later brought new community college dropout studies (Metz, 2002). Bensimon (2007) suggested that students are not free to make their own decisions about complete college immersion if their families do not permit it, and that quantitative studies had assumed too much about the makeup of minority students. Karp, Hughes & O'Gara (2008) found that community college students become attached to their institutions, this attachment is related to their dropout decisions, and that the attachment is both academic and social. Wirt & Jaeger (2014) again emphasized the classroom as a place for students to interact with faculty members, and Travers (2016) added that professional development for faculty members to be able to become good teachers is important for reducing the dropout rate.

In 2017 Davidson and Wilson added the community college institution itself as one further facet of the dropout formula, and named their idea the Collective Affiliation Model. They believe that the institution, and each employee within, contributes to the dropout decision of each student. They suggest thoroughly examining personnel, policy, and environment to discover what would make a student dropout or persist until program completion. The Davidson-Wilson model is the theoretical framework for this research study.

History of Community Colleges

The history of the community college system in the United States can be broken down into three eras: the Early Era from 1900 to 1950, the Middle Era from 1950 to 2009, and the Current Era from 2009 to the present.

Early Era

For the first 250 years of college life in America, no one particularly cared if students graduated or not. Only elite males went to elite colleges, and that was for the specific purpose of becoming a minister, doctor, or lawyer, or following in his father's footsteps to learn principles of business. Vocational education was accomplished through apprenticeships or hands-on training, not college education (Gordon, 2014).

That changed around 1900, when the country became industrialized and needed college-educated people to work as professionals such as managers and accountants. Students flocked to colleges, and colleges were able to begin to be selective about admissions. To be able to educate students who were not accepted into these selective four-year institutions, the junior college was born in 1901.

Selective institutions at that time did not care if students dropped out. Leaving was considered a screening mechanism. Only the best would finish with a degree. One study, though, was published in the 1930s. The U.S. Department of the Interior and the Office of Education commissioned John McNeely (1932) to conduct a student mortality study of 60 colleges. But then the Great Depression and World War II diverted the attention of education for some years.

In the 1910s and 1920s, higher education was becoming linked to social mobility and the population was asking for more educational opportunities, so junior colleges started in earnest.

During the 1930s, vocational training was added to the original mission of the two-year college. Vocational programs began in manual arts, nursing, engineering, and business in an effort to train the unemployed masses during the Great Depression.

Middle Era

The name junior college changed to community college in the 1950s, and continued to flourish as World War II and Korean War veterans returned with G.I. Bills in hand. The 1950s and 1960s brought a boom of college enrollments, including community college enrollments. Schools were filled to capacity. As the name implies, community colleges stayed in their communities, offering geographical access, and were inexpensive, offering economic access (Trainor, 2015). The National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 spelled out the financial role of the federal government in higher education and also endorsed education as the strength of the United States.

In the 1960s, as they embraced an open-door admissions policy, community colleges opened at a rate of one per week (Trainor, 2015). A hallmark of the community college was that poor, unprepared, and underrepresented segments of the population were always welcome, as were adults and those who needed to be retrained. The boom meant that dropouts didn't matter.

The 1970s brought renewed interest in studying dropout rates because suddenly the population number of traditional college students was expected to decrease. Schools were scrambling to attract students and to keep the students they had. At the same time, students were more diverse. Women and minorities were attending college in record numbers. State and federal funding made it possible for more underprepared students to attend. Colleges did not know how to handle all of that change. Dropouts were rampant (Beach, 2011).

Between 1980 and 2009, community colleges endured hard times. They were underfunded (Kolodner, 2015) and considered the least desirable level of higher education. Transfer students were not succeeding at four-year institutions, vocational students were not working in the fields in which they were educated, and national economic benefits waned. Because the community college had attempted to be everything to everyone, without accountability or direction, problems began to mount (Brint, 2003). Community colleges began to rely heavily on adjunct instructors. In greater numbers their students did not transfer or graduate. The status quo continued, and with inadequate funding and wheels stopping, any urgency left the system.

Current Era

Then in 2009 everything changed. Coming on the heels of the Great Recession of 2007-2009 which spiked community college enrollments (Juskiewicz, 2017), the President of the United States re-landscaped higher education by announcing the American Graduation Initiative which called for accountability not in enrollment numbers, but in completion numbers (Obama, 2009). The game had changed. Funding would be attached to completion rates. Dropping out of community college was suddenly a measurable problem. The call was now made for community colleges to double their completion rates by the year 2020 in order to have the "highest proportion of college graduates in the world" (Obama, 2009).

In September 2010 the President held a summit to "call together community college leaders, researchers, business executives, and philanthropists to highlight the importance of community colleges" (Obama, 2010, p. 4). Hefty prizes were to be given to outstanding community colleges (Schneider & Yin, 2011). Even though community colleges have always been "adaptable, flexible, and using resources, both financial and human capital, in creative ways

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in order to respond to the ever-changing educational, social, economic, and cultural needs of the students and communities that they serve" (Chase-Mayoral, 2017, p. 13), this has proven to be a difficult directive.

The mission of the community college is three-fold: preparing students for transfer to a four-year institution, teaching students the career and technical skills and knowledge to immediately enter the workforce, and offering enrichment courses to community members (Brint, 2003). To correctly tally dropouts would be to "define categories of students by what their goals are" (McPhail, 2011, p. 5). "Many community college students have educational goals other than pursuing a degree or certificate" (Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh, 2007, p. 535). Since community colleges accommodate life-learning students seeking to take a class in a certain subject area, and their goal is not to transfer or graduate, they skew dropout rates if they are counted (Takahashi, 2011). Students in one study had already earned a bachelor's degree at another institution before they attended the community college (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

The mission of community colleges, though, also includes "enabling low-income students and those with relatively weak academic achievement to continue their education and acquire useful skills" (Zeidenberg, 2008, p. 53). This mission inherently carries with it challenges of underprepared students and high dropout rates.

Confusion exists about how to count success rates at the community college level. First-time students may intend to transfer to a four-year institution, they may intend to earn an associate's degree, they may intend to earn a certificate, or they may have no degree intentions at all. Normal dropout and completion rates only measure first-time and full-time students who are seeking a degree or certificate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Only recently have conversations begun to include transfers in success rating formulas. Kudos are not given to

community colleges for lifelong learning courses. They are asked to supply "academic, vocational, noncredit, and enrichment courses to their communities" (p. 53) while also helping needy students in order to contribute to the local economy, all the while performing at the highest level in every facet of their mission and only receiving funding credits for a small part of their students (Zeidenberg, 2008).

A National Committee on Measures of Student Success was formed by Congress in 2008, met in 2010, and recommended that graduation rates be calculated to include transfers in 2015 (Carey, 2017) but which in itself is a complex undertaking. Tracking students is difficult at best. Combining graduation and transfer rates for community colleges will help the community colleges be rewarded for what they do (Carey, 2017).

The "swirling behavior of students" (Bers & Schuetz, 2014, p. 178) adds to the confusion of counting dropouts. Students transfer between four-year schools, two-year schools, four-year to two-year, two-year to four-year; they stop for a while, they almost finish, they leave completely, they graduate. Students choose infinite paths for their lives. "Dropout could occur on several levels: system-wide (stopping higher education all together); institutional (which may have included transfer to another institution); program (which may involve switching majors); and course (not completing a particular class)" (Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh, 2007, p. 535). The problem lies in the perception that community colleges are not fulfilling their mission because of their high dropout rates even though they "cannot always draw straightforward conclusions from such data because of the varying attitudes and goals of their students" (Gulf Coast Community College, 2011).

"The new national completion agenda has brought both visibility and pressure to these open-access institutions, which have completion rates of less than 25% for first-time full-time

students and even lower rates for part-time students" (Bers & Schuetz, 2014, p. 1). Better care

will have to be given to tracking students, measuring outcomes, and developing strategies to

improve outcomes (Zeidenberg, 2008).

Proposals abound. Brint (2003) suggests that each community college be broken into

three sections: one for vocational training, one as a community center for short classes such as

flower arranging, and one as a branch of a four-year school (p. 16). Resources could be allocated

accordingly, and graduation rates would be tracked only for those who declare their intention to

graduate.

The newest graduation rates for full-time degree/certificate seeking students at two-year

postsecondary institutions for cohorts beginning 2004-2013, measured by graduating within 3

years of beginning the program as published by the National Center for Education Statistics

(2017) are in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1
Graduation Rates, Full-Time Degree/Certificate Seeking Students, 2-Year Postsecondary
Cohorts Beginning 2004-2013

2004	20.3%	**2006**	20.4%	**2008**	20.2%	**2010**	19.5%	**2012**	21.9%
2005	20.6%	**2007**	20.3%	**2009**	19.8%	**2011**	20.0%	**2013**	23.6%

Five years after the American Graduation Initiative began, rates have inched up, but have

by no means begun to reach the goal of doubling the number of community college graduates by

2020. In fact, the newest rate of 23.6% exactly matches the 23.6% rate of the year 2000 (NCES,

2017).

No matter how community college dropout rates are figured, first-time full-time

community college students are still not graduating in acceptable numbers. They have dreams

when they enter. They see their community college education as a step toward those dreams.

But then roadblocks appear, and they either do not have the qualities necessary to fight through those roadblocks or the college does not have the structure or process to help them succeed. There is much work to be done.

Financial Considerations of Community Colleges

The financial burden of a student dropping out of community college is high on four fronts: cost to the student, cost to the college, lost taxpayer dollars, and diminished economic growth. Even dropping out of a single course costs the student lost potential, the college lost revenue, and the society lost productivity (Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh, 2007).

Cost to the Student

Even though community college is the least expensive higher education option (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018), it is still expensive to a common citizen. To sign up and not finish a course is a waste of tuition and fees, and also child care, transportation, and books for the part of the semester enrolled. That direct cost to the student couples with loss of greater income had the course been completed. "Past research suggests that for those who earn at least 12 credits in college, each additional credit earned increases earnings" (Kalogrides & Grodsky, 2011, p. 871).

Cost to the College

Because of the national attention on community colleges beginning in 2009 and the new funding formulas in place across the country, community colleges are now held accountable for their high dropout rates (Travers, 2016). Policymakers want high completion numbers to be able to justify their higher education expenditures to their constituencies. They want to see results, and they will fund results. If the community college cannot graduate their students, provide

them with skills and knowledge necessary to survive in the world of work, and then see to it that they get jobs, funding won't be coming their way so readily any more (McPhail, 2011).

Lost Taxpayer Dollars

"More than 20 million working-age adults in the United States are college dropouts, failed in some way by institutions that collectively receive hundreds of billions of dollars in public funding every year" (Carey, 2017, p. 1). States spend less operating their community colleges than their four-year colleges and universities because faculty salaries are lower, full-time faculty members teach more classes, more part-time faculty are hired, and there are fewer non-essential services (Zeidenberg, 2008). Nonetheless, $4 billion of taxpayer monies from the local, state, and national level support American community colleges every year (Crosta, 2008). Approximately 40% of first-time full-time community college students do not return for their second year. Each school year that equals over $1.5 billion of taxpayer money which was spent on students who only attended for one year when they had begun a two-year program (NCES, 2017). Because community colleges are open access to students who are underprepared, developmental education is also expensive for community colleges (Moss, Kelcey & Showers, 2014) and is estimated at $2 billion annually (Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016).

Diminished Economic Growth

The U.S. higher education system has a distinct goal: to train a workforce to compete in a global economy (Obama, 2009). Dropouts do not contribute to economic growth as they could. Shea & Bidjerano (2016) found data showing that a majority of jobs in the U.S. in the next 10 years will require a post-secondary degree, but the U.S. has had a "sluggish growth in the stock of educated labor" (Dynarski, 2008, p. 577). "The failure of students to complete college represents a loss to the overall economy, which has prompted calls from the federal government,

major foundations, and public intellectuals for a significant increase in the numbers of people with postsecondary degrees" (Bailey, Jaggars & Jenkins, 2015, p. 1). Community colleges could train more workers if students did not drop out.

Characteristics of Community College Students

Community colleges have their own version of *traditional student*. Characteristics of community college students do not parallel traditional students at four-year residential colleges. Since public community colleges pride themselves on open access, welcoming all types and academic levels of students (Garcia, 2010), all types of students enter their doors.

Community college students are "both more disadvantaged and less prepared for college work" (Zeidenberg, 2008, p. 53). Their college entrance exam scores and their high school grade point averages are low, so 42% of them (Moss, Kelcey & Showers, 2014) need developmental coursework to get up to the proper level to even begin to take college classes. They may have disabilities (Gulf Coast Community College, 2011), and may have problems in the areas of family, substance abuse, transportation, and finances (Saret, n.d.).

Community college students typically delay entry after high school, with the average starting age of 28 (AACC, 2018). With age come family responsibilities and employment (Johnson, Williams & Wood, 2015), which may cause distractions and take away time needed to do schoolwork. Community college students often hold full-time jobs (AACC, 2018), which decreases time spent to study. More than half of community college students attend school part-time which means that they are not very involved in school activities outside of the classroom (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014). It also means that they take longer than two years to finish (Carey, 2017) and that it is more difficult to fit into the college culture (Bensimon, 2007).

It is common for community college students to be near completion and choose to not finish. "These nearbies were all successful students as evidenced by their GPAs, yet they seemed to wander through college with minimal connection to the institution, uncertain goals, uneven information to inform their decisions, and significant extra-curricular claims for time and attention (from work, family, and peers) that took priority over school" (Bers & Schuetz, 2014, p. 178).

Community college students not only have families, they are also deeply connected to them, so instead of making their own independent decisions, they follow familial codes. If education is not a priority in their family, they are more apt to leave school (White Paper, n.d.). Because they live with family members, they most often commute to campus (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014). College is just one small part of their lives.

Community college students come from groups of historically underrepresented and underserved minorities (Johnson, Williams & Wood, 2015), "ethnic and cultural heritages" of all types (Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh, 2007, p. 1). Community colleges enroll "disproportionate numbers of minority and immigrant students" (Zeidenberg, 2008, p. 53) who may have patterns of behavior that are misunderstood by their teachers (Bensimon, 2007). Especially if they are first-generation college students, they are nervous and do not know what to expect of the college experience (Jenkins, 2012). They need help learning the rules of the college game and figuring out the college culture (Saret, n.d.). They may need instructional materials in their native languages (Gulf Coast Community College, 2011).

Community college students are generally poor, underprepared, older, employed, family-oriented, and come from underrepresented populations who need to know that the classroom experience relates directly to the workplace and that they aren't wasting their time, money, or

energy (Jenkins, 2012). The dizzying behavior of students with regard to choosing a college, choosing a program, and sticking with it until the end (Bers & Schuetz, 2014) makes some describe their behavior as motivation problems (Gulf Coast Community College, 2011).

Empirical studies have reported "strong and consistent correlations" between these student characteristics and dropout behavior (Bers & Schuetz, 2014, p. 168). Since students are not going to change any time soon, and the open access mission is a worthy goal, the problem then becomes what the colleges can do to help the students with this set of characteristics stay in school long enough to graduate from their programs.

Programs Attempting to Curb the Dropout Problem

In an effort to keep students in school past the first year and eventually graduate from the community college, program efforts abound. These programs address an intent to change structures and processes at the student level, the program level, or the institution level. So many programs have been tried, in fact, that funding needs to be allocated to empirically study which programs are working (Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016).

Institutional Level Initiatives

Nitecki's qualitative study (2011) found that the characteristics of the professionals involved in the program itself could bridge the "overwhelming bureaucracy and institutional confusion" (p. 104) of the institution with the individual student, making persistence more likely. Students prospered because of the bonds they formed with faculty and classmates, and faculty members worked hard to have interaction with students, both in and out of the classroom.

Hispanic students also need personal attention to succeed in community college. Dropping out might not always be the student's fault. According to the students themselves, they need help navigating financial aid, registering online, taking online courses, and finding

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accurate assistance from staff when needed (Garcia, 2010). Fairlie, Hoffman, and Oreopoulos (2014) conducted a quantitative study at a large community college and found strong evidence that having a faculty member of the same race as the student contributed to better grades, less course dropout, and better graduation rates.

Not to be forgotten are the students of middle Appalachia, which encompasses most of West Virginia. One literature review (Kannapel & Flory, 2017) concludes that poverty, lack of job possibilities, and parent wariness make community colleges responsible for teaching prospective students about college – and then making sure they have the knowledge and skills needed to get a job or transfer. Rural community colleges comprise more than half of all community colleges in the U.S. It is difficult to recruit faculty members because salaries are low, teaching loads are high, and the faculty member might not enjoy a rural setting after experiencing it for a time. Since faculty-student interaction is so vital, colleges need faculty members who wish to stay for some years in order to have valid relationships with students and also have time to build programs (Cejda, 2010).

Faculty-student interaction has been proven to be extremely important in keeping students from dropping out (Tinto, 2000). Community college studies have proven that, because students are primarily commuters, the faculty-student interaction itself occurs during the classroom experience (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014). Programs have been tried to train faculty to be more responsive to the needs of their students. *Faculty-student interaction* needs to be interchangeable with *student-faculty interaction*, and both parties need to take responsibility for the interaction (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014). Since most of community college faculty members' time is dedicated to teaching, they are in touch with students often and can perhaps influence them to stay in school. "Community college administrators should support policies that offer incentives

to faculty, particularly part-time faculty, to engage students both inside and outside of the physical classroom or to engage in such discussions more frequently in an on-line format" (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014, p. 990).

Students often attribute their success to the interactions they had with a faculty or staff member who "had given them confidence and affirmation as well as the academic, cultural, and informational resources they needed to succeed" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 442). Students crave the inspiration of community college employees. Perhaps faculty should speak more openly about the joys of program completion being the end of a reachable goal (Bers & Schuetz, 2014) and "create learning opportunities that enable students to make those connections" (Saret, n.d. p. 1).

Faculty can be supportive of students as the students deal with their work and family obligations, lack of self-confidence, or poor study habits. It is faculty's job to make it possible for students to succeed (Saret, n.d.). If students feel more connected, they will learn more, and they will more likely stay in school (Saret, n.d.). "If nontraditional students are going to graduate, then much of the onus falls on classroom instructors" (Jenkins, 2012, p. 2). Teachers must view students as learners, recognize special needs of students, design their courses accordingly, let students know the relevance of the work they will be doing, and become intentionally welcoming (Jenkins, 2012).

Faculty need to be responsible for marginalized students to ensure that they are in supportive relationships with them and that they offer them ways of learning which best fit each student. Practitioners can be the change catalysts that are needed by the students (Bensimon, 2007). A 2017 quantitative study sought to measure student success on new assignments which measured *effort* rates more than cognitive ability against graduation rates. It failed – and two

faculty members were fired for insubordination because they did not want to change their assignments (Gray & Swinton, 2017).

Community colleges could try an early alert system, but once problems are identified, substantial intervention must take place. Counseling, technical support, or social communities might be necessary for students to succeed (Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh, 2007). Community colleges also need to make sure that students are taking only the necessary coursework if they are on a degree track, and register their new major when they change. They might also consider offering the last two courses free to students who are about to finish (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

Mitchell, Etshim, and Dietz (2016) conducted a Career and Technical Education case study at one large community college. Since CTE courses are traditionally hands-on, they have been slow to be offered online, but they have been successful at this particular college. The researchers discovered that the online CTE program is a success because it is included at all levels of the college as part of their mission of student learning and success. It is not meant to be isolated from the in-class program, and the college requires faculty to teach both face-to-face and online so that the faculty members stay engaged at the college. It is successful because everyone believes in student success at the core.

Program Level Initiatives

Various programs to sort students into groups for study and communication purposes have included academic cohorts (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood & Wright-Porter, 2011), first-year seminars (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006), learning communities, (Jackson, Stebleton & Laanan, 2013), and programs to teach learning strategies to students (Tuckman & Kennedy,

2011). Hansen & Schmidt (2017) determined that the synergy of a first-year seminar and a

learning community combine with a summer bridge program to effect change.

A 2014 study in East Los Angeles used GPS to map the physical location of every

dropout and also every positive point of interest such as a library, school, or park and every

negative point of interest such as a liquor store, bar, or tattoo parlor. They found that the

students who dropped out of school reside by negative points of interest, specifically liquor

stores, and encourage city planners and educational leaders to think more broadly about the

dropout problem (Waktola, 2014).

Closing the educational gap for underprepared students is a problem. Many

developmental education strategies have been tried for the 42% of entering freshmen at public

two-year colleges who need them (Moss, Kelcey & Showers, 2014). Students do not like

remedial courses because they waste time and get the student no closer to graduating.

Developmental courses cost taxpayers $2 billion each year and studies have shown that such

courses made no difference in student chances of passing freshman year courses, earning an

associate's degree, or transferring to a four-year school (Zeidenberg, 2008). In fact, some studies

have shown that they hinder students' transfer possibilities (Crisp, Carales, & Nunez, 2016).

Since developmental coursework stigmatizes students, and since these skills should have been

learned in high school (Moss, Kelcey & Showers, 2014), the newest developmental method is to

merge that coursework with regular math and English courses. No matter the format,

underprepared students need continued academic support and specialized instruction with full-

time faculty members using proper teaching methods (Moss, Kelcey & Showers, 2014).

Important are "academic support/guidance, targeted interventions for specific student

populations, and easing the transition of students to the college environment" (Gulf Coast

Community College, 2011, p. 2). These can be accomplished by academic advising, first-year seminars and transition programs, summer orientation/bridge programs, and early warning systems. Worth a try are early group registration, field trips, guest speakers, peer mentors, or some free tuition. Staff must locate the students "whose habits or personal situations may elevate their risk of drop-out" (p. 16). Offer a self-advocacy class and teach students to locate information, ask questions, meet faculty and staff members, and own their education. Create a mentoring program with the local high school so that high school students can ask questions and college students can share their real experiences (Gulf Coast Community College, 2011). Much work still needs to be done to determine which strategies work for which students in order to keep them from dropping out.

Online education is rampant. Two million community college students took at least one online course last year (Travers, 2016). Online courses are prevalent at the community college level of higher education, perhaps because the "increased flexibility and convenience" (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014, p. 104) of an online course fits more easily into the life of the community college student. A hallmark of community colleges is that they have always been adaptable (Cejda, 2010), and so community colleges would understandably be at the forefront of the change to online education.

Because of online popularity, online dropout research is important to the overall dropout picture, although the research is varied and contradictory. One area of controversy is the difference, if any, between face-to-face and online dropout rates. "Contradicting the notion that there is no significant difference between online and face-to-face student outcomes," Xu & Jaggars (2013, p.1) found that community college students do worse and drop more often in online classes. But then "in contrast to previous research," Shea & Bidjerano (2016, p. 14) found

that more online community college students graduated or transferred. Travers (2016) found that online *course* completion rates are significantly lower than face-to-face completion rates. Because online education is so new, the research vacillates on even the basic points.

Online courses may be a safe way for students to begin college because they can complete work in the familiar surroundings of their own homes. For nontraditional students, online learning is appealing because they can squeeze it in between other obligations such as work and family, but then often they don't have the self-motivation to complete the course. Personal characteristics of students may contribute to the dropout rate of online students, but also contributing may be poor technology and instructional methods that are not working (Travers, 2016).

Wladis, Wladis, & Hachey (2014) analyzed online data at one large community college to discover that students dropped out at a rate of 30% for lower level courses and 15% for upper level courses. They also found dropout rates of 32% for elective courses and 14% for required courses in the major. In a qualitative study of online faculty, Russo-Gleicher (2013) discovered that students drop out more if student services are not fully utilized.

Travers (2016) studied individual online course completion rates. He suggested that students drop out from online classes because of poor technology, lack of social and academic integration, and traditional academic and administrative processes that have not changed to support online education.

Through a review of studies combined with a survey of 30 community colleges, Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh (2007) developed a three-fold online course dropout framework. They concluded that students drop out of online courses because of technical factors including online searching, emailing, and word processing skills; social factors including peer and teacher

interactions, teamwork, and class participation; and psychological factors such as motivation, persistence, and time management.

Student Level Initiatives

The Male Student Success Initiative for African-American community college students was an effort to bring validation and campus services to a group that is "historically underrepresented and underserved" (Johnson, Williams & Wood, 2015, p. 26). Having an African-American mentor was successful to the point of needing to turn away students who wanted to join the program. Their purpose was to help men of color "secure financial stability, balance work and school obligations, and navigate other life stressors" (Johnson, Williams & Wood, 2015, p. 26). Minority students need personal attention (White Paper, n.d.).

Gulf Coast Community College (2011) is full of suggestions to avert dropping out of community college. One program had students make a pledge: "I will commit myself to the following: Make my education a priority. Do my best to complete the entire school year. Take at least 2 classes per semester. Make a real effort not to miss any classes. Only drop a class after talking to my counselor. Complete my class assignments as required. Participate in occasional evening and Saturday programs" (p. 14).

A "learner-oriented community college online course dropout framework" (Liu, Gomez, Khan & Cherng-Jyh, 2007, p. 531) might help to keep students from dropping out. Christensen & Sparkman (2017) designed a study to identify the point at which students lose momentum and are more likely to drop out of the course. They suggested deciding the cause of that point, whether it be the lesson itself, lack of teacher feedback, need for more peer interaction, or technological obstacles, and change the course structure accordingly.

Valuing student success must stay at the core of every program tried. The goal of community college should be to help students finish their programs of study.

West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges

The 1960s and 1970s saw the formation of public community colleges in West Virginia. Each college was administered by a four-year public college or university. In 1995, the state legislature added *Technical* to the names of all existing community colleges in an effort to revive emphasis on technical programs and workforce education (Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College, 2018). In 2008, this emphasis led to the passage of House Bill 3215 which separated all Community and Technical Colleges from the four-year institutions with whom they were affiliated and in whom, in some cases, they were housed (Mountwest Community and Technical College, 2018).

West Virginia is currently host to nine public Community and Technical Colleges: Blue Ridge, BridgeValley, Eastern, Mountwest, New River, Northern, Parkersburg, Pierpont, and Southern. Each college has its own administration and board of governors who report to the Chancellor of the West Virginia Community and Technical College System in Charleston, West Virginia. West Virginia Code 18B-1-1a states that the instructional mission of the state's public higher education system has two goals: "to produce college graduates who have the knowledge, skills and desire to make contributions to society; and to provide opportunities for citizens to engage in life-long learning to enhance their employability and their overall quality of life" (State of West Virginia Code, 2018).

West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges succeed in their effort to offer life-long learning to the population, but they fall short in their quest to produce college graduates. The state of West Virginia has recently located 150,000 adults who live in West Virginia and at

some time attended either a four-year or two-year institution, but never graduated. Some of these people have enough credits to have earned an associate's degree, but never followed through. The state is attempting to track them down (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2018).

The West Virginia Community and Technical College system enrolls approximately 22,000 students per year (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2015). The graduation rate is approximately 24% (NCES, 2017).

A new West Virginia Community and Technical College funding formula is in the planning stages. It is scheduled to be presented to the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission in 2019, and is expected to mirror the proposed four-year college/university model. Colleges will get points toward their share of the budget based on:

Access: Credit hours attempted by West Virginia residents, and weighted by academic discipline, course level, and high-risk student status.

Success: Number of undergraduate West Virginia resident students who are on track for on-time degree completion, with additional credit awarded for students in high-risk populations.

Impact: Number of degrees completed by West Virginia residents, with additional credit awarded for degrees produced in high-demand fields and those earned by students in high-risk populations. Institutions are also rewarded for non-resident students who join West Virginia's workforce after graduation (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2018).

West Virginia high-risk populations include the economically disadvantaged based on Pell grants, academically underprepared based on ACT/SAT math and English scores, non-

traditional adults age 25 and over, and underserved racial/ethnic minorities. High demand fields will initially include healthcare, education, and engineering, but the Department of Commerce will eventually make that designation in order to keep focus on the current workplace demands in the state (WV HEPC, 2018).

In January 2018, the West Virginia Senate unanimously passed a bill to make Community and Technical Colleges free to "fill future workforce needs for the state" (Mistich, 2018, p. 2). If such a bill is signed into action and students rush to college, or if the proposed funding formula is ever passed, faculty, staff, and administrators would be well served to know dropout causes and solutions.

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 discussed the literature pertaining to dropout theories, the history of community colleges, and the financial considerations of dropping out. It then discussed characteristics of community college students and programs that have been tried in an effort to help the dropout problem. It then gave a brief history of West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges.

Dropouts will always be present in the community college higher education system; that is as it should be. Community college is a place of discovery, and some people will learn that their career goals in no way necessitate a college education. But institutions should do all they can to ensure that those who want or need a community college education are served in the best manner possible to be able to attain their educational goals.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the study was conducted. It discusses the research methodology and research design that were used, the participants in the study, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. It also reiterates the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and research questions, and provides the personal reflexivity of the researcher.

Statement of the Problem

Typical community college students are older, working, family-involved students. They are often from poverty, minority, and underserved populations (Crosta, 2008). These students enter college with characteristics different from their four-year peers such as low high school grade point average and low priority value on education. They often have low self-esteem, no study skills, few social skills, and unrealistic goals (Bickerstaff, Barragan & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). To keep such students in school requires special understanding, special commitment, and special programs on the part of the community college. The problem that was addressed in this study was twofold. First, it was conducted to identify personal and institutional barriers preventing community college students from completing their education goals, whether that was a degree program, diploma program, or credentialing program. Secondly, it was conducted to identify strategies that can be used to assist these students in overcoming these barriers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students at one West Virginia Community and Technical College who have dropped out of their programs of study.

The study sought to identify actions and events that contributed to students choosing to drop out and strategies that can be used to reduce their dropping out.

Understanding the students' perspectives concerning their decisions to drop out will assist community college personnel to evaluate the on- and off-campus factors influencing these decisions. This qualitative study sought to directly ask students about their personal lives and also about the people and events on campus that influenced their decision to drop out of community college.

"Students' sense of place within the institutional community, their involvement in that community, and how they fit into that community are all important in retaining students in school" (Travers, 2016, p. 55). Community colleges can try to understand the personal lives of students. They can also try to view college from the student perspective in an effort to understand dropout decisions. In higher education, many studies on student success have focused on the students' characteristics before college, and have largely ignored the role the school personnel and schools themselves might have on student success. Student success might be a "learning problem of practitioners and institutions" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 446) instead of completely a student characteristic problem.

This study aimed to discover any significant personal factors or institutional factors that community colleges might possess or actions their employees might exhibit which helped or hindered students on their path to completion. "It is far more likely that practitioners will attribute inequality in educational outcomes to student deficiencies than question their own practices" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 456). Every aspect of the community college must be examined to find strengths and weaknesses.

Research Questions

The phenomena driving this research study are factors that influence the retention and dropout rates of students at one West Virginia Community and Technical College. The study contained three major research questions:

1. What personal factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

2. What institutional factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

3. What strategies can one West Virginia Community and Technical College implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates?

Research Methodology and Design

This study used a traditional qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of students who have dropped out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College in order to determine the personal and institutional factors which contributed to their leaving school.

A qualitative research design was chosen in order to learn the reasons why students dropped out of their programs of study to add life to the numerical data of how many had dropped out of school in the West Virginia Community and Technical College system. Qualitative research is used to "facilitate study of issues in depth and detail" (Patton, 2015, p. 22). Using open-ended questions in face-to-face interviews allowed participants to share their deepest thoughts and feelings. "Thick description with contextual details captures and communicates someone else's experience of the world in his or her own words" (Patton, 2015, p. 54).

One-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted. "Interview data consist of verbatim quotations with sufficient context to be interpretable" (Patton, 2015, p. 36). Once collected, the researcher then analyzed the data to discover differences and similarities among participants in order to determine patterns and themes. "Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry" (Patton, 2015, p. 22).

Participants

The participants for this qualitative study included community college students who were enrolled for at least one semester and then did not return to college. The students were identified by current or former faculty or staff at their college as having the desire to continue in a program of study, but after at least one semester, did not continue. Criterion and purposeful sampling were used to select participants in order for the researcher to identify participants who could provide the data that could completely answer the research questions.

Specific criteria for the community college student participants for this research study were as follows:

1. Students at one West Virginia Community and Technical College who attended at least one semester and who dropped out before completing their programs of study.

2. Students who were enrolled in defined programs of study.

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining approval of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited from the West Virginia Community and Technical College system with the approval of the Chancellor of the West Virginia Community and Technical College system. The letter seeking Chancellor approval is included in Appendix A. Because those doing qualitative

work "do not seek to observe a random selection of activities or people" (Posavac & Carey, 2007, p. 163) and instead seek information from those who know the landscape, the researcher then emailed a letter, included in Appendix B, asking for research assistance from the Vice President of Academic Affairs at one West Virginia Community and Technical College. The letter asked for the names of faculty or staff members who would be willing to suggest possible interview participants who met the study's criteria for participation. The researcher then sent a letter, included in Appendix C, to the recommended faculty or staff members. The researcher purposely asked faculty or staff members from different departments in order to attempt to achieve a diverse sample of participants. The faculty or staff members contacted potential participants to encourage them to participate in the study. Eighteen potential participants were suggested to the researcher.

Potential participants were emailed a letter, included in Appendix D, detailing the study and asking if they would be interested in participating. The letter included describing to the participant the use of a pseudonym to protect participant identity, the concept of member checking, the benefits and risks of participation, compensation, and details about interview place and time.

The researcher contacted 18 possible participants, with 3 declining because of their heavy time constraints of job and family, and between August and November proceeded to interview 15 participants until code redundancy was reached. A thank you letter was sent to participants after the interview was completed. The letter is included in Appendix E.

Participant Demographics

The researcher anticipated that 15-20 participants would be required to complete the study. The number of participants who were actually interviewed was 15. All participants had attended at least one semester before dropping out of their programs of study.

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Data Collection Procedures

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Interview Procedures

This researcher studied the community college dropout issue by interviewing 15 participants from one West Virginia Community and Technical College. Demographic information for each participant was collected at the beginning of each interview.

During the interview, open-ended questions, followed by probing questions if possible and necessary, were asked of each participant. To obtain a semi-structured interview process, a pre-written list of interview questions was used. One advantage of interviewing is the "opportunity for the interviewer to follow up on the points made by the respondent" (Posavac & Carey, 2007, p. 87), so every attempt was made to ask for deeper insights, descriptions, or clarifications as the interviews progressed.

Data collected from the interviews focused on the personal and institutional reasons that students at one West Virginia Community and Technical College dropped out of school. Document analysis was conducted to collect additional data about these students.

Fifteen face-to-face interviews were conducted. The interviews were held in confidential rooms at public places such as libraries, schools, and coffee houses so that participants could speak openly.

To begin each interview, the informed consent form was discussed in detail with each participant and then signed by the participant and the researcher. The form is located in

Appendix F. Permission from each participant was also sought to record the entire interview session, and after that the semi-structured interview began. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and all interviews were audio recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interview participants were given a $25 gift card for their gracious participation. To protect the identity of the participant and ensure confidentiality of the data, pseudonyms were utilized and any other identifying information was immediately removed from the data.

Care was taken to study one-on-one interviewing techniques so that the most possible data could be collected. "Interviewing is not an easy job. Good interviewers possess interpersonal skills and common sense that will permit them to obtain the information needed while maintaining the goodwill of the person interviewed. It requires a degree of maturity and a respect for truth to be able to record and report attitudes at variance with one's own" (Posavac & Carey, 2007, p. 103). The one-on-one interview is also a social activity, making the relationship between interviewer and participant particularly important to the process (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009). Building and maintaining rapport with participants was important throughout the entire research process.

True rapport can help participants feel comfortable enough to be able to give more in-depth responses, especially in regard to sensitive topics (Steber, 2017). Interviewing someone from another culture, race, or socio-economic status can cause issues to become sensitive and actions need to be decided on a case-by-case basis (Brayda & Boyce, 2014). If sensitive issues appear, the participant must feel free to end the interview process (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2009). Participant safety and consent always took precedence over the interview itself.

During the interviews, student participants were asked to share their experiences of dropping out of Thompson Community and Technical College (pseudonym). A guided interview format was used, as the researcher possessed a list of issues and questions but the order of the questions and the specific wording of each question was not determined before the interview took place. The interview questions are included in Appendix G, and demographic questions are included in Appendix H.

Document Review

A review of several documents was used to supplement the interviews for this research study. The National Center for Education Statistics and reporting documents of the West Virginia Community and Technical College system gave clear accounting of the facts of the retention and dropout situation in the institution.

Field Notes

Each interview was recorded, and in addition the researcher took notes of significant points made by the participant during the interview in order to seamlessly ask follow-up questions. Additional notes were written after the interview was over and the participant left the room. The field notes were utilized to make further notes during the transcription phase of the research process.

Memo Writing

The researcher kept track of ideas, insights, and thoughts by writing memos during the study. Reflexive memos were written to follow the researcher's own personal journey, and more technical memos were written to remember perceptions about data. Appendix I contains an example of a memo from this research study.

Pilot Testing

Pilot testing was carried out for this study in the same manner as the main study was carried out, using the same qualitative methodologies and design. Two participants were selected by the researcher to test the research design. These two participants were selected because they met the same selection criteria as that of the main study except that they were from a Commonwealth of Virginia community college.

Data was gathered for the pilot test using the same procedures that had been planned for the main study. Data was assembled from interviews, field notes, and memos. Data was then analyzed using the same procedures that had been planned for the main study. As a result of the pilot study, the researcher discovered that the interview protocol was indeed effective in eliciting information related to the research questions, so no change in the interview questions was deemed necessary. The pilot study participants responded freely to the questions and shared many experiences. The researcher transcribed each pilot study interview, and then coded, categorized, and identified themes.

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Data Analysis Procedures

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"Qualitative analysis involves interpreting interviews, observations, and documents – the data of qualitative inquiry – to find substantively meaningful patterns and themes" (Patton, 2015, p. 5). This researcher "conducted an inductive, thematic analysis" of the transcripts of participant interviews to "identify emergent themes" (Roulston, deMarrais & Lewis, 2003, p. 647).

Data input was begun after the first interview. The researcher transcribed the interviews using Microsoft Word to input the data, and using Microsoft Excel to sort and manage the data.

Transcription was undertaken the day after the interview. Appendix J includes an example of a transcript.

Coding

Coding was completed after all of the interviews were finished and transcribed into Word. Mainstream qualitative whole text analysis was used, and the sentence was the unit of analysis. One or more short phrases, or codes, were assigned to each grouping of one or more sentences which were grouped as an excerpt based upon meaning. New codes were assigned each time the meaning of the passage changed.

Codes were then grouped into categories and later into themes to answer the research questions. An example of coding for one category has been included in Appendix K.

Trustworthiness

The traditional trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established through conscious efforts by the researcher.

Credibility. A qualitative researcher conducts a rigorous inquiry by utilizing various credibility strategies (Anney, 2014). This researcher employed two strategies to make the research findings more likely to be credible. First, peer debriefing was used as the dissertation committee provided scholarly guidance throughout the entire research process. Second, member checks were utilized. "The purpose of doing member checks is to eliminate researcher bias when analyzing and interpreting the results" (Anney, 2014, p. 277). This researcher shared the analyzed and interpreted data with participants and they evaluated the interpretations that had been made. Participants enthusiastically corroborated the interpretations.

Transferability. The results of qualitative research can be transferable to the point where the results can be applied by the reader to another situation or context. It is the

researcher's responsibility to give enough detail so that the reader may decide if the results can be applied in that reader's circumstances (Patton, 2015). This researcher attempted to provide thick, detailed descriptions of the entire research process from beginning to end. This researcher also involved a variety of participants so that a wide range of data could be gleaned and perhaps transferred to other situations.

Dependability. The researcher made every attempt to follow the precepts of rigorous qualitative inquiry in order to deliver results which are sound, observable, and thoroughly documented (Patton, 2015). In-depth explanations of research methodology and design were given, and clear and succinct steps for carrying out the semi-structured interviews were followed and explained. Also, the audio recordings of participant interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Confirmability. The audit trail and reflexive journal were used by the researcher. By carefully documenting research with an audit trail of raw data, analysis and synthesis notes, and research process notes, and also detailing the reflexive journey of the researcher, other readers may follow the stages of the research and be able to apply findings in their situations. This researcher used an intellectual audit trail to reflect on how thoughts evolved through the phases of the study (Carcary, 2009).

Researcher Stance

Reflexivity refers to the "importance of deep introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one's perspective" (Patton, 2015, p. 70). The reflexive process prompts the researcher to attempt to understand and ultimately own the personal perspective. This researcher worked very hard to be reflexive about all aspects of the phenomenon during the entire research process. Since the literature review was completed prior to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, careful attention was given to not allowing the

results of the review to bias the researcher and thus reduce openness during the conduct of the study.

This researcher has taught for most of 40 years, including adjunct courses in the West Virginia Community and Technical College system for ten years, from 2007 to 2016. The researcher has experienced students leaving a course during the middle of the semester, and in addition has experienced enthusiastic students not returning after a semester. The researcher also has first-hand knowledge that almost no research has been completed with participants in the West Virginia Community and Technical College system because the system is so new.

This researcher believes that attending community college is a valid educational option leading to a career or further education, and that student dreams can be fulfilled with a community college education. The researcher also believes that student characteristics and college experiences contribute to the likelihood of a student staying in or dropping out of school, but that community colleges might do more to tear down barriers for students making an effort to complete their programs of study.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

Chapter 4 begins with a restatement of the purpose of the study and research questions, followed by demographic information of the research participants and a discussion of the pilot study. Chapter 4 then turns to the findings of each research question of the study and concludes with a summary.

This study was conducted to identify personal and institutional barriers preventing community college students from completing their education goals, whether that was a degree program, diploma program, or credentialing program. It was also conducted to identify strategies that can be used to assist these students in overcoming these barriers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students from one West Virginia Community and Technical College who have dropped out of their programs of study. The study sought to identify actions and events that contributed to students choosing to drop out and strategies that can be used to reduce their dropping out.

Understanding the students' perspectives concerning their decisions to drop out will assist community college personnel to evaluate the on- and off-campus factors influencing these decisions. This qualitative study sought to directly ask students about their personal lives and also about the people and events on campus that influenced their decision to drop out of community college.

Research Questions

The primary focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students who have begun, but not completed, their programs of study at one West Virginia Community and Technical College. The study contained three research questions:

1. What personal factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

2. What institutional factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

3. What strategies can one West Virginia Community and Technical College implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates?

Methodology

A basic qualitative research approach was utilized to answer the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, with the initial question always being, "So what led you to leave the community college," and further questions probing for understanding the direction the answer to that initial question might lead. The researcher interviewed 15 participants from one West Virginia Community and Technical College.

Participant Demographics

Participants for this study attended one West Virginia Community and Technical College between Summer Semester 2012 and Spring Semester 2019. They were between the ages of 18 and 34 when they were enrolled at the college, and only 3 participants were typical college-age students when they began at Thompson Community and Technical College. They lived between 2 blocks and 38 miles from the college itself, and they took classes in-seat, online, or by video-based distance learning. They represent 28 semesters of time and approximately $56,000 of

tuition money attending community college, and none of them earned a community college degree, diploma, credential, or certificate.

Following is a brief description of each participant in this study. The names given here are pseudonyms and are listed alphabetically to protect participant confidentiality.

"Angela" was 18 years old when she started at the college, and she was enrolled for 3 semesters. She lived approximately 30 miles away, worked 2 jobs, and was close to finishing her associate's degree when she left school. She took both in-seat and online courses.

"Benjamin" was 29 years old when he studied at the college for 2 semesters. He lived 10 miles from the school. He was a single parent, worked a job, and took classes in-seat and online.

"Carla" was age 22 when she attended the college for 2 semesters. She lived ½ mile away, took both in-seat and online classes, and held a job.

"Diego" spent 1 semester at the college when he was 19. He lived ½ mile away, worked a job, and took in-seat and video-based distance learning classes.

"Evelyn" was age 21 and had 1 child when she attended the college for 1 semester. She lived 15 miles away, and took in-seat and video-based distance learning courses.

"Frederick" began studies at the college when he was 20 years old. He attended for 3 semesters, lived 2 miles away, and took classes in-seat, online, and video-based distance learning.

"Gayle" was an 18-year-old mother of 1-going-on-2 when she attended the college for 1 semester. She lived 2 blocks away and took all in-seat classes.

"Howard" was age 24 and a single parent when he attended the college for 1 full semester and parts of 2 other semesters. He lived 10 miles away and took all in-seat courses.

"Isabelle" studied at the college for 1 semester when she was 34 years old. She was between jobs at that time. She lived 10 miles from the college and completed all online classes.

"Jaquan" was 31 years old and had a job and a child when he attended the college for 1 semester. He lived 3 miles away from the college, and took 2 in-seat and 2 online courses.

"Karinna" spent 1 semester attending the college when she was 25 years old. She worked, took all online classes, and lived 15 miles away.

"Lawrence" was age 20 when he took 1 semester at the college. He was enrolled in all in-seat classes, and he lived 15 miles away from campus.

"Mona" was 23 years old when she attended the college for 2 semesters. She took all in-seat classes, and lived 2 miles away from the college.

"Ned" was age 24 when he took classes for 2 semesters at the college. He completed in-seat, online, and video-based distance learning classes, lived 15 miles away, and worked a job.

"Olivia" was 26 years old when she began at the college. She took classes for 4 semesters and worked full-time. She drove 38 miles to take in-seat and video-based distance learning classes, and tried an online course once.

Pilot Study

A pilot study with two participants was conducted prior to this research to determine if the interview protocol was effective and if the data collected was analyzable. The participants, one male and one female, shared their experiences of attending a Commonwealth of Virginia community college for at least one semester and then leaving the community college before the completion of their programs of study.

The interview protocol used during the pilot study was found to be effective in eliciting information related to the research questions, so no change in the interview questions was

deemed necessary. The pilot study participants responded freely to the questions and shared many experiences. The researcher transcribed each pilot study interview, and found the data analyzable by being able to identify codes, categories, and themes.

Overview of Themes

Participants in this study discussed their experiences related to leaving Thompson Community and Technical College before completing their programs of study. They shared personal and institutional factors which contributed to their leaving. They also shared strategies which could possibly be used to enhance student retention and decrease dropout rates.

Themes evolved as responses were coded and categorized. The themes which emerged included personal and institutional factors for dropping out of school, and also possible retention strategies.

Participants made attendance decisions based on personal factors such as difficulty juggling school and life, financial difficulties, and lack of support groups. They also made attendance decisions based on institutional factors such as paperwork, communication, teaching, advising, and getting encouragement. Their retention strategies focused on minimizing negative student experiences such as not getting the help they needed in areas of advising, communication, and problem solving, and maximizing positive student experiences such as receiving special attention from faculty and staff members. Participants expressed the need for help in many areas of college life and shared how grateful they were for any assistance.

Research Question #1: Personal Factors

RQ1: What personal factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia

Community and Technical College?

The first research question in this study sought to understand the personal reasons for students leaving Thompson Community and Technical College. To answer this question, if participants mentioned personal factors in describing what led them to leave the community college, discussion followed along those lines. Three participants identified a personal factor as their primary cause of leaving school. For the rest, according to their responses, personal factors did influence their decision to leave school, but only as a secondary reason.

The theme that emerged relating to the first research question was *personal factors can be hurdles to community college completion*. Four categories relating to this theme emerged: (1) School-life balance, (2) Financial difficulties, (3) Unsettled life pathways, and (4) Lack of support groups. Table 2 shows the codes and categories related to the theme *personal factors can be hurdles to community college completion*.

Table 2
Personal Factors Theme: Personal Factors Can Be Hurdles to Community College Completion

Codes	Categories	Theme
Work-school demands Tired, Stressed Schedules Family responsibilities	School/life balance	
Out-of-pocket costs Bills Transportation Summer school Supplies, books More financial aid	Financial difficulties	Personal factors can be hurdles to community college completion
College goals Life goals Handling change Not ready Making decisions	Unsettled life pathways	
No support Minimal support Bad influence	Lack of support groups	

School-Life Balance

Participants noted that it was difficult to juggle the responsibilities of college and the rest

of life's activities and commitments.

> Cuz that was a big lot of the pressure was, you know, I would drive my daughter to day care in a local town, then drive all the way out to Thompson, and then after I'd leave there, go home, then go back to another class, then go back to the other town to pick her back up (Howard, paragraph #18).

> That was probably the major factor was being tired. Working the two jobs, because sometimes I would go to class, then I'd go to my first job, then I'd go to my second job. Or flip flop. I'd go to my first job, I'd go to class, then I'd go to my second job (Angela, paragraph #46).

> Having to go to class? [laughter] Having to do the work? I mean, I do enjoy it but I mean life gets in the way. It gets busy and… (Benjamin, paragraph #32).

> Waking up early. [laughs] I'm not a morning person, and those 8 o'clock classes sure were tough. I was half asleep in there trying to listen to somebody tell me something I've never heard before, and I think my English class was at 8 am, so that was a rough class for me [laughs] (Angela, paragraph #16).

> Because there's not that many schools around here that would work around what I'm going to be with. Most schools do day classes and I work all day. So I'm going to have to go somewhere that has evening classes, and that's probably more than likely going to be an online school (Angela, paragraph #36). Because I'm going to be 8 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday. And you know, most college classes are usually from 8 to 5 Monday through Friday (paragraph #38).

Living near Thompson, one way to ease the strain of busy schedules, was mentioned as a

positive feature of the community college.

> I liked how [laughs] close in proximity it was to my home (Diego, paragraph #40).

> And it was like two minutes away from where I lived (Gayle, paragraph #14).

One participant left the college for a very specific personal reason. Olivia dropped out

only because "there was a death in the family and I had to leave college to take care of my

elderly grandfather" (paragraph #2).

When asked if there were other reasons for leaving the college, Olivia responded

emphatically:

> Um, no! The only issue that I had was the fact that I couldn't maintain a full-time job
> and full-time student responsibilities while taking care of my grandfather (paragraph
> #12).

Participants enrolled in online courses to attempt to ease the burden of trying to

simultaneously work and go to school, but that did not always work out successfully.

> It's like the work load is like, 'here's a test, here's this, here's this, and this's gotta be
> done today. And I'm used to it because I went to the local 4-year college, but it's just
> different kinda, it's like of a put all the workload on you, and you don't have that much of
> studying basically (Karinna, paragraph #8).

Karinna further explained the reason she signed up for online courses when she knew full

well what the experience would entail. "I was working too, but I was online because I was

working" (paragraph #10).

> Ned also explained school-life balance difficulties relating to taking courses online.

> And then sometimes I just felt like there was too much to do at once. It felt like that all
> the time actually, [short laugh] especially with the online classes, like if you get a little bit
> behind, it's really easy to do. And then you have like your, I had classes at school and
> then classes online, and then constant homework, and being on the computer (paragraph
> #14).

He added:

> Some of the classes that I needed to take with my work schedule were terrible, cuz I close
> the bar some nights so I don't get home until 4:30 am sometimes, and then having to be
> in a class the next morning at a certain time is just unrealistic for me. So certain things I
> *had* to schedule to be online instead of in the classroom (paragraph #22).

One participant left Thompson when her first child was six months old and she found out

she was expecting a second child.

> I had great pregnancies. I have three children now. Each one of them was great. It was
> just the part of being a mom and going to school and trying to balance life. It was going
> to be hard. I wasn't ready (Gayle, paragraph #10).

She further shared.

> I finished that semester because I was still pregnant – I didn't have *two* babies – but I was going to have them before the next semester ended and I didn't want to miss school trying to have a baby, and miss exams and stuff. Then I would have flunked out, so… (Gayle, paragraph #38).

Participants stated that having access to a day care would have helped with the stress of fulfilling school and life commitments.

> Maybe if they had a day care, it would have been nice. Or even just bringing kids to class. Or I mean, you probably could have brought your children to class, but – no, two infants in a classroom? [laughs] (Gayle, paragraph #40).

> Or even having a day care there. Cuz I remember we went, one time, our English teacher took us on a tour of the local 4-year university library and she was saying like they have housing there, people have their kids, there's a day care, and to me that just *blew my mind*. I mean, being able, I mean if someone would have said there's a day care, plus you can get a job at Thompson, your daughter can stay here. I mean, I would have graduated, you know, 10 years ago instead of having to withdraw. And being even a first-time parent, I didn't know, if I'd had any help with that in any shape or way, it'd have been… (Howard, paragraph #18).

Financial Difficulties

Even though most participants had stated another primary reason for leaving school, two participants in particular mentioned finances as very important to their decision to leave.

> And you know, having rent and you know bills to pay, going to school, I was you know taking a lot of classes, but then I couldn't *work* because I didn't have a babysitter in the evenings, so then I was just, it, for me, I had to leave to go work full-time so I could get caught up on my bills and then have a, you know, better plan when I came back the following semester (Howard, paragraph #2).

> I think really the only thing that could have gone better was if I had been able to get a little more financial aid when I did take that last semester because I was only part-time then. The semester started just a few days after my grandmother had passed away. And it was, it was, it was difficult to make the decision to leave, but it was either continue going to school and let the bills go, or get work and hope for the best (Olivia, paragraph #46).

Participants mentioned the financial difficulty of attending college as an add-on to their primary reason for leaving school. Other factors drove them to consider leaving, but then the added discomfort of funding tuition, supplies, and transportation pushed them to drop out.

Participants shared how available cash was difficult to find.

> I would have had to pay the actual money to start school. I would have had to order all of my books out of pocket, I mean, and I really just did not, and I couldn't do that because I was paying day care and… (Evelyn, paragraph #16).

> I had contacted them, I had contacted the financial aid office, and they gave me the option, they told me that I could *pay* the money up front and go to school, and that they could possibly send the papers out, and they would refund me the money, like write me a check for the money, but I really didn't have the money to pay [laughs] (Evelyn, paragraph #12).

> I really didn't get financial aid, I didn't get that much, and what I did get they kept. And I had to order my books from specifically *them*. I couldn't order it from nowhere else. Um, and they was really expensive (Karinna, paragraph #16).

> I actually came back to Thompson but they wouldn't let me in because they said the first time I *did* withdraw, the second time they said I never completely withdrew and I don't remember ever doing that, and I even paid off all of my student loans, but they said if I came back I'd have to pay for everything in full. So that's why I went to the local 4-year college (Howard, paragraph #24).

Participants also shared that paying for extra expenses related to school impacted their decision to leave college.

> My thing was transportation. I did not have a license at the time, not because it was revoked or anything, I just hadn't taken the test. Um, I also didn't have a *car*, so I couldn't rely on someone else, you know, to transport me to and from class every day (Isabelle, paragraph #20).

> And then the cost for the summer also is – because you have to have the supplies basically for those lab classes – also was a contributing factor (Benjamin, paragraph #14). Financial was some of that as well, and then for summer classes you don't get as much financial aid (paragraph #44).

> I will have zero problems trying to get enrolled, so as soon as I get me a laptop I'm going back (Angela, paragraph #28).

One participant shared his desire to have access to a job at the college where it would be

convenient to earn money while also attending classes.

> And also have more of a workable approach to like, you know, jobs at college and stuff, to where you could work. Because I was never made aware of anything I could do to make money over there either (Howard, paragraph #18).

Unsettled Life Pathways

In the course of discussing other topics, many participants indicated that their path of life

at the time they attended Thompson Community and Technical College was rather unsteady and

subject to change.

> I still don't know. [laughter] I just started college to try to get somewhere (Gayle, paragraph #20).

> I just stopped that path. I mean, not that I stopped that my brain has decided to do something different – *not at all*. I just have not continued my career. I'm kinda in just limbo (Benjamin, paragraph #40).

> I left because I found out I was pregnant with my second child (Gayle, paragraph #2). I already had one kid and I second guessed going to college anyways, just because it was a new baby and stuff, and um, and then when I went that semester, about maybe a month before it ended, I found out I was having *another* baby. And I didn't think I would be able to handle another semester with two babies (paragraph #4).

> Like I don't have to – cuz, man, they didn't talk me into changing my – I mean, I don't know why, I mean – I don't know why, cuz, well, sometimes I would make it on my own decision, but then they're like, Well, if you choose this degree, you'll have this credit, that, that, but if you choose this one you'll have this. So I told myself if I'd just change my major I could have more credits here – but yah, then when you go, it doesn't even add up (Frederick, paragraph #34).

> I'm not a waking up early type person, and school just wasn't for me, so I just focused on finding a job (Lawrence, paragraph #2).

> I just felt like I wasn't ready (Frederick, paragraph #6).

> It was kind of like a transition period for me really (Jaquan, paragraph #22).

> I had, a, um, 9 o'clock class, and a 11 o'clock, and then I went through the day and it was a 4 o'clock class so it got better after that. But I just, um, well, basically I slept in high school, so I was like school ain't for me (Lawrence, paragraph #4).

I probably could have shortened my schedules and went part-time instead of a full-time student, um, but I had already made the decision that it was going to be too hard, so… (Gayle, paragraph # 36).

I was dating someone in my life, and we had got engaged, and after the engagement I switched my career path a little bit. That's when I started working at my first job, and after I got the job there the checks were really, really good. And the checks being good, I was tired because I worked a lot of hours there on top of all of my hours in school. So when I started slacking on my school work and was talking about how stressed out it was making me, he implied you don't even need college. We can both make enough money together and you can just drop out of school (Angela, paragraph #4).

Some participants indicated they were now ready to craft a plan for the future.

I am excited to go back. I just need to think of when and how (Diego, Paragraph #52).

Because now I know I need college. [laughter] It kinda helps (Angela, paragraph #34). Thompson is a really good school. I really enjoyed going there, small, laid-back, but at the same time I feel that if I would have been at a bigger college, they would have pushed me harder and I probably would have quit sooner. So I mean I stayed in as long as I could at Thompson, and I mean if you think about it, they're really only like a 2-year school, cuz I was almost done. Like I could have transferred after 1 more semester and been on my fast track to an actual degree. So… (paragraph #50).

I *would* like to go back to college maybe in the future, when my daughter's a little bigger and can, you know, she's in school, or I don't have to put her in day care because I don't particularly like day care. So, hopefully, eventually (Evelyn, paragraph #54).

I could get a degree I could actually use in my life. So it's just a lot of thinking – and a lot of doing. But it's possible. Anything is possible (Angela, paragraph #54).

Lack of Support Groups

Along with Carla who stated that she is on her own (paragraph #48), and Karinna, who

said that she "never had a lot of support" (paragraph #18), participants indicated that they did not

receive the most wholehearted support from their loved ones.

I mean, my family told me like you know they were just proud of me for going and stuff, but as far as like helping and supporting, they were distant with it (Gayle, paragraph 12).

I mean, my mom's side of the family, there's just maybe a couple graduates, and they're from the old school of just go out, get a job, no further education. You have a kid. My dad's the same way, but his adopted parents both have their master's, were school

teachers, coaches, and my uncle is actually, um got his master's from a major university, for librarian. So they wanted me to go and that was the great support group was, just finish school, start your own path. But then you know when I started financially going downhill a little bit, it was hey, go back to work, you shouldn't have done it, you know, you're kinda too late in your life where you have a daughter. So, um, at home the support group wasn't much (Howard, paragraph #4).

I lived by myself, just my cats and I. And my grandmother at the time was very, very supportive, and allowed me to use her car to get to and from classes. And it was basically just me, my cats, and my grandparents (Olivia, paragraph #40).

In some cases direct physical family support groups were absent, leaving the student

isolated.

Um, the first time, well actually both times, were um, I had just gotten custody of my daughter, so it was um my brother was living in Korea, my dad was in Connecticut, my mom was in South Carolina, so it was just me and my daughter (Howard, paragraph #2). It was, I mean I didn't have anybody close around me. I just felt 100% in it by myself. And like, I had, where I was first time in college, I had nowhere. And being even a first-time parent, I didn't know, if I'd had any help with that in any shape or way, it'd have been… (paragraph #18)

My parents had just left and moved to Virginia at that time, so basically it was just me and my daughter at the time (Jaquan, paragraph #20).

Participants considered classmates part of their support group network, appreciated

friendships made at Thompson, and utilized their classmates as a strategy for overcoming their

lack of support.

And [pause] that was pretty much the only support system I had until my second semester when I finally, I made some *friends*, and I felt so proud of myself. I felt accomplished that I *had* made friends (Olivia, paragraph #40).

I made one friend at Thompson and I had my family, so if that's considered a support group, then yes, but then no at the same time [laughs] (Mona, paragraph #48).

One participant followed, as she now sees it, the wrong support group.

Mmmm, just had a lot of things going on in my life and I let some stupid people talk me into [air quotes] you don't need college. Yah. And I was dumb enough to listen (Angela, paragraph #2). And instead of listening to the people who raised me my whole life, I let someone who left out of my life on their own free will change *my* history, well, not history, but change my *future*. And that's what sucks (Angela, paragraph #40).

<center>**Research Question #2: Institutional Factors**</center>

RQ2: What institutional factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia

Community and Technical College?

The second research question in this study sought to understand the institutional reasons

for students leaving Thompson Community and Technical College.

The theme that emerged was *each institutional exchange with each student is important*.

Six categories relating to this theme emerged: (1) Paperwork, (2) Communication, (3) Needed

Help, (4) Teaching, (5) Advising, (6) Climate, (7) Needed Encouragement, (8) Opportunities.

Table 3 shows the codes and categories related to the theme *each institutional exchange with*

each student is important.

Table 3
Institutional Factors Theme: Each Institutional Exchange With Each Student Is Important

Codes	Categories	Theme
Paperwork lost Paperwork confusion Run around Unnecessary meetings	Paperwork	
Wanted to talk Emails Connections Faculty-student Staff-student	Communication	Each institutional exchange with each student is important
Information Books Processes Orientation Coursework	Needed help	
Teachers read slides Teachers Video-based distance learning Online courses Unused materials	Teaching	

Table 3 Continued

Institutional Factors Theme: Each Institutional Exchange With Each Student Is Important

Codes	Categories	Theme
Tangled credits Don't know how college runs Bad/no advisor Already took class No researched advising answers	Advising	Each institutional exchange with each student is important
Left out Aggravated, frustrated Impersonal, rude Boring Low expectations	Climate	
Got discouraged Provide options Show big picture Understanding	Needed encouragement	
Academic programs Technical programs Tutoring Involvement Educational level	Opportunities	

Paperwork

For some participants, paperwork caused delays, annoyance, or anxiety. They shared detailed stories about their paperwork experiences.

Frederick stated that he "had no real problem with Thompson except for like their staff. The professors were OK, but everything else was so *slow*. They'd, well, they'd lose papers and stuff" (paragraph #2).

> They kept losing things of mine. It would be like little simple waivers or just things you were supposed to sign, and I would go sign it, and then two weeks later you'd have to come in and sign this paper. I already signed it. 'Oh well, we must have misplaced it,' or something but… (paragraph #4).

He continued with other details.

It was more of like the head guy, like I would go in there – uh, I changed my mailing address one time, and they were like still mailing stuff to another address where I wasn't getting anything, and I changed it – but it never got changed. And even when I went back recently to transfer to the local 4-year college, I had to fill out another one because they said I never changed it. Like even it was *still* wrong. It was still when I was like two years out of high school, and I've moved like three times since then. Going to Thompson, having to change your address, it was just, I don't know. Then one time – 'here, you can change your own address, you go in on this web portal, you do it online,' and you're supposed to go in, but then it'd be in somebody else's system like that, but it won't be in the head office's, so he sends me this paper and says 'here fill this out.' I'm like, 'I already did it online.' (paragraph #12)

Evelyn shared a specific series of paperwork events:

Well, I was supposed to go back, but the office actually didn't take care of my financial aid. I was supposed to turn them in my papers and they were supposed to get them to the actual FAFSA office, and they never sent my papers off (paragraph #2).

I was supposed to start back in August. I think my papers had to be in – by July maybe? If I'm not mistaken? And I had to have copies of my W2s from my previous year, um my living forms and everything, and I had them all turned in, and I got a letter in the mail two-three weeks later, saying my papers hadn't been turned in (paragraph #4).

I had went to the school and, well, they basically just gave me the runaround that they didn't *have* my papers. I know they had my papers. [laughs] I had turned them in – they had actually, I had turned them in, and I had to fill out a paper while I was there turning them in that they were *also* supposed to turn in. So I *know* the paper was there [nervous laughter] (paragraph #10).

Paperwork had also been a problem for Evelyn the semester she first enrolled at the

college.

When I first started Thompson, I actually had the same problem with the financial aid, except that time I mailed the papers by myself, *but* I didn't have no tax papers, so I had to pay out of pocket then – well, my dad paid for it – and they did refund me the check. They refunded me the check and I mean it went to my dad. But it was basically just because Thompson didn't give me the correct papers to fill out, so I had to pay out of pocket to start, it was $1900? (paragraph #58).

She continued:

I had made numerous trips to the school, I had made numerous phone calls, I pretty much talked to everyone in the building – and the FAFSA building (paragraph #28).

Then Evelyn concluded by sharing what she thinks is needed at the college to avoid such a situation in the future.

A better FAFSA office I suppose? [laughs] Or not even… I mean, I don't guess a better FAFSA office, but a staff, I guess, that knows what they're supposed to do. *I* could have mailed the papers in to the FAFSA office, is my big thing. But they told me to bring *them* my papers, and that they would do it (Evelyn, paragraph #50).

Carla shared her experience with the paperwork process of entry at Thompson as she went back and forth between colleges.

Whenever you first like want to go there you have to have like a in-person like with the Adminis… I don't know what his title is there (paragraph #18). I just feel like it's unnecessary especially like if you've already been there or like taken a class there before. I feel like you shouldn't have to go and have a sit-down with him. That was kind of inconvenient. (paragraph #24)

It was like *twice* you had to go and then you had to go to another lady to like pay your bill and stuff like you couldn't just pay it online (paragraph #28).

Jaquan described the reason he left school.

Uh, I couldn't take my online classes because I couldn't get my money for my books before the classes started, so they dropped me out of my online classes so I was just left with my in-classes (paragraph #2).

He elaborated, "They want you to attend I think it is 3-4 weeks before you get your financial aid, so if we don't already have money, you can't afford your books, then it's kind of a hard thing to do (paragraph #4). He had turned in his financial papers, but had difficulty obtaining the funds.

Yah, they were in prior, and on time, but it's where I didn't attend my online classes they didn't give me my money. But I couldn't get it until I went there for a certain number of weeks (paragraph #6). The in-campus classes I could go to and attend, but as far as online I couldn't do the work without a book (paragraph #8).

He then added suggestions for improvement.

Um, the overall organization of the school, with the one person being over the whole system as far as the financial aid and the signing up and all that. Basically that one guy runs all that. And he can't keep up with all that (paragraph #30).

They definitely need more people in the different departments to not have all the pressure on one person because that sets up for too many mistakes (paragraph #32).

Communication

Some participants expressed the desire to interact with faculty, staff, and administrators on campus. Mona, in particular, shared details of what she needed and what it felt like.

The things I wanted to talk about were like is this a good fit for me? should I be looking at something else? do you have other options? I just didn't know like what they offered, what would be good for me, or anything. I was just kinda like *swinging in the wind* (paragraph #14).

I didn't interact with anybody. Uh, I didn't have very much communication with anybody outside of signing up for school, uh, paying them some money, and that was it. I don't recall having *anybody* to sit down and talk to me (paragraph #28).

She continued:

There was very little interaction. I recall getting, I wouldn't say help, but I didn't feel like I could reach out to anyone. They just seemed so far away. Like we were all in the same building, couple of classrooms, I just seemed *off on an island* or something (paragraph #34).

Then she offered suggestions:

Maybe showing an interest in me and *my* goals and what I wanted. And maybe they could tell me what my options were, tell me what I could have been doing, uh, match me (paragraph #46).

Two other participants discussed overall communication at the college.

I think it's my fault that, um, mainly, but also I don't remember any emails shot out or, you know, even when I withdrew the first time, I don't remember anybody stopping me. I remember signing the withdrawal form, or you know, what all that was, but I don't remember anybody saying 'we can make this work,' 'let's do this, let's do that.' But you know I think had I myself dug deeper into that, maybe spoke with someone else, it might have actually changed (Howard, paragraph #14).

I felt like I didn't connect with any of the people, like any of my peers or classmates and stuff like that. I just, I don't know, it was weird. There would be like eight people in some classes and everyone would sit kind of away from each other and not interact, which I thought was a little bit strange. Um, cuz I do, like I don't find interaction weird,

I'll talk to whoever, but it was definitely, I don't know, [laughs] a bit strange sometimes (Ned, paragraph #10).

Other participants shared stories of communication difficulties between faculty and

students.

The instructors never really replied to anybody if you needed some help, uh, just kind of threw me for a loop. If you needed something, no one was there to help (Isabelle, paragraph #4). There was quite a few times I would, um, message one instructor, um, asking about an assignment, exactly what was, what they were looking for. The directions were not very clear. Um, and it'd be four or five days before I'd get a reply – if I got one at all. It was just, um, it was unefficient (Isabelle, paragraph #8).

Um, I didn't really have a lot of support from the teachers. Like the online teachers, they would be in different states and I'd try to email them. It may be a simple question to them, but it's important to me. Because I may not be catching on to something and they would never message me back. So I ended up dropping out, or either, um, failing a test or something, and that kind of degree. But that's why I left, because it was so hard for me to understand what I'm learning and the teachers wouldn't interact at all (Karinna, paragraph #2).

Karinna continued:

I would wait like a week, sometimes two, and would never hear nothing back. And I'd email again, and still nothing back, so I ended up calling their school, uh, to talk to somebody, and they said that, uh, they will get back to me, the professors will get back to me when they can (paragraph #6).

She concluded with a specific description.

Like the teachers there are overwhelmed, obviously if they can't message me back with two to three days max, cuz I understand, you might teach here, there, cuz they're *online*. You know, so I try to give them that chance, and it still didn't help. I just ended up getting frustrated. I'm so behind. I'm trying to catch up with everybody. She don't care. She closes them out. Cuz you know, you gotta go in there each day and complete it. Closes them out. I'm like 'wow.' And they won't message me back. So that's the main thing that threw me off and made me like 'I'm just gonna wait and go back to the local 4-year college' type thing (paragraph #30).

Needed Help

Participants mentioned many types of assistance that they needed from faculty or staff

members. Howard shared his need for help with a variety of topics.

Honestly, I think the main thing that would have been both, kinda me and the faculty, like I think at that time, you know, at that age in my life, you're more scared to ask for help because you think you know where you are in life and you want to accept the consequences. Where if I was younger, if I'd have been 18-19 years old, it would be like, 'hey, I need help on this.' I would have been more myself more proactive on asking faculty or a guidance counselor (paragraph #14).

And further,

I didn't even know kind of what work study was or anything, and I think it's, you know, it's a learning point in my life *now*, but if somebody would have been in – like you know the first time I signed up and said 'hey, you're about to start school, hey I notice you're a single parent, I notice you *have* a daughter, um, how about where does she go to day care, what's the hours of your classes, um, and have you *thought* about work study, we can put you here, we can turn your schedule around and you can work 2-3 days a week, that would pay for a lot of your bills,' here's, you know, 'we're thinking about starting a day care, or a day care that's closer over here,' or even 'here are some services that the college or DHHR offers, let's keep you *in* here.' And then every semester progressively get better (paragraph #20).

Howard concludes his thoughts on the subject.

But I don't know if it might have been on my part, I was so stressed out at the time, but I don't remember it being laid out (paragraph #20).

Other participants expressed their desire for assistance.

If they would have took time to show me the process of going about getting my books, or as far as not put me in online classes like I requested to begin with, then I probably would have been OK (Jaquan, paragraph #34).

I should have just like, if I would have, if there were things I needed, if I would have asked for them like early on, um, dropping some classes and stuff like that, but … (Ned, paragraph #28).

Pretty much there's just not enough help over there to accommodate everybody. They just have a lack of help (Jaquan, paragraph #36). It's just, basically you have to go to him for everything. So it kinda piles him up, and it's just frustrating cuz you gotta wait cuz there's other people in line too (paragraph #42).

Ned explained his experiences.

Um, there were a few things. I was kinda dissatisfied. I can't remember his name, but he's the one who helps you do all of your stuff. He kinda wasn't great, and I feel like every time I went to him for help, um, he wasn't like trying to hear the things I needed. I

was kinda like rushed out, I feel like. He wasn't rude or anything, I just felt like I wasn't getting like the things I needed (paragraph #2).

He continued:

Um, I feel like an in-person orientation in the first place, and then, um, the, I don't even know what his title is, but that guy, [laughs] if he could have been more helpful. Um, I feel like I didn't like it. I didn't know what was going on there half of the time, and what they had to offer, or what *I* could do, or *my* options (paragraph #24).

And the orientation is an online orientation, and I just don't, I don't know, I don't think that was, I think they should have like an actual orientation and should show ya where things are, and tell you like the things that you need to know, and that didn't happen (paragraph #8).

Ned concluded with:

Um, if I would have felt like when I like went for help I got better help, I would have been like less discouraged to go and tell them if I *was* overwhelmed or like needed to drop things and stuff like that. And if I would have just maybe taken less online classes in the first place (paragraph #18).

Other participants expressed their ideas.

I never registered as a student with ADHD because when you tell people that you are ADHD, they kinda look at you like 'are you, are you a high-functioning like disabled person,' I'm like 'no, I'm just like *you*' (Mona, paragraph #22).

Like you gotta have like this certain *email* for them that you gotta set up. Um, I didn't know how to really navigate. Like I come from the local 4-year, we used their system. So I'm coming to a new system, and I really just didn't know how to navigate, like to get to the assignment, or to email a certain teacher. I didn't know how to do that for like a week or two, so that was a big problem (Karinna, paragraph #14).

Yah, there was like, the actual people on campus were helpful. Like they help you and tell you the truth, and they try to help you the best way they *can*. But it's like they just throw you in there after you're signed in. Like you have to go on their site, do all this, and they don't walk you through that. They just give you a list of things you have to do (Karinna, paragraph #12).

Isabelle wanted more instruction to complete her paperwork. She wished they would

have made sure that "people are up-to-date on information that, you know, this is what's going

on, this is how this is going to go." She "didn't get that" (paragraph #28).

She related this experience:

When, um, applying for financial aid, I hadn't done so in probably 20 years. Um, it was totally different and totally new to me. So I needed a little bit of help from an outside source. I would expect someone from Thompson to run me through these things and, and talk about them. Instead, uh, they said 'here sign this, sign this, and we'll see you in this time to pick up this much money.' Um, when I showed up in this time to pick up this much money and sign my papers to get it started, they didn't inform me when I signed those papers I had *time* to wait for my first loan to come through. So here I am struggling, um, new student, no money for books. I had to wait another six weeks to even *get* my books and get started (paragraph #6).

She finishes her story by sharing this thought:

So by midterms I was already behind, struggling, and wondering if this is what I wanted to do (Isabelle, paragraph #6).

Karinna needed "more support, more effort from the teachers." She went on to explain

her experience.

Like OK, like I would ask, they knew I was working like I explained to them. I have three kids, I'm working full-time. Um, like could you give me an extra day to finish this assignment, or I didn't know that we had this assignment, because I wasn't used to the teachers like scheduling or putting stuff up. You know how that goes, syllabuses and all that. I was taking certain courses, what else courses was I taking there, that's the main two because those were the two teachers that wasn't helping me. That's why I remember so much. [laughs] They wasn't helping me and those were the two hardest classes there while I was there (paragraph #22).

Lawrence elaborated on his classroom experiences at Thompson.

Teachers they just put you to work on a PowerPoint, and be like that's your assignment. I mean, a lot of people they just can't go in and just start working and get a good grade. Some would want help, some ain't gonna want help. So I say like, the people that need the help, give them the help that they need. The people that don't need it then, let them work until they say that they need help (paragraph #16).

Yah, I asked for help. But most of the time the teachers had a class the time I was needing the help. And then when they was free, they basically acted like they just had to do something else when I needed it, so I was just like, hmm, I'm gonna just find a job. The school thing ain't for me (paragraph #20).

Well, I'm, uh, I don't really like to disrupt class, so I asked after class if I needed the help or whatever. And, uh, they just acted like they didn't have the time, so no, I just went home and worked on it myself. And then there was just one day I was working on it and

I was like, and it was a late day, and the next morning I had to wake up for the same class I was working on, I was like, nah, I ain't going, I'm dropping out (paragraph #36).

Teaching

Participants shared their views on a variety of teaching topics, discussing subjects such as teaching styles and delivery systems. Evelyn shared her experience with one course.

Basically, I had considered leaving after the whole class thing – after I failed it – because I knew I'd have to take it again, and I was really worried about having to do it the same way again. Like I didn't want to have to do the same exact class and then fail it again, because, like I said, she did not, we did not learn *anything*. It was a PowerPoint, and we went over the PowerPoint, but basically all that was in the PowerPoint was just everything that was in the book (paragraph #56).

She added emphatically:

But I guess, you know, where we were at two different campuses, we had the books and she really didn't think, you know, I guess she didn't consider the fact that we *had* the books. So the PowerPoints were *exactly* what was in the book. And I *had* the book and I still didn't, [voice trails off] still didn't pass the class (paragraph #56).

Other participants also spoke to the subject:

[long pause] Um, I think teachers too forget that, um, or tend to forget that some students have not been practicing their subject as long as they have. You know, they have a curriculum, they have this set out before school even starts. I think they fail to see to it that every student is progressing as they should. Um, I'm trying to think of another way I can say that. [pause] Every student doesn't learn at the same pace. So to get up in front of the classroom and say 'we're doing x, y, and z today,' and you do in fact go over x, y, and z, but you never check back with the students to make sure x is done, then you move to y, then you move to z. It's more like this is how you do it, x, y, and z, and that's it (Mona, paragraph #50).

Like the teachers were there but they really wasn't helping. So it was basically just, you gotta learn everything on your own basically (Lawrence, paragraph #14).

There was one instructor that I didn't get along with very well, and she seemed to make, try to intentionally make my time there miserable. But that may just be, have been a personality thing (Olivia, paragraph #6).

This English class there does stand out in my mind. Um, when class started, at the start of class, we would come in, we would sit down. She would show us some type of syntax or sentence structure on the computer and she would go over it. And her next thing would be 'this is your assignment, do it like this,' and with very little guidance I'm sitting

here like 'ok, you want us to do this and this and this and this, how do we do this?' You know, I see your example on your computer that you're pulling up for the whole class. 'What are we doing again?' [laughs] You know. There was very little interaction between the students and the teachers there. That was my experience. Um, I recall a teacher telling me like in the first sentence or whatever, you're supposed to have a comma in there. That's it. I'm like, 'can you explain that a little better?' And that was it (Mona, paragraph #32).

Myself, I'm not a veteran, I didn't really, I'm not a social person per se, and some kids were like over the top as far as their communication in class. While the teacher was talking, they were talking in the back, they were having their little groups going on. There seemed to be no control in the classroom. But I don't, I didn't like my experience (Mona, paragraph #40).

Participants mentioned special challenges related to video-based distance learning

delivery system courses.

Um, I had two video classes where she's on the screen and we just sit there. She's at a different school, so she's got students. She's actually teaching multiple campuses. And I had – it was a science class – and it was a lab class so we had to order these lab kits. And I hated it. Everything that we done with the lab kit we had to do at home. And it was like basically we got the instructions in email, and we had to do what the instructions said, and I mean, you know, a *lab* thing, in my eyes, should be done in class. Like it was actually, I did not pass the class. There were eight kids in the classroom and I think two of them passed. And the teacher was, all we did in class was we went over our PowerPoints. It was an hour-long class and we went over PowerPoints – no, it was three hours, sorry, it was from 9 to 1? or 12:30? on Fridays. And it was *the worst* class of – I mean, from elementary, middle school, high school, it was the worst class I've ever taken (Evelyn, paragraph #38).

But when it came to like that hands-on – that English, math, science – it's like almost impossible. Because not only are you, you see the professor and you're talking to him, but he still has five other classrooms there too. And like trying to get all that, you might have to wait 30 minutes for them to finish their discussion and ask their questions, but your question was like way at the beginning, and he goes this… I don't know, it's a little, little difficult when it comes to those major classes (Frederick, paragraph #10).

She was teaching another class and we just kind of like watched her teach another class. So we couldn't actively ask questions, and if we did, it was just kind of hard because she had like 60 students (Diego, paragraph #32). Like she would have probably like 20-some people where she was teaching, and there were 20 of us too. So 40 people trying to ask questions, it was just kind of hard (Diego, paragraph #42).

I took one video-based distance learning class, and it was a speech class, and I don't even think that should be an *option* [laughs] to have a speech class on video-based distance

learning. And probably, I didn't have any other classes, but I would imagine they were the same. They would have, um, multiple technical difficulty issues sometimes. I could not hear half of the things that people on the other end were saying. It was awkward [laughs] to stand in front of a camera and talk to four different campuses and like a hundred different people. Yah. I don't, I don't even, I guess I get like what it's for, but like maybe if there was more funding or something then each school could have, like offer that class and wouldn't have to deal with that because that was a nightmare [laughs] (Ned, paragraph #32).

Ned offered even more insight:

I didn't even talk unless I was asked something. Cuz the whole thing was like pretty *strange*, and then sometimes when you do talk you're asked what you were saying like a few different times. And by, usually after I repeat myself the first time I feel like 'uh,' and then like you say it three times and it's just, you just want to run out the room. It was rough [chuckles through whole paragraph] (paragraph #36).

Um, the only thing that I didn't like structurally was, about the institution, was the video-based distance learning classes (Olivia, paragraph #6). The video-based distance learning classes seemed in concept like a good idea, but the system crashed every 5, 10 minutes, or would freeze, or we would lose sound. There was an entire week period where the instructor could only communicate with us by writing down what they were saying on the white board and the camera wouldn't focus on the white board (paragraph #8). So it made it nearly impossible to actually follow along with what was being said. And on more than one occasion, the system crashed to the point that they *could* not get it back up, and we were dismissed (paragraph #10).

Participants also discussed online coursework.

I figure that I do *not* like the online schooling. I don't take in the information as well and, I don't know, it just wasn't working out for me. So I didn't like that part of it (Ned, paragraph #14).

Thompson did not offer *in-class* over the summer what I needed and so more classes would – if they would have been – I would have been willing to take them in a school setting instead of online had they offered that (Benjamin, paragraph #54).

And then I was taking several online classes and there were a couple of my teachers who like weren't the best at responding. And one of them was really *sassy* with me one time when I wasn't being sassy, like I genuinely didn't know what was going on (Ned, paragraph #2).

At the time I wasn't happy with the online – or whatever they are – classes because it was just kinda hard to communicate with your teacher. It's always nice to be able to be face-to-face (Diego, paragraph #2). I like to be face-to-face and in person with my instructor (paragraph #4).

Online classes weren't too bad at all, except my accounting – because math, and trying to do it online – it's a little difficult (Frederick, paragraph #2).

One participant had an experience with a teacher leaving during a semester and being replaced by a substitute.

Well, ummm, there was a lot of teachers that I felt like didn't really care, you know, and like because I had there was one like we got, he left like in the middle of the class and like then we had to like have a substitute or whatever and it was just like kind of confusing cuz you weren't following the same curriculum and like they tried to pick up where he was and it was just impossible (Carla, paragraph #38).

Another participant mentioned the need to purchase materials that were never used in the coursework.

I had to pay, I think the lab kit was like $300, and we used maybe 2 things out of it. It was the biggest waste of money. And it had to actually be paid for out of pocket because like, you know, you have so much to spend on books out of your FAFSA, and by the time everything else was ordered, you don't have $300 or I think it was 350 for the lab kit? You don't have that to spend, and then for it to not even be used, you know. I hated that. The teacher, and just everything about that class, was awful. [nervous laughter throughout this paragraph] (Evelyn, paragraph #40).

Advising

Participants discussed the level of interaction they had with an academic advisor at Thompson Community and Technical College. Evelyn was "not really sure" if she had an advisor assigned to her (paragraph #32) and Diego believed "there was just one, and it was the same person for everybody" (paragraph #36). Benjamin thought he "probably could have found an advisor" but he "didn't know that" (paragraph #58).

I had an advisor. I met with the advisor one time. That was with, um, the whole financial aid package, and they went over that with me, as well as enrollment, what classes I would be taking, and then that was it. I never heard from them again. They didn't check up on me *at all* during the semester. Um, so I mean it was like, there was none assigned to me, just somebody to say 'here, I need you to do this' – and you're on your own (Isabelle, paragraph #12).

I did have an advisor and the advisor never messaged me back. [voice trails to whisper] Never. I dealt strictly with the teachers that would message me back (Karinna, paragraph #20).

I didn't even know that we had actual advisors until the first semester was almost over, cuz no one even told me, and I thought that was something (Ned, paragraph #8).

I did, and I didn't… um, it was actually my English teacher, who was great, but our schedules were like never amazing, like um, hard to fit it (Ned, paragraph #8).

I can't recall (having an advisor) (Mona, paragraph #16). I recall meeting with someone one time to schedule classes for the spring, but other than that I don't remember (Mona, paragraph #18).

I just, Arnold, whoever the director over the whole school is. That's who I talked to (Jaquan, paragraph #18).

I don't recall if they had an advisor there either. I don't think they did. That would have been helpful as well (Mona, paragraph #46).

Um, definitely more, um, interaction with an advisor, um, especially for someone who's doing this for the first time, they're confused, they're lost, they don't know what they're doing, so you know, a more active advisoring? Advising? [smiles] (Isabelle, paragraph #28).

Maybe if I would have talked to my advisor more, he probably would have tried to push me into staying in school, but where I didn't, I didn't get the – anybody didn't help me, you know. I wasn't even helping me, so… (Gayle, paragraph #44).

Howard described his experience with advising.

Honestly, I don't remember them ever giving us advisors. Uh, when I started summer, I had three classes, and it was, we, you talked at some lady at the front office, who was kinda like the counselor or I guess like advisor for everybody, and you went and did your classes and told them what – but I mean I don't really remember being a support group as of, you know, because my grades were really good, so it wasn't that, it was 'hey, I'm thinking about leaving' or 'let's see if we can get you part-time work' or 'work through it.' There was nothing there. It was either for me college or work. So it's kind of. That was the only bad parts. I don't remember any really support from the school itself (paragraph #6).

Participants mentioned needing an advisor for a variety of topics such as course selection, college processes, or program offerings.

There was this one fellow who would make all the schedules for all the students and he put me in a class that I'd already passed at another university. So halfway through when I realized I didn't even need the credit, I kinda just lost all interest in the facility itself (Diego, paragraph #56).

Carla shared her experience:

If you don't get a certain score like on your ACT or math you have to take this one class there before you can actually take the algebra. And I took both, and neither of them applied to the local 4-year college. So I basically took like two – I took like multiple classes at Thompson – and actually they had me take another class I had already taken. It was just named something else so they didn't really even like look over my transcripts *that well* before they like signed me up for classes. That one lady that helped me out, that switched me to general education, she was like 'you've already taken this class. I don't know why he has you signed up for this class' (paragraph #42).

Carla concluded:

So like I feel like they didn't really, they didn't take the time to look at my transcript before they were like delving into making me a new schedule (paragraph #42).

Frederick also shared an advising experience.

I had changed my major, so like when you change your major of course you know you gotta start, not completely over, but you have to start taking these classes for this major instead of the classes – which I was young and didn't really *know* that. So that's why I kinda like got lost and nobody was *telling* me this. They were like 'do you just want to change your major,' and I'm like, 'I can do that, sure,' but they're not telling me 'oh these credits that you got aren't going to go towards this degree.' So I kinda got entangled a little bit until I set down and realized I have these many credits for this degree and that many credits for this one (paragraph #30).

Isabelle related her experiences.

Um, well, um, I go, I get started of course. Um, I don't get my financial aid as I'm expecting so I can't get my books. Six weeks in I'm frustrated, I'm thinking you know, next semester is going to do it all over again. I'm reassured that it's not going to happen by, you know, my outside support. Um, so six weeks in I'm going through midterms, I'm struggling, um, I'm doing OK, I pass everything by the finals, but uh, about that time it's time to, you know, sign up for next semester. And I'm looking at the programs they have (paragraph #34).

She continued:

They're not offering any guidance on, you know, what goes where, what I should take for, you know, what degree. And I'm lost! (paragraph #34).

And so she looked at other colleges, and concluded:

I saw the programs that they were offering elsewhere and I said, you know, this is a lot better, this is a lot cheaper. Most of it is online, I don't have to travel, you know, every day. So it was just more economic for me, just… Even traveling is more economic than for me to go there and not get the education that I want. (Isabelle, paragraph #34)

I was gonna get my associate's in social work at Thompson, and I was going through jobs looking what I could get with that degree, and it was nothing. Like you couldn't really go into that field with only your associate's (Carla, paragraph #10). They could, maybe like even if I wanted to go into social work, they could have maybe put me like as a course like, or I guess the degree that I would have chose, to like major in there. Like one that would have been like more applicable for people that wanted to eventually go on and receive their bachelor's (paragraph #30).

That was my very first request was not to do online (Jaquan, paragraph #14).

Basically he was trying to tell me the only classes I could take that would help me was the two that was online and then the two in-campus classes (Jaquan, paragraph #16).

I left Thompson because I, I really didn't like the program. I was placed in, I want to say, to be an education major. That was *not* what I wanted to do (Mona, paragraph #2).

Climate

Participants shared information related to the overall climate at the college.

I wish I would have mattered at Thompson. Um, I don't know how to really, how to sum that up into words. It's more like, I felt like I had to be someone else, I'm not sure. I just, I, I… (Mona, paragraph #38).

But over there it just kinda seemed like you *knew* you were in community college and there was no greater expectation of even going *past* that (Howard, paragraph #10).

The staff. The staff was *the* #1 reason. I mean not even the issues that I had with the FAFSA, but the class was – I mean, that just… When I found out that I failed it, which I had a pretty good, a pretty good idea that I did after taking the exam, I was aggravated with it as well. And then, like I said, I mean like six other people or five other people, failed that class too, so I knew it wasn't just me (Evelyn, paragraph #42).

I can recall going to the office on more than one occasion and I can't remember the director's name, it was a gentleman. But it was just kinda like everybody was all over the place. Um, several of the teachers were teaching *and* working in the office, if I recall correctly (Mona, paragraph #12).

But she was the only teacher that approached me or anybody at Thompson that approached me about doing something. I never even knew there was anything *there* (Howard, paragraph #22).

Frederick shared his experiences with the college.

And nothing like really *pulls* you to Thompson to make you *want* to stay. It's just like bland – like unseasoned chicken maybe? Like, it's just no real *life* there, if that makes sense (paragraph #6).

He continued with what he would have liked to experience.

Maybe like just like more – like participation, to where like even if the school is doing something after hours or something – like they used to do these things like show movies after hours – and I went to one and it was just so *boring*! Like you just sit there and watch a movie and eat popcorn – rather than like, at the end, maybe like [pause] umm season it some! But like make it more exciting, because it was just horribly boring (paragraph #8).

They had like a whole student body there, but it's like it was chosen by favorites, like nobody could, like – the same people who was on it this year or the same person that was doing work study, like they just keep the same person, they *never* like change it out, switch, or give people other *opportunities*. Because like I would have work study, and OK I could do this, or be part of the student body council. But, nah, it was just the same people (paragraph #26).

Evelyn related a story.

I could have taken a semester off and went back, but by that time I was so aggravated that I really *did* not want to continue (paragraph #22). My mom and my fiancé, and – I mean my family was a big supporter. They were pretty upset when everything went downhill. My sister was also there with me. She was, we were taking the same classes – we were going for the same thing. But she, she left too. [nervous laughter] It didn't work out for her either. (paragraph #46)

Howard shared his thoughts on the school climate.

That would have been, I think when, um when, which you know a lot of community college is single parents, um people who's been through stuff. It's not your typical my parents, you know, have a decent amount of money, I'm going to college. No, it's, you know, where you done bad in high school (paragraph #18).

That was like the most *soul crushing* thing ever, was when they wouldn't let me go back. Said I'd have to pay for everything. So then I took a break for another two years and finally went to the local 4-year. That was terrible (paragraph #26).

Isabelle was very specific with details:

> Just the way they'd *talk* to you. It was like, like I said, you were a number, not a person. You were there to give them *money*, they were there for a service. Um, when I'm looking at someone for an education, I expect some kind of *humanity*. I might as well have been talking to a machine (paragraph #10).

> Like, um, I went in and said' hey I'm here for my financial aid.' They looked at me, they said 'what's your number,' I gave it to them. They went [sharply] 'well, we can't help you here. Go here.' Not 'hey, this is what's going on.' No explanation, just go here. I go here. 'Well, why'd they tell you to come here?' I don't know. Just go here. It was just very – no communication. They're just *rude*, honestly. I can't pinpoint any one because they're all the *same*. You know the whole experience was just terrible (paragraph #24).

> [big blow out breath] They say that a smile goes a long way, right? If you, if you treat people with respect and kindness and just smile once in a while, you know, they're more likely to be open, to be accepting, and, and wanting to be around you more. So you know, if your staff is rude and, and impersonal and just blaaa [short A sound], you're not going to want to stay there because you're going to feel, if you're one of those happy people, you don't want to be brought down by that environment. So you're going to go somewhere where you know you can be *happier* (paragraph #30).

Needed Encouragement

Two participants shared lengthy stories of needing encouragement to take classes and stay in school.

Benjamin related that he "signed up for summer classes and when I signed up, the man who registered me told me that they were basically too hard to complete online – um – and I was discouraged and basically didn't even try – and then I never went back" (paragraph #2). He continued with the narrative.

> I was doing online classes for my major and I needed parts one and two of one class, and I was trying to squeeze it in over the summer. And he told me that they were too *hard* and that people who've done them online did not complete them and um – but went ahead and registered me anyway and we got signed up (paragraph #14).

He shared further that "encouragement about the online class probably would [laughs] have been the first thing" (paragraph #44) that someone at Thompson could have done to help.

Looking at my grades and seeing that, you know, I had been able to complete what I had with a full-time job and a child. Encouragement like 'hey you know this is going to be hard but you can do it' (paragraph #44).

He concluded with this suggestion:

The person that was signing me up, if he felt like there was an alternate way, could have encouraged me in *that way* as well, and helped me find – in-class or whatever – found another way to go about what I needed instead of just discouraging me and then throwing me out there (paragraph #62).

Howard described his desire for encouragement in great detail.

But for the people who are going there because say their grades weren't that good, um, good enough to get into a 4-year institute or their just, their first time trying college, I think there should have been more of like a bigger picture. Say 'hey if you come here and keep your grades up, you can get an associate's here and then you can go on. We're in good standing with the local 4-year college. You can continue your bachelor's studies or your master's studies over there' (paragraph #16).

He continued:

And also, have more of an understanding for people that are going there, what their pay is when they get out, or um different opportunities. Or anything just to really keep someone, you know, wanting to continue their studies. Instead of like, because after the first semester you're kind of like now it's slowing down, the newness is gone. I don't see myself four years from now. So it's, I think for them to have maybe introduced people who have graduated from there, who has done better things, to say 'hey this is where I was at in life, this is where I'm at now,' and talk with people in your, what your major and minor's in, I think would have been really beneficial (paragraph #16).

He concluded with additional thoughts.

I know we're adults, and you have to have accountability and be proactive in your decision making, but then again it's such a new experience. I mean, I graduated in 2006 and moved out at 17 and went straight to the workforce so I had no idea about being a parent, raising a kid on my own, going through all the court to get custody, and then having to go to college for the first time, not working, you know, all my support, you know, states and countries away. I just wish – it would have been *so great* if someone, especially that would have *been* in that situation, would have been like 'hey this is what we can do.' I mean, my stress level and ease of mind would have been, I mean, completely all the way down. It would have been fantastic, something like that (paragraph #20).

Ned also desired encouragement from someone at Thompson.

I just felt like he wasn't thorough with me and like wasn't taking his time, and then it made me discouraged to not want to keep seeking help. Because I have anxiety anyway, so it's like hard to walk in someone's office like asking for help and then not getting the help that you needed. It was just discouraging (paragraph #4).

Opportunities

Participants shared opinions about the academic programs, tutoring, and other

opportunities at the college.

I wanted to pursue my bachelor's and I was going to Thompson. I thought about maybe getting my associate's first and that would open doors, but then I talked to a counselor there and a lot of the classes that you had to take there, um, didn't transfer to like a four-year college – so that's one of the main reasons I left (Carla, paragraph #2).

I did *not* like that there's not a lot of opportunity there. Like with, um, majors and stuff and all of that (Gayle, paragraph #16).

What would be helpful if they made things more clear as to what they offer, like, uh, just more classes in general would be nice. Like here they have gym that you can take if you like, or I'm not sure if they have credits that would transfer if you took classes here and at Thompson at the same time, I'm not sure. But that may help students as well, who need the extra options and not just ok, today we have English, math, and I can't even remember what they offer. I think that may help (Mona, paragraph #24).

Like probably something that I could have, uh, maybe like a university or something, not a community college cuz the community college didn't have what I like to do. Uh, I mean, I like playing basketball, but I mean I'm not the best, but I like playing it (Lawrence, paragraph #24).

Um, I was joining a writing club, but it started, it was supposed to start a couple weeks after I left. My English teacher had it. Um, they would have other little things sometimes. Um, there was like a domestic abuse thing and stuff like that, but there were no, I don't think they had like actual clubs or anything like that. If they did, I wasn't aware of them (Ned, paragraph #16).

Frederick would have rather "found a trade than graduate from college" (paragraph #22)

but the trades in which he was interested were not offered at Thompson.

It was some kind of like a power line electrician thing, and it was another thing, like some kind of assembly line that you – it was so many different programs that I felt like, I could do this and really get going, but instead I got pushed down into this little group of certain things I can and can't do (Frederick, paragraph #20). Now if somebody would have said 'hey we have a new program coming in and we can do this here,' or 'we have a

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place that's like local that you could go to' or something – that would probably have made me stick around there (Frederick, paragraph #22).

Participants discussed aspects of the college's tutoring program. Diego explained his experience. "I just kinda lost interest. The tutoring wasn't, like, very accessible" (paragraph #24). He tried to attend, but "never followed through with it because it was hard to get in touch with anybody" (paragraph #26). He described needing to set up a tutoring session himself. "You had to *find* the person. And if it just so happened that they were there when you had class, you could talk to them, but …" (paragraph #30).

Mona wanted tutoring, but said that she did not "even think they had like a tutor there, um, maybe the teachers did" (paragraph #20). Karinna wanted tutoring services, but did not receive them. "Yah, I got a home setting when I walked in and signed up and all that, like [excited voice] 'yah, come here,' but once I got there it was like [flat voice] *you're there"* (paragraph #24).

Ned was looking for a higher level of academics.

Like we would just, a lot of the classes, um, it would be like simpler stuff, and some people I guess wouldn't, didn't know a lot of the things I feel like they probably should have known cuz I learned like most of those things in school previously. So we were like going back on a lot of stuff that I kinda feel like we should have already known and like been applying the new information. So I felt like in a few of my classes it was that and I like wasn't really learning much I guess (Ned, paragraph #6).

I liked a *few* of my classes, but a lot of it I feel like I wasn't learning anything, like I was paying for something but not like getting anything out of it. And, um, there's all levels of people in there, on like different levels and stuff, but I felt like it was like very *lower* level education, like the stuff we were learning, so I felt like I wasn't getting like the college experience kind of thing that I wanted (Ned, paragraph #2).

Research Question #3: Possible Strategies

RQ3: What strategies can one West Virginia Community and Technical College implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates?

The third research question in this study sought to understand possible strategies a community college could implement in order to keep students in college.

The theme that emerged was *specific strategies may help students stay in college*. Two categories emerged related to this theme: (1) Minimize negative student experiences, and (2) Maximize positive student experiences. Table 4 shows the codes and categories related to the theme *specific strategies may help students stay in college*.

Table 4

Possible Strategies Theme: Specific Strategies May Help Students Stay in College

Codes	Categories	Theme
Advice Early intervention Communication Problem solving	Minimize negative student experiences	Specific strategies may help students stay in college
Teachers professional Teachers helpful/friendly Good teachers Like learning Received academic help Got involved Special attention Relationship with teachers	Maximize positive student experiences	

Minimize Negative Student Experiences

Participants shared specific strategies that, if implemented, might have kept them enrolled at Thompson Community and Technical College. Overall, participants wanted their problems solved, problems which made them "very upset" (Evelyn, paragraph #24). Such problems then led them to the point of deciding to drop out of school, which happened quickly in some cases, "before the midterm" for Karinna (paragraph #28) and in "about six weeks" for Isabelle (paragraph #36), even though they stayed through the semester.

When asked what strategies could be used to overcome the problems they experienced, participants indicated that they simply wanted solutions to the problems which they expressed when answering previous questions. If those problems were solved, students might be retained.

Participants expressed the need for help to come in a variety of forms, and because no help came forth, they left school. They specifically mentioned strategies to try at Thompson Community and Technical College in the areas of advising, communication, and problem solving.

> Isabelle wanted an advisor to give guidance on program requirements and degrees so that she did not need to "seek outside support" such as friends and family who suggested that she "look, you know, to other colleges that are in-state" (paragraph #34). When no advice was given at Thompson, Isabelle did look around and subsequently left.

> Karinna stated that she would not have wanted to leave if her teacher would "respond back to me where I can keep on track with the class. Because after I fell back, I just gave up" (paragraph #26).

> Mona shared that she would have stayed at Thompson if someone "could have reached out" (paragraph #46), including faculty members. "Maybe the teachers could have been more personable. I don't, as I said before, I don't recall just feeling comfortable enough to pull a teacher to the side and say 'hey can you explain this a little better' other than some examples that they would go over on the board. I just felt completely on an island while in the classroom" (paragraph #50).

> Ned's suggestion for student retention would be to give significant assistance at the very beginning of a student's enrollment at Thompson. Students should not be "confused about like how to go about certain things" (paragraph #4). He stated the obvious, which was overlooked in his experience, "Like, I'd never been to college before" (paragraph #4), and mentioned needing help with enrollment, drop/add, and information about academic programs. When no help was offered, he left the school.

> Carla shared that "if they had made it more convenient for students to sign up for classes there without having to go and like have this really long like sit-down meeting with this man" (paragraph #28), she would have returned to Thompson. She did not want to go through that again.

> Lawrence stated that he would not have left school if someone could have helped him "do something to pull my GPA up" (paragraph #32).

Evelyn wanted to see effort from staff members at Thompson. "They really didn't – when everything, you know, when I found out everything wasn't correct, they really didn't, *they* didn't make an attempt to fix anything" (paragraph #48). Thompson "really didn't try whatsoever" (paragraph #48). She stated that she would have stayed in school if her problem had been "taken care of somehow" (paragraph #48). She left because the problem was not solved.

Maximize Positive Student Experiences

In contrast to the retention strategy of eliminating negative student experiences, two sets of participants shared positive strategies for keeping students in school: (1) those who left Thompson only for personal reasons, and (2) those who mentioned good experiences when asked specifically about what they liked at Thompson Community and Technical College. The participants felt that these experiences could be strategies for retaining students if they were the norm as opposed to the exception.

For the first set of positive-response participants, those who left Thompson only because of personal reasons, no prompting was needed to elicit stories of good memories. They were glad to recount the reasons they enjoyed their community college experience.

Angela *really* enjoyed the educational experience at Thompson.

Thompson was really, really, really good. The teachers were really friendly, and that's really what makes or breaks a school, is the professors. So the professors there were really professional about it, but also understanding about the work and stuff (Angela, paragraph #20).

I really enjoyed the teachers at Thompson. Where it was kinda like a smaller school, they had more time to like kinda help people with more individual help than at a big college would. I had some hard teachers, I had some good teachers, but most of my teachers were really friendly, and they were always willing to help if you didn't understand something or were having problems with something. They were on it – [snapped fingers] 'if you have questions, all right, I'll answer them, I'll help you.' I feel like that was one of the parts that I liked best about Thompson. Where it was smaller and you can get the help if you needed it. I kinda breezed through it a little bit, but, some classes were a little bit more difficult than others – math's not my subject – but my math teacher was awesome. I can't even remember her name now, but she was awesome. So my grades went from being low to high in her class (Angela, paragraph #14).

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Gayle also mentioned faculty members at Thompson.

I enjoyed the teachers there because it's such a small campus that you kinda get one-on-one. Because I only had I think four or five classes, and two of them were with the same teacher, so you know we got to build a relationship kinda. So it was just – that made it real easy. That's the best part I liked about it (Gayle, paragraph #14).

Olivia shared memories of faculty, staff, and administrators, and also her satisfaction at Thompson.

They just, they made my experience there so much fun that I wanted to come back (Olivia, paragraph #14).

I loved just the prospect of being able to learn something that I had never known before or something that I was interested in, and to become, I guess, *proficient* in something finally (Olivia, paragraph #4).

The class sizes were a lot smaller than they were in a traditional college. You got more one-on-one time with the teachers. They were able to get to know you, get to know how you learned. I have learning disabilities, um, and in elementary school and high school it was *so hard* for me to stay focused and to understand the subject matter. At this specific institution, the teachers cared enough to stop and explain it to me in a way that I understood. And my GPA went from a 0.52 to almost a 3.5 in less than 4 semesters (Olivia, paragraph #16).

Olivia stated that she was able to become highly involved at the college because it is a small school.

I joined the student government actually. I was vice president of the student government (paragraph #42). I helped in the office a little bit, I helped one professor, and just anyone needed something, I was a gopher (paragraph #44).

There was the student advisor. I think there were three of them at the time, and one I got along with very, very well. And they seemed, [pause] I don't even have a word for it, friendly, competent (Olivia, paragraph #14).

Olivia recounted a life-changing experience at the college because of attention she received from faculty and administration.

I have, I have been diagnosed with ADD, and the others I have never really been formally diagnosed with, but I have a problem with algebra. It just doesn't *click*. I've, I've never really been able to understand it, but I can do geometry and trigonometry in my head (paragraph #20).

Algebra, just, the, [pause] I don't even have a word for it, but it just didn't mesh well with how I learn. And the whole reason I started going to Thompson was my sibling was working in the city at the time, and I was the only one with a driver's license, so I would drive my sibling to work, and stay in town there because it was less gas and less expensive to just stay in town and sit at the library than it was to drive home and then go back and get them.

She continued:

Thompson allowed me to come in and use the computers. And the dean of the school, um, asked me 'why don't you just sign up for classes and take classes while you're waiting' and I told her that I, my GPA was so low, and I had, had to leave college before, that I didn't think it was possible. So I went and took, she convinced me to take an aptitude test. Took the aptitude test, and they filed the financial paperwork, and lo and behold I got a pell grant, and I started, [voice chokes] had a bit of a cry, and then I started school that fall (paragraph #22).

And further:

I took a math class, a remedial math class, because I scored low in what was required to take college level classes. I took a remedial math class with, I believe it was an adjunct professor, and this professor sat with me every day. I would show up there every day for 5 hours, sit and go over and over this math, sat with me, and we found a way that I understood. And suddenly it was like the clouds parted and I understood the math (paragraph #24). Turns out I'm actually quite good at it (paragraph #26). I found a way that worked with my *brain*, and it was amazing (paragraph #30).

The instructor that I had for that remedial class was phenomenal. And, um, I, I see this person every once in a while in town and sometimes I just want to run up and give him a hug (paragraph #34). It was, I believe, either a 5- or 10-week course, and I would show up as soon as the doors opened and stay until my sibling got off work (paragraph #36).

And she concluded:

I did it, and I did it not because it was expected of me but because I wanted to. And it was a very freeing experience (paragraph #38).

For the second set of positive-response participants, those who had predominantly negative experiences at the college, retention strategies emerged when they were asked what they liked about Thompson Community and Technical College. They had to think for a minute to

come up with something positive – only two had nothing good to share – but they indicated that

their thoughts are retention strategies if these positive experiences can be duplicated.

Participants reported that good teaching was a key to retaining students and can be used

to enhance the love of learning in students.

> Some parts I liked were, actually Thompson I feel like has like some of those professors there are *really good*, like that's what kinda like kept me around because the small class, a good professor, like one that's gonna actually make you get involved with class, that was there. Completely. Every class I was in, it was everyone in the class was participating, nobody... Because I guess it's just smaller rooms or something, but *the schooling* was, I liked it (Frederick, paragraph #16).

> Um, well, wasn't many people so it was face-to-face, hands-on, and they gave you opportunity to catch up and everything. Like both the teachers I had, I don't remember their names, both the teachers I had were really good, I will say that, that I had in class (Jaquan, paragraph #28).

> I had a really good class. I mean, it was very good (Evelyn, paragraph #34). The teacher. She was – everything was made *very* clear, everything we done – I mean, it was a very good class. She was an awesome teacher (paragraph #36).

> I enjoyed this class. She was super helpful and into what she was teaching (Diego, paragraph #32).

> Um, I liked my English class a lot. I liked just, she was very thorough. Um, the way she did her grading, it wasn't, um, based off of, like, she would just read what you wrote and then take it in, and then wasn't judgmental toward like what you were giving her but if you were doing the things right, like using things where they were supposed to be, but not what you were telling her. Like if she asked for a story, and you told her a story, she wouldn't be like 'your story sucked' even if it wasn't the best story, as long as things were like formatted and how they were supposed to be. And I thought that was nice (Ned, paragraph #12).

> I liked *learning*.   I mean, I like increasing my knowledge on everything. Some things when you get busy with life you forget – in English classes or math classes. I like revisiting previous knowledge and learning new knowledge too (Benjamin, paragraph #30).

Howard recalled what it was like emotionally when he first started college and knew he

was enrolled to be able to learn.

Um honestly, it was the learning aspect, and not digging a ditch all day, saying, looking into the future when there's a guy beside ya that's been there for 40 years saying this is where I'm going to be, and going to have the same financial situation. But the honest, actual learning and, you know, being rewarded for learning in itself. And you know, if you *really* tried, then it showed a direct reflection on your grades right then and there instead of in the workforce you can be the best at it and still get no recognition for it. So honestly I loved college (paragraph #8).

He finished his description of that initial experience:

And honestly knowing that I was going, because I didn't do too well in high school, knowing that I actually started college, I mean, it was, to me it was one of the best feelings I ever had (paragraph #8).

Mona had a good enrollment experience because of the small size of the school.

My father was a veteran, and I just applied to many local colleges. Thompson called me back. I can't even remember the lady's name, but I met with someone, signed some papers, and I was in. [laughs] (paragraph #8).

Howard talked with excitement when he discussed receiving special attention from a

faculty member and also gaining self-confidence by taking remedial classes.

When I had Mr. Jones as my English teacher, I was going to do the Model UN with him, actually go to DC and speak and everything. But, um, that's right when I signed up for it, I think is when I, that was English 99, I think when I went to English 101 is when I was just ready to do it but then I dropped out. And that was one thing I was *extremely* excited about (paragraph #22).

One good thing I did like about Thompson was your, you know, the 98 and 99 classes, you know, because I couldn't go to the local 4-year college without, I think either – because over there I did Math 98 and English 99 and I think another class and then I took, was going into my 101s when I dropped out but that was really good, like for. And you took a placement test there, and said 'you're not as bad as you thought' (paragraph #24).

Summary

Chapter 4 began by stating the purpose of the research study and research questions, followed by the demographic information of participants. The pilot study and an overview of the themes which emerged from the study were then discussed. Chapter 4 concluded by describing the findings of each research question.

Chapter 5

Discussion of Results and Conclusion

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the research study, discussion of the findings, discussion of conclusions drawn from the researcher's interpretation of the results, recommendations for professional practice, suggestions for future research, and concluding remarks.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students at one West Virginia Community and Technical College who have dropped out of their programs of study. The study sought to identify actions and events that contributed to students choosing to drop out and strategies that can be used to reduce their dropping out.

Understanding the students' perspectives concerning their decisions to drop out will assist community college personnel to evaluate the on- and off-campus factors influencing these decisions. This qualitative study sought to directly ask students about their personal lives and also about the people and events on campus that influenced their decision to drop out of community college.

"Students' sense of place within the institutional community, their involvement in that community, and how they fit into that community are all important in retaining students in school" (Travers, 2016, p. 55). Community colleges can try to understand the personal lives of students. They can also try to view college from the student perspective in an effort to understand dropout decisions. In higher education, many studies on student success have focused on the students' characteristics before college, and have largely ignored the role the school personnel and schools themselves might have on student success. Student success might

be a "learning problem of practitioners and institutions" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 446) instead of completely a student characteristic problem.

This study aimed to discover any significant personal factors or institutional factors that community colleges might possess or actions their employees might exhibit which helped or hindered students on their path to completion. "It is far more likely that practitioners will attribute inequality in educational outcomes to student deficiencies than question their own practices" (Bensimon, 2007, p. 456). Every aspect of the community college must be examined to find strengths and weaknesses.

Statement of the Problem

Typical community college students are older, working, family-involved students. They are often from poverty, minority, and underserved populations (Crosta, 2008). These students enter college with characteristics different from their four-year peers such as low high school grade point average and low priority value on education. They often have low self-esteem, no study skills, few social skills, and unrealistic goals (Bickerstaff, Barragan & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). To keep such students in school requires special understanding, special commitment, and special programs on the part of the community college. The problem that was addressed in this study was twofold. First, it was conducted to identify personal and institutional barriers preventing community college students from completing their education goals, whether that was a degree program, diploma program, or credentialing program. Secondly, it was conducted to identify strategies that can be used to assist these students in overcoming these barriers.

Research Questions

The study was steered by three research questions:

1. What personal factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

2. What institutional factors contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College?

3. What strategies can one West Virginia Community and Technical College implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates?

Methodology

The basic qualitative research design of conducting one-on-one qualitative interviews was used for this study. Criterion and purposeful sampling were utilized to identify participants. Semi-structured interviewing and document reviewing were utilized to gather data to discover rich information from the participants' lived experiences. Participants were suggested by current or former faculty or staff members at one West Virginia Community and Technical College campus located in the state of West Virginia. They were students who had already attended for at least one semester and who had subsequently dropped out of their programs of study. Fifteen participants were interviewed for the study.

This study was exploratory and descriptive in nature and sought rich, in-depth information. Data were compared at all phases during the research, and memos and field notes were continually used to enrich the process and summarize findings. Data were meant to be used to gain insights into the thought processes of students regarding dropping out of school in order to fulfill the research objective. Although the data is not generalizable to larger population, the individual readers of the report can determine if they can be related to their respective environment. A detailed presentation of the methodology used to conduct this study is presented in Chapter Three.

Key Findings

Key findings include the following:

1. As reported throughout community college literature, participants in this study were, indeed, older, working, family-involved, first-generation college students who commuted to the college in their local community to attend school.

2. Participants did not start school intending to leave before completion of their program of study.

3. Participants remembered specific stories of their community college experiences so clearly that emotions of happiness, sadness, or anger often surfaced.

4. Decisions to drop out of school were based on personal factors which included: 1) difficulty juggling school and life, 2)) financial difficulties, and 3) no or minimal support groups.

5. Decisions to drop out of school were also based on institutional factors which included: 1) paperwork, 2) communication, 3) perceived available help, 4) teaching, 5) advising, 6) the climate of the college, 7) getting encouragement, and 8) opportunities.

6. Participants needed assistance in many areas of college life including academics, completing forms, meeting deadlines, finances, communication channels, and how to thrive. They needed help with these categories, but also with the process of these categories as they relate to enrolling in and attending college.

7. Participants expressed gratitude for any special help they received during their tenure at the college.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study as related to the experiences of students who left one West Virginia Community and Technical College before they completed their programs of study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Community college experiences, good and bad, stay with the students for years.

2. Colleges have full control over finding the remedy for all of the institutional factors mentioned by participants as reasons for leaving school before completing a program of study.

3. Colleges could possibly have control over finding the remedy for some of the personal factors given as reasons for leaving school. Examples of these personal factors include balancing school and life, financial difficulties, and lack of support groups.

4. To capitalize on the small, caring nature of the college in a community, only the most personable faculty and staff should be employed at a community college so that assistance is happily given to students.

5. Community college faculty and staff should dole out special attention to students who enroll at their schools.

6. Faculty or other designated academic advisors should be well trained in giving advice on a variety of topics, including courses, delivery systems, programs of study, and career options, and also where to send students for help in areas of staff expertise.

7. Staff should be well trained in their own area of expertise, but also in other areas of expertise so that students can locate accurate information any time they are on campus or call, even if the staff member in charge of a particular area is absent.

8. Instructors should utilize a variety of teaching methods that promote a high degree of student classroom engagement.

9. Students may be scared to begin a new adventure such as attending college, so they may need extra attention in classrooms or offices if they are to successfully reach their higher education goals.

10. Communication channels must be open and functioning properly so that students can readily find and receive information, direction, and help as needed.

11. Since the students are commuting, and have full lives outside of campus, classrooms are the places where peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships need to be built.

12. Opportunities to become involved with school activities should be advertised loudly, and personal invitations given if possible.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

A discussion of the study's findings is presented as follows: 1) personal factors which contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College, 2) institutional factors which contributed to students dropping out of one West Virginia Community and Technical College, 3) strategies that one West Virginia Community and Technical College can implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates, and 4) theoretical framework.

Personal Factors

When asked the initial open-ended question of "What led you to leave the community college," only three participants answered with a specific personal reason as being the primary reason for dropping out. One had a six-month-old child, found out she was expecting a second

child, and decided she could not also go to school, one suddenly needed to care for her elderly grandfather, and the other decided to only work her two jobs.

But many participants mentioned other personal factors, which along with the primary institutional reasons for leaving, contributed to their making the decision to drop out, much like the straw breaking the camel's back. These personal factors included difficulty in managing school-life balance, financial hardships, unsettled pathways of life, and minimal support groups.

Life gets busy, too busy sometimes to squeeze in the hours required to successfully complete college coursework. Participants mentioned often that they struggled with time constraints. School involves getting up early for class, going to bed late because of studying or sick children, missing family events or activities. It is exhausting and stressful. Participants such as Howard indicated a desire for assistance in one service that would free up some time spent driving when he said, "I know it costs money to start a day care, but you have kids (potential students) there that will *never* go to school because of that lack of aspect" (paragraph #18). There are barely enough hours in the day to raise a family, work a job, *or* attend college, and participants are trying to do all three.

In addition to being tired and stressed because of college schedules, work, and family, participants mentioned the stress of financial obligations. It is difficult to find money available for books or supplies even if tuition is taken care of with financial aid packages. Sometimes it is more attractive, or even necessary, for a student to leave school in order to earn an income. Once the income starts, it is difficult to make the decision to come back to school and again try to make the ends meet when they may not stretch that far. So even if intentions were to come back and finish a program of study, it may not happen for financial reasons.

College attendance is fluid. Participants went to other colleges before Thompson Community and Technical College, and they went or are still going to other colleges after Thompson. (They can name the good/bad of each place.) They might not always be exactly sure of their career goals, and those goals change, sometimes because a better plan comes along, sometimes because the old plan just does not work out, sometimes because an outside force like lack of finances forces the goals to change. Changing goals might mean changing majors or changing schools, or it might mean starting over with a new education or training plan.

Some participants had no support at home, or only partial support at home. College is difficult enough if a person does have support, almost impossible without. Community college students commute to school, and live at home or alone; so without the full support and commitment of their loved ones, it is difficult to make class attendance and study time high priorities. Family runs strong in West Virginia, so if any relative needs help, it is the unquestioned responsibility of the son or daughter, nephew or niece, grandson or granddaughter, to take someone to a doctor's appointment or grocery store. School gets pushed back if class and errands overlap, and study time can become nonexistent. Also, a seemingly supportive person can give bad advice. One participant now understands that she followed the advice of a person who might not have had her best interest in mind when he strongly suggested that she leave college. She regrets following the wrong support group.

Institutional Factors

Even allowing for overstatement or understatement, and even while knowing there is another side (or two) to every story, the experiences as related by participants in this study are rather compelling. They told tales of paperwork snafus, miscommunication, ignored pleas for

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help, bad classroom experiences, wrong information, boring surroundings, discouragement, and lack of opportunity. They had high hopes, which were dashed at every corner.

But not to worry, each problem is fixable, perhaps not easily, but fixable, and correcting these problems might lead to the benefits of more community college graduates as listed by Levin and Garcia:

1. Additional income reflecting higher productivity and trainability of an associate degree completer relative to a high school graduate, reflecting benefits to the student and to society.

2. Higher tax revenues derived from the additional income, reflecting fiscal benefits to the taxpayer.

3. Reduced costs of public services for crime, public health, and public assistance, reflecting fiscal benefits to the taxpayer.

4. Overall gains in productivity of other workers created by the presence of a more educated workforce (2018).

Even while maintaining high academic standards and teaching students to fend for themselves, colleges need to help students. By their own admission, students are often lost, especially when they are just starting. They need information, they need conversation, and just like every other living being they need nourishment to grow and flourish. College is a new game, one that, for many community college students, has never before been played by any of their family or friends. They need to clearly understand the rules of the college experience and also the options available to reach their desired outcomes. Even if community college is truly the place for them, they may need much help along the way.

Howard's observations of community college students and the description of his initial experience shed light on the possibilities. His emphases are in italics, the researcher's in bold (and ignore the fact that stand-alone remedial courses are no longer taught in this form).

> You know, that was one good thing is, **everybody is *extremely scared* when they go over there**, so when they put you in those 98-99 classes and it re-jogs your memory, and then when you go into a 101 right after that, and you're ace-ing it because you remember everything, that I mean, you know, **it boosts your self-confidence by *millions*** because, you know, everybody that's going over there, you know, not, you know, real life applications, you know, not *that* uneducated, but as far as *academic* education, **they *know* they're not good at it**. So when you do those beginning classes and then you jump into 101, and *remember* everything, and you're doing *great* – I mean, **that was one of the *best* feelings** cuz I was making straight A's – I was like *god* this is awesome – so that was one thing I did love over there (paragraph #24).

When asked the initial open-ended question of "What led you to leave the community college," 12 of the 15 participants named a specific institutional factor. Even after years passing in some cases, they each, without hesitation, knew the exact experience which caused them to leave.

Participants mentioned paperwork processes that did not operate smoothly or quickly. Forms were lost or not submitted on time, students were repeatedly asked to turn in the same papers, and information was not clearly communicated. Since the goal of college for every student would be to complete a program of study, and the only way to do so is to complete a set of coursework, the object of paperwork at the college level is only to get the students successfully into and out of those courses, including the legal and financial responsibilities of all parties. Each paperwork process should be streamlined enough to be easily explained to new students and quite independently completed by returning students. Also, by the testimony of participants in this particular study, paperwork and all related processes should contain exactly zero errors.

Participants craved communication, with faculty, staff, and each other. They wanted to get to know their teachers, and also to have their questions answered quickly. They wanted to connect. They wanted to bounce ideas around about classes or about their personal goals, and sometimes they just wanted to shoot the breeze. As Mona expressed, "I couldn't really talk to people when I wanted to. I just didn't feel like they were giving me what I *should* have had in that, uh, setting" (paragraph #2). It does make sense in light of the fact that some participants did not have much of a personal support network for school attendance that they would have needed to rely on a college support network to get them through the tough times. Communication at the community college can be tricky. Students often leave immediately after class to go to work, run errands, or care for children. Unless an activity or communication occurs in the classroom or directly after class, it won't happen at all, and that leaves students frustrated. Doors must be open and office hours observed at times when the students are most apt to be walking by so the students feel comfortable going to someone for help, especially for shy or scared students.

Communication with students is a vast time commitment by faculty and staff, as is the commitment to help them on a large variety of topics. Participants mentioned needing all types of assistance, from academics to day care, from financial aid to community resources. Students need help. They thrash around, sometimes following the wrong opinion, until they settle on solutions to their problems. The trained personnel at the college should be the ones sharing information and helping students so that problems are solved quickly and accurately, and do not grow into drastic problems that can be cause for students to leave school.

Since most of the daily interaction at a community college happens in the classroom, teaching is important beyond just transmittal of knowledge. Peer and student-teacher

relationships are built in the classroom. Another point to consider is that community college faculty members may not be trained teachers. They are required to have completed course hours in their field of expertise, but they are not required to complete courses on actual methods of instruction or philosophies of education. They can, though, learn such material on their own by reading or by watching good teachers, and new faculty members can be trained so that all faculty members are good teachers. They can, also, no matter their background, always answer student questions quickly and professionally.

Participants were unclear about advising. They did not necessarily know what an official academic advisor was, and they mistakenly named other personnel as advisor. If they had an advisor, they did not seem to know that they should talk to their advisor about academic or other matters. They mentioned needing advice, and perhaps wanting advice on majors and courses, but they did not connect that need to talking to an academic advisor. Gayle did have an academic advisor, but did not "remember his name" (paragraph #30). As are communicating with and helping students, advising is a heavy time commitment. Perhaps a well-advertised advising center would work better than the current advising system, or perhaps only certain personalities with proper training should attempt to wear the title of advisor. Academic advising is a major cog in the smooth workings of getting students through coursework and onto graduation. They desire solid advice from trained professionals, and academic advisors can give them that in full measure.

Participants shared their views of the climate of Thompson Community and Technical College. Aside from contending with the overall image of the community college in this country, each community college has the power to make their institution into a valued and viable institution. Participants wanted the college to have strong educational programs, fun activities,

and a stable environment. They wanted employees at the college to have professional demeanors and helpful, caring attitudes. They wanted to see effort out of everyone at the college, in every office and in every classroom, from each person with whom they came in contact.

Participants also mentioned the need to receive encouragement from faculty and staff at the college, and sometimes they simply mentioned being *dis*couraged as they were attempting to complete a successful semester. It is easy to give up on college, which of course is what each of these participants did at some point. College is difficult at best, and for typical community college students who may be older or may be heavily involved in work and family life, and who also may not have written a paper or taken a test in some years, college can be a larger hurdle than they had envisioned. They need encouragement. Since they may not get ample encouragement at home, they may need extensive personal, educational, and career encouragement from those at the community college.

Participants expressed the desire to know what majors are available at the college, what careers go along with those majors, and where their credits could possibly transfer to continue into a four-year institution. They wanted a significant learning experience. They also wanted a strong tutoring program, technical programs, clubs to join, a basketball team, and a real campus. The variety of ideas suggests that they wanted choices and also that they had preconceived notions of what college life is all about. As Lawrence stated when he discussed what he liked about the college, "Uh, I mean, it was a community college, so basically nothing, because I didn't get to see like a *campus* or anything" (paragraph #8). The problem to solve, then, is how to fit the community college experience into those preconceived notions so that the students are proud to attend their local community college.

Strategies

Participants in this study knew exactly what caused them to leave Thompson Community and Technical College, and considered those causes to be areas for which strategies could be implemented to help other students remain in school to graduate from Thompson. They shared specific examples of negative experiences which could be minimized in order to help students stay in school. They also shared specific examples of positive experiences which could be maximized in order to help students stay in school.

Participants had problems – and wanted help solving those problems. When the problems were not solved, they chose to leave. Participants indicated that retention strategies should focus on solving student problems of all types, including personal problems leading to dropping out, advising, communication, and other forms of assistance. They also felt that developing and maintaining a feeling of community among students, faculty, staff, and administrators would enhance student retention.

Academic and personal advice were needed by participants. When advice was not received, they chose to leave. Participants indicated that Thompson should provide thorough advice as a retention strategy.

Communication with faculty and staff was deemed necessary for academic success by participants. When communication did not occur, they chose to leave. Participants indicated that retention strategies should include additional communication between faculty, staff, and students.

Participants gave suggestions for retention in the form of streamlining paperwork procedures. They also desired that staff give timely assistance when most needed by students, such as when they are new to the college.

Above all, participants needed help of all types, and stated that they would have stayed in school if they would have seen an effort from the faculty and staff members to whom they turned for their help. When they saw no effort, they chose to leave the school. Participants saw effort itself as a retention tool.

When participants received help in any area of their Thompson experience, they were very grateful. By mentioning the categories of help they received, they were also sharing several additional strategies that community colleges could implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates. These strategies included ensuring good teaching and learning experiences, capitalizing on the small size of the school, and offering students attention from faculty or staff members.

Participants shared stories of some good classroom experiences. They enjoyed professional, friendly faculty members who engaged the class in the coursework. They appreciated faculty members who would work with them and their lives, and who would try to understand their points of view. Participants also expressed the joy of learning. They sometimes had not been successful in high school, and very much enjoyed the learning they accomplished at Thompson. Classrooms are key to the success of the community college and key to the success of the individual students at the college.

Participants often indicated that classroom experiences were good because the class size was small and Thompson itself was small. They enjoyed getting to know faculty and staff members and also getting involved in college activities. Community colleges can capitalize on their small size in order to help students be successful.

Community colleges can capitalize on their small size, too, by giving special attention to students all along their paths to graduation. Participants in this study mentioned occasions when

they were beneficiaries of attention that was above and beyond the scope of normal college activity. Faculty personally invited students to participate in activities, tutors took time with students, remedial courses worked, staff helped the system along, and community college students reaped the rewards of the attention.

Theoretical Framework

This research provides one of the few studies that address, in students' own words, personal and institutional factors relating to why students drop out of community college. It provides the institution a look at specific examples of why students did not choose to complete their programs of study.

The Davidson-Wilson (2017) Collective Affiliation Model was used as the theoretical framework for this research study. Davidson and Wilson have suggested that the dropout problem at the community college level should actually be placed within the institution instead of within the student. Community college is only one small part of the student's life, the student will stay involved in family and other relationships even while attending college, and therefore the college must find a way to position itself squarely into the student's life. A college atmosphere of caring is instrumental in helping students affiliate with the college and therefore complete their programs of study.

The findings of this study parallel the Davidson-Wilson Collective Affiliation Model. The participants started school intending to finish, but institutional factors contributed to 12 of them desiring to leave more than stay to finish their programs of study. Participants needed care and concern from faculty and staff members, and they needed help with forms and processes. They tried to succeed in college and still keep their full slate of duties at home, work, and community. In order for students to prosper under such an enormous burden, an institution must

go above and beyond, giving assistance in every possible manner, and helping students become involved enough in the college to want to complete their goals, even when it gets difficult as school is apt to be.

The Davidson-Wilson model is an offshoot of the Tinto (1999) theory of how to integrate students into college, namely that even though the community college, with its open-access goal, has little control over the personal characteristics of their students, the college does have control over what occurs within the institution: academics, communication, support. The findings of this research study also parallel Tinto's theory. Participants wanted valuable teaching and learning experiences, they wanted to get to know their classmates and college employees, and they wanted assistance in areas of advising, deadlines, tutoring, and paperwork.

Summary

In their own words, these former community college students have expressed personal and institutional reasons for leaving college before completing their programs of study. They also shared valuable strategies for changes to make so that other students may possibly stay enrolled in school until the completion of their programs of study. Such is the potential, such is the hope.

Recommendations for Practice

West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges must give assistance to each student based upon each particular set of needs as determined by the student going along the path to completion of a program of study. Based upon the literature review and the results of this study, following are recommendations for practice in the field:

1. Academic advisors should be well trained.

2. Staff should be able to readily solve problems.

3. Communication channels should be well established.

4. Appoint a point person for each student to be the first contact with any problem, or just to check on them from time to time.

5. Ask if students want to email, phone, or text.

6. Monitor faculty and staff attitudes.

7. Ensure that students know which courses to take so they do not waste credit hours.

8. All faculty members need to use teaching methodology that promotes a high degree of student classroom engagement. This will not only enhance student learning, but will also help students get to know each other and foster a sense of community among students.

9. Advertise tutoring services.

10. Train students on processes of registration, drop/add, financial aid, textbooks, etc.

11. Continually ask students how they are doing.

12. Start a day care.

13. Find former students who have not completed their programs of study to see if they might be interested in coming back and finishing their programs of study.

14. Solve student problems quickly and creatively.

15. Bring graduates of the school in often as guest speakers.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based upon the review of the literature and the results of this study, the following suggestions for further research are made:

1. Duplicate this study in each of the other West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges and in community colleges in other states.

2. Similar research could be conducted at small four-year colleges, especially those with large commuter populations.

3. Duplicate this study in urban areas.

4. Longitudinal research is needed to determine if giving solid attention to students, and how much and what type, actually affects their college attendance decisions.

5. Further research should be conducted to determine the best way to communicate with community college students, and also how to get them the assistance they may need.

Concluding Remarks

Society needs community college graduates. The technical niche is now wide open for opportunity, and the transfer niche always has been. In general terms, "workers with education are valued more highly in the workplace because they tend to be more proficient at jobs, benefit more from additional training, and make better and more productive decisions in the allocation of resources, including the use of their own time" (Levin & Garcia, 2018). Anything that can be done to improve community college graduation rates should be attempted in order to help students reach their educational goals and also to support our society.

Finally, considering this researcher began teaching 40 years ago, including 10 adjunct years at a community college, a surprising amount of valuable information was gleaned from intently and directly listening to the stories of those who left the community college before completing their programs of study. Conducting the interviews was a most enjoyable experience, and the researcher will now look at personal teaching style and communication patterns with renewed emphasis on the student. The overall impression that the researcher gathered about the participants is that they are even now doing the best they can and trying to

make their way in the world. It was a privilege to have each of them share a part of their lives, and this researcher wishes them all the best as they continue their incredible journeys.

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Appendix A
Chancellor Letter Seeking Assistance for Research

Dear Dr. Tucker:

As an Ed.D. candidate in Career and Technical Education at Virginia Tech, I am conducting a qualitative research study as partial fulfillment of my doctorate degree. The title of the research project is "Factors Inhibiting Completion of a Program of Study at a West Virginia Community and Technical College."

May I please have your permission to contact the VPAA at one of your nine West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges? I would like to request that person to recommend faculty or staff members who could suggest former students who might participate in this study.

The purpose of this research is to examine reasons why students decided not to stay in school to finish their programs of study. I have received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech whose aim is to protect the rights and safety of human subjects participating in research.

Thank you so much for any assistance you would be able to give me. Please text me at (276) 245-0474, call me at (276) 326-2089, or email me at dianeb88@vt.edu.

Thank you so much for considering this request, and for your contribution to my research. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Diane Belcher
Ed.D. Candidate
Career and Technical Education

Dear VPAA:

As an Ed.D. candidate in Career and Technical Education at Virginia Tech, I am conducting a qualitative research study as partial fulfillment of my doctorate degree. The title of the research project is "Factors Inhibiting Completion of a Program of Study at a West Virginia Community and Technical College."

Dr. Sarah Tucker suggested that you might be able to recommend faculty or staff members who could suggest former students who might participate in this study. The purpose of this research is to examine reasons why students decided not to stay in school to finish their programs of study. I have received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech whose aim is to protect the rights and safety of human subjects participating in research.

Thank you so much for any assistance you would be able to give me. Please text me at (276) 245-0474, call me at (276) 326-2089, or email me at dianeb88@vt.edu if you have contact names for me.

Thank you so much for considering this request, and for your contribution to my research. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Diane Belcher
Ed.D. Candidate
Career and Technical Education

Appendix C
Faculty/Staff Letter Seeking Assistance for Research

Dear Faculty/Staff Member:

As an Ed.D. candidate in Career and Technical Education at Virginia Tech, I am conducting a qualitative research study as partial fulfillment of my doctorate degree. The title of the research project is "Factors Inhibiting Completion of a Program of Study at a West Virginia Community and Technical College."

_____ (VPAA) suggested that you might be willing to recommend students who recently were enrolled for at least one semester in a program of study, but who dropped out before finishing that program, who might consider participating in this study. Participation would involve the students completing a maximum one-hour interview with me, either face-to-face or by online video interview. Participation is completely voluntary, and all student and college identities will be kept completely confidential at all times. The students will receive a $25 Wal-Mart gift card for their participation.

The purpose of this research is to examine reasons why students decided not to stay in school to finish their programs of study. I have received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech whose aim is to protect the rights and safety of human subjects participating in research.

Thank you so much for any assistance you would be able to give me. Please text me at (276) 245-0474, call me at (276) 326-2089, or email me at dianeb88@vt.edu if you have former students who you think might participate. I will then send you an email from me to please forward to any possible participants. They will then contact me directly.

Thank you so much for considering this request, and for your contribution to my research. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Diane Belcher
Ed.D. Candidate
Career and Technical Education

Appendix D
Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Person:

As an Ed.D. candidate in Career and Technical Education at Virginia Tech, I am conducting a qualitative research study as partial fulfillment of my doctorate degree. The title of the research project is "Factors Inhibiting Completion of a Program of Study at a West Virginia Community and Technical College." _____ (faculty or staff name) is forwarding you this email from me because he/she thought you might be interested.

The purpose of this research is to look at reasons why students decided to leave school before finishing a program. If I could talk to you personally, you could tell me exactly what you were thinking when you decided not to come back to school. I'll be talking to many former students, and no one else will know we talked – it's all done very confidentially, even using a fake name for you.

Your participation in this study will involve a one-hour interview, and you may choose either a face-to-face interview that will be audio recorded or an online interview using Zoom, which will be audio and video recorded. You may choose the time and place that is convenient for you. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and your identity will be kept completely confidential at all times. Also, if you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time during the interview process, and after the interview, you will have the opportunity to review the text for accuracy.

My personal background is that I have been a high school and small-college teacher for most of 40 years. I have taught part-time at Bluefield State and Concord for about 20 years. I am excited to do this research so that I can maybe help more students reach their career goals.

To thank you for being in this study, I will give you a $25 Wal-Mart gift card when we do the interview.

If you are willing to participate in my study or if you have questions, please text me at (276) 245-0474, call me at (276) 326-2089, or email me at dianeb88@vt.edu. I will then contact you to arrange a date, time, place or online interview that is convenient for you.

Thank you so much for considering this request, and for your contribution to my research. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Diane Belcher
Ed.D. Candidate
Career and Technical Education

Dear Person:

Thank you so much for participating in my research study. Thank you especially for answering all of my questions and thinking about this topic. The information you gave me will be very helpful to the outcome of the study. I will put together what you said with what others have said. This information could assist our West Virginia Community and Technical Colleges in their effort to improve their services to all students.

As we talked about in our interview time, you will soon have an opportunity to review the transcript of the interview for accuracy. It is important to do that so the study can be valid. Please remember that all of your individual information is removed, and a false name will be used instead of your name.

Thank you again for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Diane Belcher
Ed.D. Candidate
Career and Technical Education
Virginia Tech

Appendix F
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

Title of Research Project: Factors Inhibiting Completion of a Program of Study at a West Virginia Community and Technical College

Researcher:

    Diane Belcher   (276) 326-2089   dianeb88@vt.edu

Principal Investigator:

    Dr. Bill Price, Faculty Advisor   (540) 231-7390   wprice@vt.edu

I. **Key Information**

    I'm studying the reasons why people drop out of community and technical college. I want to ask you some questions so I can understand your thoughts. I hope to include about 20 people in this research study.

II. **Who can I talk to?**

    If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, talk to Diane Belcher at (276) 326-2089 or Dr. Price at (540) 231-7390. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may contact them at (540) 231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research subject; your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by others; you cannot reach Diane Belcher or Dr. Price; or you want to talk to someone other than the researcher to provide feedback about this research.

III. **What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?**

    Diane Belcher will ask you to describe your experiences just one time during an interview that will take approximately one hour. You may choose a face-to-face interview or an online interview. The interview will take place at a date, time, and location convenient for you. To ensure the reliability of the data, the interview will be recorded. A face-to-face interview will be audio recorded and an online interview using Zoom will be audio and video recorded.

IV. **What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?**

    You can leave the research at any time, for any reason, and it will not be held against you. If you decide to leave the research, contact Diane Belcher if you would so that she can find someone else.

V. **Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?**

    There are no known risks to participating in this study.

VI. **What happens to the information collected for the research?**

    Every effort will be made to protect your identity in any written work resulting from this study. Where need arises to use a name, a pseudonym (fake name) will be used

to identify you in any written materials. The researcher will make every effort to mask anything that could identify you.

The researcher is the only individual who will have access to the recordings of the interviews. The recordings will be erased and destroyed after three years. Before the recordings are destroyed, the researcher will have determined that all necessary data and conclusions have been retrieved and transcribed. Transcripts may be viewed only by the researcher and members of the dissertation committee.

The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, journal articles, or academic papers, and as part of a dissertation. The results of this research study may also be shared with West Virginia Community and Technical College administrators, faculty, or staff. Your real name will never be used in any of these.

Since all of the participants are from one college, and administrators and faculty/staff assisted with recruitment, no promise can be made to keep the name of this college confidential.

The Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VII. Compensation

You will receive a $25 gift card at the completion of the interview as compensation for participating in this study.

VIII. Participant's Consent

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all of my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent. You will receive a signed copy of this form for your records.

_____ Date _____
Signature of Participant

_____
Printed Name

_____ Date _____
Signature of Researcher

_____
Printed Name

Appendix G
Interview Questions

First Ask Rapport-Building Questions and have general conversation, for example:
What program of study were you enrolled in?
What semesters did you attend?
What do you do now?

THEN ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS AND FOLLOW THEIR LEAD TO ASK PROBING QUESTIONS FROM THE LISTS BELOW.
> Open Ended:
> 1. **What led you to leave the community college?**
> 2. What specific experience caused you to leave?
> 3. What made you first think about leaving?

PROBING QUESTIONS RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

RQ1: What personal factors contributed to students dropping out of a West Virginia Community and Technical College?

Did you work when you were going to college? Where? What type of job? Hours per week?
Do you have a spouse? Children?
Who is your support group now? Did they support your decision to go to college?
How did they support you while you were going to college?

RQ2: What institutional factors contributed to students dropping out of a West Virginia Community and Technical College?

What parts of college did you like? Dislike?
Was there anything about the college that might have been a factor in causing you to drop out?
Administrative procedures? Registering for classes? Paying tuition? Amount of tuition?
Parking? Faculty? Overall atmosphere of the college? Other?

RQ3: What strategies can a West Virginia Community and Technical College implement to enhance student retention and decrease student dropout rates?

What could have happened that might have kept you in school?
What services could the college have provided to help you stay?
What could someone at the college have done to help you stay?
What could someone at the college have done differently so that you didn't want to leave?
What could someone at the college have done to help you in any other way?
Do you have any thoughts or plans to return to college?

Closing
May I contact you again if I have further questions? Is there anything else you would like to add?
Many, many thanks – and present gift card.

Appendix H
Demographic Questions to Ask Participants

1. How old are you?

2. What is your gender?

3. What is your ethnicity?

4. What semester/s and year/s did you attend this college?

5. Approximately how many miles away from this college did you live when you attended here?

6. Did you take classes in-seat or online?

Interview Experience

September 6, Noon

So much fun to interview with such a confident, vivacious male. Enjoyed his vocabulary. Interesting that he feels so deeply about this topic that he would share with a complete stranger. Makes me wish I could fix things, not just write about them.

The Participant

September 6, Noon

Very talkative. Got emotional when expressing desire for the school to do better. Sees such potential in the school. Full of ideas. Really got going, with so many thoughts tumbling out.

Interview Issues

Saturday, September 7

He had so many ideas that it was difficult to sort his ideas in order to ask follow-up questions. Wrote notes on paper to remember topics to ask about, and glanced at it to make sure every topic was covered.

R	OK, so what led you to leave the community college?
P	Well, I was supposed to go back, but the office actually didn't take care of my financial aid. I was supposed to turn them in my papers and they were supposed to get them to the actual FAFSA office, and they never sent my papers off.
R	So tell me more about that. So you gave it to them when? Do you remember what time of year or something?
P	Well, I was supposed to start back in August. I think my papers had to be in – by July maybe? If I'm not mistaken? And I had to have copies of my W2s from my previous year, um my living forms and everything, and I had them all turned in, and I got a letter in the mail two-three weeks later, saying my papers hadn't been turned in.
R	And where were the papers?
P	At The College.
R	On somebody's desk?
P	Oh, well I had turned them in to the person in the financial aid at the school, so I guess they were still there. [laughs]
R	OK, and then what did you do after, when you got that notification?
P	I had went to the school and, well, they basically just gave me the runaround that they didn't HAVE my papers. I know they had my papers. [laughs] I had turned them in – they had actually, I had turned them in, and I had to fill out a paper while I was there turning them in that they were ALSO supposed to turn in. So I know the paper was there. [nervous laughter]
R	So then you contacted them I assume.
P	I had contacted them, I had contacted the financial aid office, and they gave me the option, they told me that I could pay the money up front and go to school, and that they could possibly send the papers out, and they would refund me the money, like write me a check for the money, but I really didn't have the money to pay. [laughs]
R	OK, and so by now it's time for school to start?

P	Yah, school had started.
R	OK, and so you just said…
P	I would have had to pay the actual money to start school, I would have had to order all of my books out of pocket, I mean, and I really just did not, and I couldn't do that because I was paying day care and…
R	And had you already signed up for classes?
P	Yah, I had my schedule.
R	OK, so you just got out of the classes and just stopped.
P	I had to basically drop out.
R	OK.
P	I could have taken a semester off and went back, but by that time I was so aggravated that I really <u>did</u> not want to continue.
R	OK, because the longer you think about it…
P	Oh, I was very upset.
R	And did you ever tell anybody that you were upset?
P	Oh, they knew I was upset. They were well aware.
R	Did you call multiple people?
P	I had made numerous trips to the school, I had made numerous phone calls, I pretty much talked to everyone in the building – and the FAFSA building.
R	OK, so while you were there… So you never have gone to other schools, right?
P	Right.
R	Did you have an advisor while you were there that semester? Anyone you knew who might have been your advisor?
P	I'm not really sure. [nervous laughter]

R	OK, and then when you were there that semester, what parts of college did you like?
P	Um, I had a really good class. I mean, it was very good.
R	What was good about it?
P	The teacher. She was – everything was made <u>very</u> clear, everything we done – I mean, it was a very good class. She was an awesome teacher.
R	Ok, and what parts did you dislike while you were there?
P	Um, I had two video classes where she's on the screen and we just sit there. She's at a different school, so she's got students. She's actually teaching multiple campuses. And I had – it was a science class – and it was a lab class so we had to order these lab kits. And I hated it. Everything that we done with the lab kit we had to do at home. And it was like basically we got the instructions in email, and we had to do what the instructions said, and I mean, you know, a <u>lab</u> thing, in my eyes, should be done in class. Like it was actually, I did not pass the class. There were 8 kids in the classroom and I think 2 of them passed. And the teacher was, all we did in class was we went over our powerpoints. It was an hour-long class and we went over powerpoints – no, it was 3 hours, sorry, it was from 9 to 1? or 12:30? on Fridays. And it was <u>the worst</u> class of – I mean, from elementary, middle school, high school, it was the worst class I've ever taken.
R	And did you know that it was going to be IVN before you started?
P	No. [pause] I had to pay, I think the lab kit was like $300, and we used maybe 2 things out of it. It was the biggest waste of money. [laughs] And it had to actually be paid for out of pocket because like, you know, you have so much to spend on books out of your FAFSA, and by the time everything else was ordered, you don't have $300 or I think it was 350 for the lab kit? You don't have that to spend, and then for it to not even be used, you know. [laughs] I hated that. The teacher, and just everything about that class, was awful. [nervous laughter throughout this paragraph]
R	So you probably have answered this, but I'll say it a different way and it maybe help you even think of something else, but was there anything else about the college that might have been a factor in causing you to drop out?
P	Um, well, the staff. The staff was THE #1 reason. I mean not even the issues that I had with the FAFSA, but the class was – I mean, that just… When I found out that I failed it, which I had a pretty good, a pretty good idea that I did after taking the exam, I was aggravated with it as well. And then, like I said, I mean like 6 other people or 5 other people, failed that class too, so I knew it wasn't just me.

R	Did you have a support group while you were trying to do this? Like were there people saying, "Yes, you can do this" or …
P	Um, at the school, or like family?
R	Either.
P	My mom and my fiancé, and – I mean my family was a big supporter. They were pretty upset when everything went downhill. My sister was also there with me. She was, we were taking the same classes – we were going for the same thing. But she, she left too. [nervous laughter] It didn't work out for her either.
R	OK, um, you've said this another way too, but what could have happened that might have kept you in school?
P	My FAFSA – being taken care of somehow. They really didn't – when everything, you know, when I found out everything wasn't correct, they really didn't, they didn't make an attempt to fix anything. The FAFSA office, you know, told me that I could pay, out of pocket, but The College really didn't try whatsoever.
R	And what services could the college have provided to help you stay?
P	A better FAFSA office I suppose? [laughs] Or not even… I mean, I don't guess a better FAFSA office, but a staff, I guess, that knows what they're supposed to do. I could have mailed the papers in to the FAFSA office, is my big thing. But they told me to bring them my papers, and that they would do it.
R	So, again, I keep asking the same thing, don't I, what could someone at the college have done differently so that you didn't want to leave? Anything besides FAFSA and then your IVN experience? Can you think of anything else?
P	Other than that my experience was, it was well. [pauses to think]
R	OK. OK. And do you have any thoughts or plans to return to college? There or somewhere else or anything?
P	I would like to go back to college maybe in the future, when my daughter's a little bigger and can, you know, she's in school, or I don't have to put her in day care because I don't particularly like day care. So, hopefully, eventually.
R	OK I think. Let me make sure. And I think you told me too, what made you first think about leaving? Like, it just all… I think you told me the story exactly, right?

P	Basically, I had considered leaving after the whole anatomy and physiology thing – after I failed it – because I knew I'd have to take it again, and I was really worried about having to do it the same way again. Like I didn't want to have to do the same exact class and then fail it again, because, like I said, she did not, we did not learn anything. It was a powerpoint, and we went over the powerpoint, but basically all that was in the powerpoint was just everything that was in the book. But I guess, you know, where we were at two different campuses, we had the books and she really didn't think, you know, I guess she didn't consider the fact that we had the books. So the powerpoints were exactly what was in the book. And I HAD the book and I still didn't, [voice trails off] still didn't pass the class.
R	OK, I think that covers it. Tell me the story of when you first started.
P	OK, so when I first started The College, I actually had the same problem with the financial aid, except that time I mailed the papers by myself, but I didn't have no tax papers, so I had to pay out of pocket then – well, my dad paid for it – and they did refund me the check. They refunded me the check and I mean it went to my dad. But it was basically just because The College didn't give me the correct papers to fill out, so I had to pay out of pocket to start, it was $1900?
R	Thanks.

Qu #	Category	Code	Participant/ Paragraph	Text
RQ1	School/life balance	Tired	A16	Waking up early. [laughs] I'm not a morning person, and those 8 o'clock classes sure were tough. I was half asleep in there trying to listen to somebody tell me something I've never heard before, and I think my English class was at 8 am, so that was a rough class for me [laughs].
		Schedules Work-school demands	A36	Because there's not that many schools around here that would work around what I'm going to be with. Most schools do day classes and I work all day. So I'm going to have to go somewhere that has evening classes, and that's probably more than likely going to be an online school.
		Schedules Work-school demands	A38	Because I'm going to be 8 am to 5 pm Monday through Friday. And you know, most college classes are usually from 8 to 5 Monday through Friday.
		Tired Work-school demands	A46	That was probably the major factor was being tired. Working the two jobs, because sometimes I would go to class, then I'd go to my first job, then I'd go to my second job. Or flip flop. I'd go to my first job, I'd go to class, then I'd go to my second job.
		Family responsibilities	B32	Having to go to class? [laughter] Having to do the work? I mean, I do enjoy it but I mean life gets in the way. It gets busy and…
		Schedules	D40	I liked how [laughs] close in proximity it was to my home.
		Family responsibilities	G10	I had great pregnancies. I have three children now. Each one of them was great. It was just the part of being a mom and going to school

				and trying to balance life. It was going to be hard. I wasn't ready.
		Schedules	G14	And it was like two minutes away from where I lived.
		Family responsibilities	G38	I finished that semester because I was still pregnant – I didn't have *two* babies – but I was going to have them before the next semester ended and I didn't want to miss school trying to have a baby, and miss exams and stuff. Then I would have flunked out, so…
		Family responsibilities	G40	Maybe if they had a day care, it would have been nice. Or even just bringing kids to class. Or I mean, you probably could have brought your children to class, but – no, two infants in a classroom? [laughs].
		Family responsibilities	H18	Cuz that was a big lot of the pressure was, you know, I would drive my daughter to day care in a local town, then drive all the way out to Thompson, and then after I'd leave there, go home, then go back to another class, then go back to the other town to pick her back up.
		Family responsibilities	H18	Or even having a day care there. Cuz I remember we went, one time, our English teacher took us on a tour of the local 4-year university library and she was saying like they have housing there, people have their kids, there's a day care, and to me that just *blew my mind*. I mean, being able, I mean if someone would have said there's a day care, plus you can get a job at Thompson, your daughter can stay here. I mean, I would have graduated, you know, 10 years ago instead of having to withdraw. And being even a first-time parent, I didn't know, if I'd had any help with that in any shape or way, it'd have been…
		Stressed	K8	It's like the work load is like, 'here's a test, here's this, here's this,

				and this's gotta be done today. And I'm used to it because I went to the local 4-year college, but it's just different kinda, it's like of a put all the workload on you, and you don't have that much of studying basically.
		Work-school demands	K10	I was working too, but I was online because I was working.
		Stressed	N14	And then sometimes I just felt like there was too much to do at once. It felt like that all the time actually, [short laugh] especially with the online classes, like if you get a little bit behind, it's really easy to do. And then you have like your, I had classes at school and then classes online, and then constant homework, and being on the computer.
		Work-school demands	N22	Some of the classes that I needed to take with my work schedule were terrible, cuz I close the bar some nights so I don't get home until 4:30 am sometimes, and then having to be in a class the next morning at a certain time is just unrealistic for me. So certain things I *had* to schedule to be online instead of in the classroom.
		Family responsibilities	O2	There was a death in the family and I had to leave college to take care of my elderly grandfather.
		Work-school demands Family responsibilities	O12	The only issue that I had was the fact that I couldn't maintain a full-time job and full-time student responsibilities while taking care of my grandfather.

Appendix L
IRB Approval Letter

VIRGINIA TECH.

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 28, 2019

TO: Bill Price Jr

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Factors Inhibiting Completion of a Program of Study at a West Virginia Community and Technical College

IRB NUMBER: 19-437

Effective May 28, 2019, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) and Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)
Protocol Determination Date: May 28, 2019

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Invent the Future