Community College Graduates’ Perceptions of the Effect of Cocurricular Involvement on Their Academic Success and Career Skill Development

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Community College Graduates’ Perceptions of the Effect of Cocurricular Involvement on Their Academic Success and Career Skill Development

Abstract
This phenomenological, qualitative study explored community college graduates’ perceptions of their cocurricular involvement and its effect on their academic success and career development through the lens of The City University of New York’s Accelerated Studies in Associate Programs (ASAP). Besides the low graduation rates among community college students, the available literature regarding cocurricular involvement and its positive effect on students’ retention is not representative of non-traditional students who attend community colleges. Given ASAP’s success in supporting community college students through graduation by providing students with social/emotional and financial support, this study sought to gain insights into how to improve engagement and retention for community college students. Participants of this study were randomly selected among graduates of the ASAP program from fall 2018 and spring 2019. Pre-interview questionnaires were used to collect demographic data and to select interview participants. The data was collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews and was analyzed by developing codes, categories, and themes. The data revealed eight factors that contributed to the graduate's academic success and career skill development. These factors are: (a) career readiness, (b) personal development, (c) social integration, (d) advisor mentorship, (e) structured environment, (f) appreciative practices, (g) academic integration, and (h) financial support. The recommendations to stakeholders include student-advisor assignment, outcome-driven cocurricular activities, and structured, supportive environment.

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Community College Graduates’ Perceptions of the Effect of Cocurricular Involvement on Their Academic Success and Career Skill Development

By

Ramón De Los Santos

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Anthony P. Chiarlitti

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St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

The journey of writing a dissertation does not happen in isolation, and many people have contributed to helping me pave the path to completing this chapter of my life. First, I dedicate this to my parents, Ligia and Ramón. “Ellos me inculcaron muchos valores y entre ellos dos que definitivamente contribuyeron con este logro y los cuales son: el deseo de aprender y superarme y la importancia de trabajar duro para logra lo que uno quiere.” I also dedicate this dissertation to my wife Gloribel for her support, encouragement, and patience during this long process. To my daughters, Liana and Leyla, for giving me the strength to work harder every day to set an example that hopefully, you both can follow. I also dedicate this to my mentor Isabel Li who was my first college advisor and professor. She has stayed in my life ever since as a mentor and a friend, challenging me to dream and aspire to more.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Girardi for her guidance, support, and dedication during this journey. She challenged and motivated me when I needed it the most. This accomplishment would not have been possible without her support. Thanks to Dr. Chiarlitti for being part of this process and your feedback. I also would like to thank Dr. Seals and Dr. Grachan for your encouragement, support, and the flexibility that allowed me to focus on my dissertation even during hectic times at work. Thanks to my executive mentor Dr. Williams for your invaluable feedback and mentorship. Thanks to my “compadre,” Wilfredo, for being there for my daughters when I was not able to do so, due to the multiple commitments of this program.
Last but not least, thanks to my group United Committed Change Agents (UCCA). It is really rare to find a group of exceptional professionals who unselfishly encourage each other to do their best, and I found that in a group of colleagues that I now have the pleasure of calling my friends—Tameka, Jacinth, Alana, and Nadjete. You are the best partners I could ever ask for.
Biographical Sketch

Ramón De Los Santos is currently the Interim Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York. Mr. De Los Santos graduated from Hostos Community College with an Associate Degree in Arts in 2002. He completed his Bachelor of Business Administration with a concentration in Human Resources Management from Baruch College in 2004. He attended Queens College, graduating with a Master of Arts in Urban Affairs with a concentration in Public Sector Management in 2009. Mr. De Los Santos came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2018 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. He pursued his research in environmental factors that contributed to students’ success, such as faculty and staff connections and involvement in cocurricular activities as perceived by graduates of an urban community college setting under the direction of Dr. Janice Girardi and Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti and received the Ed.D. degree in 2020.
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Participants of this study were randomly selected among graduates of the ASAP program from fall 2018 and spring 2019. Pre-interview questionnaires were used to collect demographic data and to select interview participants. The data was collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews and was analyzed by developing codes, categories, and themes. The data revealed eight factors that contributed to the graduate’s academic success and career skill development. These factors are: (a) career readiness, (b) personal development, (c) social integration, (d) advisor mentorship, (e) structured environment, (f) appreciative practices, (g) academic integration, and (h) financial support. The recommendations to stakeholders include student-advisor assignment, outcome-driven cocurricular activities, and structured, supportive environment.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

United States’ colleges are effective at recruiting and enrolling students but continue to struggle to increase the percentage of students who cross the finish line with about 60% of students who attend 4-year institutions completing a bachelor’s degree in 6 years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019b) and only 41% of students in the United States complete a bachelor's degree in 4 years (NCES, 2019a).

Unfortunately, the completion rate among community college students is as discouraging, only 32% graduate in 3 years (NCES, 2019b). The low graduation rates of community colleges are concerning as these institutions remain the gateway into higher education for disadvantaged students due to “their geographic accessibility, adaptability to student and employer educational needs, transfer routes to 4-year institutions, and flexibility in scheduling and composition of courses” (Levin & García, 2017, p. 1). Although the benefits of having a college degree are well-known, community college students continue to drop out without obtaining an associate degree or certificate (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012), which limits the job opportunities, career growth, and social mobility for this underserved population (Levin & García, 2017).

Community colleges are a unique American concept that was originally created in the early 20th century as vocational schools to train women for the workforce as teachers (Bumphus, 2018). Through the years, community colleges have evolved and currently provide a variety of certificate programs, workforce training, and preparation for
baccalaureate schools at a lower cost than 4-year public and private institutions (Bailey & Belfield, 2019). For these reasons and due to having open access policies (Bueschel, 2009), community colleges have typically attracted non-traditional students (Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). These students are often referred as to underprepared low-income first-generation students, who in their majority, are students of color, immigrants, and adult learners, (Bumphus, 2018; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Pratt, 2017) while “traditional students are those whose families have a history of college attendance, come from middle and upper-class families and typically feel confident about attending college” (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011, p. 13). As traditional students usually have the expectations of attending college, they tend to pursue their education in elite and research-extensive institutions (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Ma and Baum (2016) stated that non-Whites represent the majority of students attending public community colleges in the United States, while Whites represent 49%, Hispanics represent 22%, Blacks 14%, Asians 5%, and 10% are categorized as other. These non-White students are considered non-traditional, and they tend to drop out of community colleges due to policies and practices that do not support the unique needs of this population, and because many of them do not understand what is required of them to be a successful college student (Bueschel, 2009).

Current college practices do not empower and validate nontraditional and students of color as learners, especially for those who do not have anyone in their families who have attended college prior to them (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Seminal studies conducted by Tinto (1987), Astin (1984), and Kuh (1991), at traditional 4-year
institutions, established that student involvement has a positive impact on student persistence. Researchers recommend that community colleges provide non-traditional students the opportunity to get involved in cocurricular activities, as the literature indicates that students who engage in these types of activities tend to be more successful (Barbatis, 2010; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013; Liao, Edlin, & Ferdenzi, 2014).

Community colleges are designed to provide unique opportunities for students to develop skills needed by employers while also serving almost half of the postsecondary students in the nation (Bailey, 2002; Mullin, 2012). Community colleges also “often have strong collaborations with local industry and employers to provide students with hands-on skills that are directly applicable to their respective profession” (Grundmann, 2013, p. 8). However, due to the complicated lives and multiple commitments of non-traditional students, community college students tend not to engage in out-of-class activities, nor with other members of the college community (Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013) which makes their education an isolated experience (Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, & Guida, 2018).

Besides the problem of low college graduation rates facing the US, many private sector leaders have expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of college graduates in the US, citing deficiencies in necessary skills such as written communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Pascarella, Blaich, Martin, & Hanson, 2011). Competencies such as critical thinking, oral communication, and problem-solving abilities are known as either soft-skills or career skills and can be developed through the voluntary participation in student activities, and not only through
the classroom setting (Fried, 2013; Keeling, 2006). While extracurriculars are those activities not connected with the curriculum (Suskie, 2015), out of the classroom activities that help students learn, grow, and develop and are related to the overall institution’s learning objectives are known as cocurricular activities (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Suskie, 2015). Cocurricular activities have been highlighted for their positive effects on community college students’ development and persistence (Barbatis, 2010; Bell, Hackett, & Hoffman, 2016; Dudley, Liu, Hao, & Stallard, 2015; Keeling, 2006; McClenney, Marti, & Adkins, 2012). Despite many researchers' recommendations of getting students involved in cocurricular activities due to its positive effect on students’ retention (Barbatis, 2010; Bell et al., 2016; McElroy & Cobb, 2010), studies assessing cocurricular involvement of community college students and its relationship with academic skill development and success remain limited.

**Problem Statement**

The United States’ low college graduation rates have represented a challenge for educators and policymakers for decades (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Cohen et al., 2014; Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011; Pratt, 2017). Most of the available literature on students’ retention and graduation is based on theories related to traditional students, which do not represent the non-traditional students’ experiences (Nakajima et al., 2012; Rondón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994). Scholars and researchers, in the attempt to find solutions to the low retention and graduation rates, have conducted studies suggesting that community college students’ success depends on their motivations (Fong et al., 2017; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Liao et al., 2014; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014), ability to balance competing priorities (Hawley & Harris, 2016; Martin et al.,
2014; Peterson, 2016), ability to self-regulate their learning (Fong et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2014), and their ability to enroll full-time (Nakajima et al., 2012). While these researchers place the responsibility of community college students’ success on the students, other researchers have proposed more progressive approaches that place the retention and success responsibility back on the institutions through the development and implementation of engagement strategies (Coronella, 2018; Kuh, 2012; Kuh et al., 1991; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rojas & Liou, 2017).

More recent studies on community college retention suggest that environmental factors such as developing a meaningful relationship with faculty and staff, and campus involvement through cocurricular activities are key factors to consider when servicing community college students (Nakajima et al., 2012; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). In addition, Price and Tovar (2014) indicated that “students who attend community colleges that provide a supportive environment through academic advising; non-academic supports, and financial supports are more engaged and more engagement around the support for learners’ benchmark is predictive of higher institutional graduation rates” (p. 779).

However, most studies assessing students’ participation in cocurricular activities are quantitative, and several scholars have serious doubts that students can effectively evaluate the effect of cocurricular engagement through large scale surveys (Bowman, 2011, 2013; Cole & Zhou, 2014). As the retention and graduation challenge persists, some community colleges have developed holistic student support programs that can serve as successful models of retention and graduation as they provide students financial incentives, social-emotional support, as well as the ability to connect with faculty, staff
and other students (Berumen, Zerquera, & Smith, 2015; Headlam, 2018; Scrivener, Weiss, & Sommo, 2012; Sommo, Cullinan, & Manno, 2018; Strumbos, Linderman, & Hicks, 2018; Weiss, Ratledge, Sommo, & Gupta, 2019). However, most available studies related to student support services’ programs are quantitative, and students’ voices are missing from the current literature, which could provide a better understanding of the low retention and graduation rate facing community colleges in the United States. Besides, student support services’ programs such as the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs designed by City University of New York (CUNY), provide the opportunity to gain a better understanding of students’ perceptions of environmental factors such as faculty and staff connections, as well as participation in required cocurricular activities that helped them to succeed.

**Accelerated Study in Associate Programs Introduction**

In 2007, a program was developed to address the graduation challenges facing the City University of New York, which provided a unique opportunity to explore the effect of cocurricular involvement in students’ success and preparation for future career opportunities. CUNY’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) provides full-time community college students with student affairs-like services and programming with the goal of graduating a minimum of 50% of its cohorts in 2 to 3 years. "The program looks at the busy lives of its students and intervenes when it can to remove obstacles that block the successful pathways through education" (Davidson, 2017, p. 66).

Some of ASAP’s benefits include “comprehensive advisement, consolidated scheduling, cohort-course taking, career and employment services, tutoring, summer, and winter course-taking” as well as tuition waivers, MetroCards, and free use of textbooks
(Strumbos et al., 2018, p. 101). In order to maintain these benefits, students are expected to enroll full-time per semester, enroll in three reserved sections for ASAP students during the first year, meet with their dedicated advisors a minimum of once per month, attend an engagement activity once per month with the goal of developing a sense of community, as well as getting them prepared either for transfer or the job market (Kirp, 2019; Kolenovic, Linderman, & Karp, 2013). “In ASAP, the structural change that spells success is that deans all work together on everything—curriculum, financial aid, scheduling, pedagogy, and advising—instead of separating on bureaucratic silos" (Davidson, 2017, p. 68).

In addition to receiving financial benefits, ASAP students are assigned an advisor from the point of entry through graduation (Kirp, 2019). The advisor and student develop a close relationship where advisors help students navigate academic or personal challenges (Davidson, 2017; Kirp, 2019) in addition to guiding students through the completion of different tasks through engagement in cocurricular activities. The program established the following career and transfer benchmarks students need to complete prior to graduation: Semester 1, career assessment and attend career and scholarship events; Semester 2, complete a resume, identify potential senior colleges and apply to scholarships; Semester 3, complete a cover letter, a draft of personal statement and scholarship essay; and Semester 4, complete a mock interview, apply to senior colleges and scholarships (CUNY, 2020). Despite the ASAP success in graduating over 50% of its cohorts in 3 years (Dadgar, Nodine, Bracco, & Venezia, 2014; Feldman & Romano, 2019; Fogel, 2019; Kolenovic et al., 2013; Levin & Garcia, 2017; Linderman & Levin & Garcia, 2017; Linderman & Kolenovic, 2013; Strumbos et al., 2018), and being recognized by President Barack
Obama as one of the models to follow as part of the Free Community College proposal (White House, 2015), empirical studies on success programs similar to ASAP are limited. The available studies on ASAP are mainly program evaluations conducted by an independent agency under the name of Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) which has evaluated program outcomes in the City of New York and replication efforts in Ohio (Scrivener et al., 2012; Sommo et al., 2018; Sommo & Ratledge, 2016; Weiss et al., 2019).

**Theoretical Rationale**

The theoretical framework that guided this study is based on Rendón’s (1994) validation theory. Validation theory derives from Astin’s (1984) research on students’ retention and persistence, which became a seminal study, and its theoretical framework is referred to as student involvement theory. Astin (1984) studied factors that contribute to students’ retention and academic success by assessing students' backgrounds and skill levels at the point of entry. In addition to students’ backgrounds, Astin focused on students’ level of involvement in activities in and outside the classroom, as well as the student’s demonstrated growth at the point of graduation. Some critics of this model argue that Astin’s (1984) theory did not take into account students’ demographics and how the students’ background affects students’ perceptions and level of engagement with the college community (Rendón, 1994). The model also does not take into consideration the different needs of low-income students and first-generation students (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Rendón (1994) studied factors that contribute to retention and persistence while realizing through her study that the key for non-traditional college students’ success was
the fact that these students developed meaningful relationships with at least one college professional. Either faculty or staff developed a connection with these students, which helped students see themselves as capable learners. Validation refers to the proactive and intentional affirmation of students' experiences inside and outside the classroom (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz 2011).

Rendón (1994) stated that non-traditional and low-income students might have had negative experiences with education before college, and by providing a positive and affirmative environment, students develop confidence in themselves as learners. Rendón’s (1994) study differs from Astin’s (1984) study, as Rendón (1994) places the responsibility of students’ engagement and success on the institution instead of the student. For Rendón (1994), “validation is an enabling, confirming and the supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44).

The theory of validation has six elements that promote students’ involvement, development, retention, and persistence:

1. Initiating contact with students,
2. Motivating students’ learning through appreciative practices,
3. Validation empowers students to be confident and to get involved,
4. Occurs inside and outside of the classroom,
5. Must be seen as a developmental process that may continue over time, and
6. Requires validation as early as the first few weeks of the college experience (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994)
Based on the understanding of validation theory and the proactive engagement practices used by the ASAP program, this study focused on factors that validated ASAP students through the program’s structure and required cocurricular involvement. In addition, the study aimed to assess how ASAP cocurricular engagement practices are perceived by ASAP graduates concerning their academic success and the development of career skills. Despite many researchers’ suggestions of cocurricular’s effect on retention, persistence, and student development (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1991; Tinto, 1987), more studies are needed to gain a better understanding of the effect of cocurricular involvement for community college students and their ability to complete their degrees while gaining valuable skills for the future.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore community college graduates’ perceptions of their cocurricular involvement and its effect on their academic success and career skill development. To gain insight into ASAP graduates’ experiences, this study was conducted in one of the seven public community colleges of the City University of New York, where ASAP provides services to students. Participants for this study were drawn from the same institution. The sample population for this study consisted of 12 ASAP students who completed their associate degrees between fall 2018 and spring 2019 with a great point average (GPA) of 3.0 or better. The study sought to identify factors related to participation in cocurricular activities that validated students as learners while contributing to their retention, academic success and career skills development.

**Research Questions**
This study focused on factors related to cocurricular involvement that contributed to the engagement, retention, and success of associate degree recipients at one of the CUNY’s ASAP programs.

The following were the guiding questions of this study:

1. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success?
2. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its relation to their career skill development?
3. What role, if any, did ASAP’s curricular and cocurricular requirements contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners?
4. To what extent did factors such as academic advisement, social integration, support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP graduates to persist?

**Significance of the Study**

As this study focused on community college students, besides adding to the body of literature, it will be of interest to higher education administrators as this study tried to address the current low graduation and retention challenges facing colleges in the nation (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Keeling, 2006). Besides adding to the limited number of qualitative studies assessing the effect of cocurricular activities at community colleges, this study is unique as it sought to gain insights about the perception of students regarding their cocurricular involvement, and how these activities helped them remain engaged and ultimately complete their associate degrees. As participation in cocurricular
activities is associated with the development of soft-skills (Fried, 2013), this study will provide insights on how ASAP’s cocurricular requirements help students to see themselves as capable learners, develop skills that allowed them to complete their degrees, and successfully transfer to senior colleges or develop desired skills by employers. The assessment of the effect of cocurricular involvement of CUNY’s ASAP students may serve to demonstrate the relevance of students’ engagement as a means to better prepare community college graduates academically as well as for future academic or professional experiences.

This study provides evidence of the importance of aligning learning objectives of academic and student affairs with the college’s learning objectives to improve the holistic development of college students as suggested by many researchers (Busby, 2015; Elkins, 2015; Meents-Decaigny & Sanders, 2015; Ro, Menard, Kniess, & Nickelsen, 2017). As ASAP provides support to students outside the classroom, skills gained by graduates as a result of their cocurricular engagement could be aligned with the general community college education learning objectives to ensure that institutional research offices can better assess the relationship between cocurricular activities and students’ learning (Bowman, 2013). This study may be of the interest to employers and policymakers as it provides direct insights from graduates about ways in which colleges can help students gain skills desired by employers through participation in cocurricular activities. This study will assist community colleges in providing more structured social-emotional support to non-traditional students in order to increase their retention and graduation.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined for the purpose of the study:
Academic Success – for this study, academic success means the attainment of an associate degree.

Adult Learner – undergraduate college student 25-years-old and older who, for the most part, have full-time jobs, are caregivers, and heads of households (Glancey, 2018).

Career Readiness Skills – a term used interchangeably with soft-skills to describe skills expected by employers upon graduation, such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, collaboration, professionalism, and work ethics (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2015).

Curricular Activities—inside of the classroom activities intended to supplement the learning objectives of the course (Barnett, 2011).

Cocurricular Activities—out of class activities usually aligned with the institution’s learning objectives and are intended to enhance the students’ learning and development (Suskie, 2015).

Extracurricular Activities—out of the class activities intended to provide students with social integration and campus involvement (Suskie, 2015).

Full-time Enrollment – 12 credits per semester are the minimum to be considered full-time students by federal aid award (HESC, 2020), but for ASAP and for the purpose of this student, the minimum is 15 credits per semester.

Nontraditional Students – Underprepared low-income first-generation students who in their majority are students of color, and adult learners (Cohen et al., 2014; Pratt, 2017).
Persistence – reenrollment of students from one semester to the next in the pursuit of a college degree in any higher education institution (Tinto, 2016).

Retention – reenrollment of students from the first year to the next in the same institution, which serves as a positive indicator towards degree completion (Free Application for Federal Student Aid [FAFSA], 2020).

Self-Regulated Learning—the ability to understand one’s learning preference while controlling the environment one chooses to study (Dembo, 2013).

Soft-Skills – Skills that are not technical and can be leaned through engagement in curricular and cocurricular activities such as written communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Keeling, 2006; Tulgan, 2015).

Student Affairs – Area of a higher education institution responsible for all aspects of the student life, which includes individual and group advisement, counseling, student engagement, and cocurricular programming development (ACPA, 2003).

Traditional Students – Students aged 18 to 24 whose parents have attended college before them (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Validation – practices, and actions that allow students to develop a sense of belonging and acknowledged as leaners by an academic institution (Rendón, 1994)

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses the current graduation, retention, and persistence challenges facing higher education institutions in the United States, as well as the dissatisfaction expressed by industry leaders about skill deficiency demonstrated by recent graduates. Besides, this chapter illustrates how cocurricular activities have been recommended as a potential solution for the low retention, graduation, and persistence...
rates without many studies supporting these claims. Due to ASAP success at supporting student retention, graduation, and persistence of community college students through validating and supportive practices at the City University of New York, this study focused on factors related to cocurricular involvement that contributed to ASAP graduates’ success and career skill development.

A review of the literature is provided in Chapter 2. This review of the literature was conducted in the following areas: (a) cocurricular involvement and academic success, (b) cocurricular involvement and career skill development, and (c) the lessons learned from holistic student support programs in community colleges. The research design, methodology, and analysis are discussed in Chapter 3. A detailed analysis of the significant results and findings are discussed in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Community colleges represent a significant component for the United States post-secondary education system (Schneider & Yin, 2012) as it serves over 45% of all undergraduate students in the country (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2015). Although community colleges provide services to 47% of the bachelor’s degree recipients in the United States, the completion rate among community college students remains at a concerning rate of 32% in 3 years (NCES, 2019b). Traditionally, community colleges have prepared students for the workforce through different certificate programs and for transferring to baccalaureate degree-granting institutions at a lower cost than 4-year public and private institutions (Bailey & Belfield, 2019). In addition to having open access policies and lower tuition than 4-year public and private institutions, community colleges attract non-traditional students, who in their majority, need additional academic, financial, and social-emotional support (Bueschel, 2009; Martin et al., 2014; Nakajima et al., 2012).

Non-traditional students are often referred to as underprepared low-income first-generation students, who in their majority, are students of color and adult learners (Cohen et al., 2014; Pratt, 2017). The majority of students who attend public community colleges in the United States are considered non-traditional as Hispanics represent 22%, Blacks 14%, Asians 5%, and 10% are identified as others (Ma & Baum, 2016). Due to their social-economic conditions, community college students tend to require developmental
courses in one or more areas (Barnett, 2011; Kleinpeter, Potts, Ranney, & Chen, 2018) and have competing priorities that prevent them from persisting with their college degrees (Martin et al., 2014; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). In addition to these challenges, non-traditional students are not aware of what is required of them to be successful college students (Bueschel, 2009), while current community college practices do not validate them as learners (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Most of the literature on college student persistence stems from Tinto’s (1975) model of student persistence and Astin’s (1984) model of student involvement. Still, these models are based on traditional students’ experiences, students 18 to 24 years old with demographical characteristics very different than the community college population (Martin et al., 2014). The challenge of generalizing Tinto’s (1975) and Astin’s (1984) models is that they do not take into account how non-traditional students’ background affect their perception of education and their level of engagement (Braxton, 2004; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Rendón (1994) stated that non-traditional and low-income students might have had negative experiences with education before college, and by providing a positive and affirmative environment, students develop confidence in themselves as learners. Rendón’s (1994) validation theory places the responsibility of students’ engagement and persistence on the institution rather than on the students’ deficiencies as previous researchers concluded.

While most of the community college students’ experiences are curricular or classroom-based due to their multiple responsibilities that limit their ability to get involved in out of the classroom activities (Barnett, 2011), the literature on student persistence also suggests that students who get involved in out-of-the-classroom activities
that are aligned with the institution’s learning objectives are most likely to persist and be successful (Astin, 1984; Dewey, 1997, 2009; Kuh, 1991, 2001, 2008; Tinto, 1987, 1993). While extracurriculars are those out-of-the-classroom activities not connected with the curriculum (Suskie, 2015), out-of-the-classroom activities that help students learn, grow and develop academically and interpersonally are known as cocurricular activities (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Waryas, 2015). Many activities labeled as cocurricular are recognized for helping students develop cognitive and relational skills that are commonly promoted as learning outcomes by higher education institutions and are skills that employers demand (Academic Innovations, 2000; Heart Research Associates, 2013; Kuh, 2008; NACE, 2011).

Several researchers have explored the effect of cocurricular involvement with positive results based on large scale surveys provided to students at different colleges across the United States (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Soria, Werner, Chandiramani, Day, & Asmundson, 2018; Vos et al., 2018; Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). However, there is serious doubt that these types of large scale studies can assess the effect of cocurricular involvement among community college students as these tools do not allow students to reflect on how the cocurricular involvement helped them grow and develop academically (Bowman, 2011, 2013).

Based on the low retention and graduation rates among community college students (AACC, 2015; Barbatis, 2010; Bueschel, 2009; Hawley & Harris, 2016; NCES, 2019a), the specific needs of non-traditional students who attend community college (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rojas & Liou, 2017; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994), and the body of literature highlighting the positive effect of cocurricular
involvement (Barbatis, 2010; Barnett, 2011; Bowman, 2011, 2013; Dewey, 1997; Fried, 2012, 2013; Keeling, 2006; McClenney et al., 2012; Townsend & Twombly, 2007), the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore community college graduates’ perception of their cocurricular involvement and its effect on their academic success and career skill development. In order to gain better insights about practices that promote community college students’ success and career skill development, a review of relevant studies was conducted in the following areas: (a) cocurricular involvement and academic success, (b) cocurricular involvement and career skill development, and (c) the lessons learned from holistic student support programs in community colleges.

**Cocurricular Involvement and Academic Success**

While scholars suggest that community college students’ persistence and success depends on their motivations (Fong et al., 2017; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Liao et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014), ability to balance competing priorities (Dudley et al., 2015; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Martin et al., 2014; Peterson, 2016), ability to self-regulate their learning (Fong et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2014) and their ability to enroll full-time (Nakajima et al., 2012), many other scholars suggest that actively engaging college students in cocurricular activities is what contributes to students’ persistence (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 1991; Tinto, 1987), and better academic performance (Heart Research Associates, 2013; Kuh, 2008; McClenney et al., 2012; NACE, 2011). Similarly, Rendón's (1994) seminal study, from which validation theory stems, supports the early and consistent engagement of community college students through curricular and cocurricular activities, and places the responsibilities of students’ involvement and persistence on academic institutions.
Although the low graduation rate among community colleges around the United States persists, a limited number of studies have explored the effect of cocurricular involvement on community college students’ academic performance as a way to provide potential alternatives to address the current graduation challenges. Using the data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), Price and Tovar (2014) conducted a quantitative study to explore the statistical relationship between student engagement and graduation rates. The researchers used data from 261 public community colleges, which accounted for 162,394 students who completed the CCSSE in 2007, and the 2009 reported graduation rates via the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). After running a bivariate correlation between the CCSSE responses and the IPEDS graduation rates, the findings indicated that there was a positive correlation between student engagement and high graduation rates, especially in the areas of active and collaborative learning and support for learners. The findings also suggested that “students who attend community colleges that provide a supportive environment through academic advising; non-academic supports, and financial supports are more engaged and more engagement around the support for learners’ benchmark is predictive of higher institutional graduation rates” (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 779).

Most of the recent studies on community college have focused on factors that contribute to student readiness for higher education (Fong et al., 2017; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Liao et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Peterson, 2016) rather than exploring how cocurricular involvement impact students’ academic performance. However, the current literature regarding the effect of cocurricular involvement on academic performance derives from studies on 4-year institutions. For example, Zacherman and Foubert (2014)
conducted a quantitative study to assess the impact of time spent in cocurricular activities on academic performance and whether the effects differed between women and men. A 20% random sample was selected from the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which represented 51,874 students from different 4-year institutions in the United States. After using a factorial analysis variance to assess the relationship between variables, Zacherman and Foubert concluded that cocurricular activities are beneficial for men’s and women’s academic performance. The researcher also noted that participation exceeding 11 hours per week, either had no effect or a negative one on the students’ academic performance.

In a comparable quantitative study, Webber et al. (2013) evaluated if participation in cocurricular activities contributed to students’ academic success. The researchers assessed 1,269 responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) completed by students at a 4-year college in the mid-Atlantic region in April, 2008. After performing a principle component analysis (PCA), the findings indicated that students who engage in academic and social activities while in college earned higher grades and reported a higher level of satisfaction with the college experience. The findings also suggested that students who engaged in cocurricular activities such as undergraduate research, service-learning, and other creative activities while in college usually “have deep and meaningful conversations with faculty and peers, learn to work well with others, and generally get more excited about their college activities” (Webber et al., 2013, p. 15).

In another similar study by Bergen-Cico and Viscomi (2012), the researchers examined two cohorts of over 3,000 students’ engagement in cocurricular activities and
the relation between their engagement to academic achievement. The results indicated that there was a positive association between attendance at cocurricular campus events and having a good grade point average (GPA). Bergen-Cico and Viscomi tracked two cohorts of students for eight semesters at a large 4-year private university in the Northeast by having students check in at all cocurricular activities at the campus. After using non-parametric statistical procedures, Bergen-Cico and Viscomi (2012) suggested that the study should be replicated to assess the validity, and further studies should assess other factors such as students’ major, course load, and race/ethnicity to determine if they play a role in the positive relationship between campus engagement and GPA.

As the quantitative studies conducted by Bergen-Cico and Viscomi (2012), Webber et al. (2013), and Zacherman and Foubert (2014) serve as evidence of the positive effect of cocurricular involvement and student’s academic success, Vega’s (2016) qualitative phenomenological study also supported those findings. Vega (2016) evaluated the high school to college transition of 10 high achieving Hispanic students. Based on Rendón’s (1994) validation theory, Vega (2016) interviewed eight females and two males attending a Hispanic serving institution in the Southwest. The major findings suggested that the factors that influence students’ persistence are: “(a) academic rigor, (b) support networks, (c) internal motivation, and (d) responsibility as a first-generation college student” (Vega, 2016, p. 312). Based on students’ responses, the researcher noted that in addition to in the classroom validation, student validation also takes place through cocurricular activities and through the relationship with academic advisors as they can support students’ career exploration and college transition while reaffirming the student’s ability to be successful.
The current literature emphasizing the positive effects of cocurricular involvement derives from studies conducted in 4-year institutions (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Webber et al., 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014), while other findings indicated that cocurricular activities contribute to college students’ validation as learners (Vega, 2012). Even though studies regarding the effect of cocurricular involvement on academic performance for community college students remain limited, Price and Tovar (2014) concluded that there was a positive relationship between community college student engagement and graduation rates.

**Cocurricular Involvement and Career Skill Development**

Many activities labeled as cocurricular are recognized for helping students develop cognitive and relational skills that are commonly promoted as learning outcomes by higher education institutions and are skills that employers demand (Academic Innovations, 2000; Heart Research Associates, 2013; Kuh, 2008; NACE, 2011). In addition, cocurricular activities have a positive effect on the development of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and practical competencies that are essential for a well-rounded professional (Nunamaker, Walker, & Burton, 2017; Peck & Preston, 2018).

Kuh (2001) noted that some of the skills developed through cocurricular involvement were problem-solving, teamwork, intrapersonal development, interpersonal competence, leadership, and ethics. The skills identified by Kuh (2001) were very similar to the competencies identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employeand private sector leaders as essential for recent graduates’ ability to obtain and sustain a job (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Massaro, 2019; Peck & Preston, 2018). NACE highlighted the following competencies as associated with career readiness: critical thinking/problem
solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency (Massaro, 2019; Nunamaker et al., 2017). Unfortunately, scholars continue to report that public sector leaders and employers are dissatisfied with the limited career skills displayed by recent graduates (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Massaro, 2019; Nunamaker et al., 2017; Peck & Preston, 2018; Tulgan, 2015).

Recent studies on student engagement and retention, have provided evidence of how cocurricular involvement helps students develop career competencies that align with the ones identified by NACE (2015) and Kuh (2001). For example, Soria et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study to assess the extent to which different cocurricular activities contribute to the development of leadership and multicultural competence among students. The researchers analyzed survey data from seven large public universities in North America. The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey was conducted during spring 2015, and 8,824 responses were analyzed for the purpose of this study. The findings indicated that students who engaged in administrative and social cocurricular activities usually reported leadership development in comparison to peers. The findings also suggested that students’ academic momentum was a positive indicator of students’ leadership development, while students who lived on campus reported lower leadership development in comparison to peers. The researchers suggested that further studies should be qualitative or mixed methods to be able to answer more complex questions such as “How can we increase the overall effectiveness of cocurricular activities on students’ development? How can we ensure more students
receive opportunities to participate in cocurricular activities? Are some students more likely to benefit from cocurricular participation than others?” (Soria et al., 2018, p. 218).

In a similar study, Carter, Ro, Alcott, and Lattuca (2015) examined the effect of undergraduate research in engineering students concerning their development of communication, teamwork, and leadership skills. The researchers surveyed 5,126 students across 31 private and public colleges. After completing an axis factor analysis, the findings indicated that engineering students who participated in undergraduate research reported a significant gain in communication, teamwork, and leadership skills compared to students with similar characteristics, but who did not participate in undergraduate research. A limitation of this study was the self-reporting nature of the survey, and the researchers shared that the best way to assess student’s learning is through a standardized objective test. The researchers believe that the results of this study may help engineering faculty and student affairs practitioners in developing methods to promote transferable skill development.

Benjamin and Boettcher (2017) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to determine what members of a residential peer judicial board learned as a result of their board membership. The researchers interviewed 14 out of the 22 members of the residential peer judicial board, where most of the participants were women. Participants indicated that the experiences at the residential peer judicial board enhanced their learning related to community living and their general understanding of their community. The participants also indicated a gain of communication, critical thinking, and social skills. In addition, participants reported being more self-aware of their behaviors in the residence hall as a result of their participation as judicial board members.
The quantitative studies conducted by Benjamin and Boettcher (2017), Carter et al. (2015), Soria et al. (2018), and Webber et al. (2013) suggested that cocurricular involvement has a positive effect on the development of career skills similar to the ones highlighted by Kuh (2001) and NACE (2015). Benjamin and Boettcher (2017), Webber et al. (2013), and Carter et al. (2015) indicated that students who engaged in cocurricular activities demonstrated higher levels of communication and teamwork skills. While Webber et al. (2013) believed cocurricular participation also improved the students’ perception of themselves and the college experience, Carter et al. (2015) and Soria et al. (2018) also suggested that students who participate in cocurricular activities tended to develop leadership abilities.

**Holistic Student Success Programs**

The current literature on community college persistence and success focuses either on skills and attitudes that successful students had before attending community college (Fong et al., 2017; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Liao et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Nakajima et al., 2012; Peterson, 2016), or how promoting engagement through cocurricular activities promote positive outcomes on students’ academic performance (Price & Tovar, 2014; Webber et al., 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014), and career skill development (Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017; Carter et al. 2016; Soria et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2013). In a quantitative study by Hawley and Harris (2016), the findings identified factors that predict students’ retention during their first year of study. The researcher used the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) freshmen survey as the assessment tool during the fall 2000 freshmen orientation at Prince George’s Community College, located in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. The participants were 362
freshmen who returned the surveys at the end of the orientation, and some others returned it through the mail. The findings indicated that one of the highest predictors of dropout was the number of developmental courses students were required to take. The findings also indicated that community colleges might tend to lose students who (a) were not sure about their academic goals, (b) were not able to engage with the campus community due to personal commitments outside the institution, (c) those who took some time off after completing their high school, and (d) those who had trouble financing their education. The researchers recommended that community colleges should encourage students to engage with the campus community in all possible ways.

As community college students face multiple challenges and competing priorities, “the challenge for community colleges is identifying and enacting policies and practices around academic and non-academic support services that are proactive rather than waiting for students to seek them” (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 779). Another study that provided concrete ways in which colleges can engage non-traditional community college students is the one conducted by Bell et al. (2016). These researchers assessed students’ campus involvement and their perceptions of the campus’s environment and services. The study was conducted at San Bernardino Valley Community College, located in San Bernardino, California, one of the poorest urban cities in the United States. A survey called the Campus Climate Survey was administered in 2011, and 645 students responded. The findings indicated that, especially for low-income students, they get involved when the activities are catered to specific needs, culture, or goals. The findings also showed that when students understood the concrete outcomes related to cocurricular involvement, they were more inclined to participate. Besides, participants indicated that
interactions with office workers and the physical appearance of the campus were important to them. The researchers recommended future studies to employ longitudinal and mixed methodological approaches to gain insights into the effect of social climate and a student's educational fulfillment.

The current literature on community college persistence and cocurricular involvement is consistent with the findings provided by studies conducted by Bell et al. (2016) and Hawley and Harris (2016), and in addition suggested that students who enrolled in structured programs while in community college were more likely to attain their associate degrees (Jenkins & Cho, 2011). The body of literature regarding community college retention and success has provided a roadmap for new programs to develop strategies that address the needs of non-traditional students such as regular advisor-student engagement, career planning, and innovative ways to support students financially (Price & Tovar, 2014). The following studies focused on the effect of programs within community colleges that are proactive at addressing the social-emotional validation, career skill development, and financial and academic support as highlighted by the current literature as critical for student persistence and success.

Kolenovic et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study to assess the effect of participating in the City University of New York’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs in the retention and graduation of community college students. ASAP was created in 2007 as an initiative to address the historical low graduation rate of community college in CUNY. ASAP’s goal was to help students complete their associate degrees by providing students with frequent academic advisement, social integration, and financial support. Kolenovic et al. (2013) analyzed historical data of the first group of students
enrolled in ASAP in 2007, which included 1,132 students from six different community colleges. The first group of ASAP students were majority female (54%), and the majority were Hispanic (37%) and Black (32%). In addition, the majority of the ASAP students from the sample selected were first-time freshmen and were from low-income families. In order to conduct the analysis, the researcher also identified a comparable group of 1,791 students that shared similar demographics, preparation, and high school scores as ASAP’s first group of students. The finding indicated that after 2 years, 30% of ASAP students had completed their associate degrees versus the 11% of the comparison group. The finding also showed that after the 3 years, 55% of ASAP students had earned their associate degrees as compared to 25% of the comparison group. The findings also suggested that one of the critical factors of success for ASAP students was the frequency in which they engaged in one-on-one advisement. The researcher recommended that community colleges may improve retention and graduation by providing students with personalized and frequent guidance and advisement.

Due to ASAP success, other states have replicated the program with similar outcomes. To illustrate, Sommo et al (2018) conducted a program evaluation of the CUNY ASAP replication efforts at three different community colleges in Ohio. The Ohio ASAP replication effort was launched in 2014, and the three community colleges started with the program in 2015. The program offered similar structure and benefits to nontraditional students with the aims of increasing retention and graduation rates of community college students. Students were given comprehensive one-on-one advisement, career development services, priority registration, as well as academic and financial support. The participants were 806 students enrolled in the program and 695 students
who were not part of the program but who met similar demographics and preparation as the sample group. The findings indicated that after 3 years, 35% of the students in the program earned their associate degrees, compared to 19% in the control group. The students in the program had better retention, credit accumulation, and graduation rates than the control group. Besides, 63% of the students in the program reported engaging in tutoring, compared to 45% of the control group. Similarly, students in the program had a 34% point higher participation rate for career counseling than the control group. The researchers believed that these findings serve as evidence that the ASAP model can work with the different student populations and in different geographical regions. The researchers planned to continue the assessment of this group of students and provide a report with the effect of the program after 3 years.

In a similar study, Watson and Chen (2019) assessed the effect of the New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program on community college students’ retention, which is a comparable program to ASAP. The New Jersey EOF program was created in 1968 to promote access and success for first-generation, low-income, and minority students. The New Jersey EOF program provides programmatic and financial support to its students as a means to help them stay focused on completing their associate degrees. The researcher analyzed historical data of five different cohorts of students who joined the program from 2008 through 2013. The total number of students in the sample was 7,105, and their demographic characteristics were as follows: 31.5% Hispanic, 28.7% White, 12% Asian, 15.4% Black, and 12.4% were identified as others. The researchers also identified a comparison group of 6,535 students with similar characteristics as the sample group, but were not selected for the program. The finding indicated that students
in the New Jersey EOF consistently had better retention rates during their first semester than students in the control group. The results also suggested that there was no significant difference in performance, separating the sample group in gender and race. The researchers recommended further studies of community college support programs designed to improve retention. They also recommended further studies of a larger cohort of the New Jersey EOF students to assess the difference in performance by different subgroups.

Kolenovic et al. (2013), Watson and Chen (2019), and Sommo et al. (2018), agreed that community college students who participated in student support service programs that provide academic, social-emotional, and financial support tended to persist and graduate at a higher rate than their peers who do not participate in these types of programs.

**Chapter Summary**

While community colleges are preparing near half of the baccalaureate degree recipients in the United States (AACC, 2015), the 3-year graduation rate for public community colleges remains at the unsatisfactory rate of 32% (NCES, 2019a). Scholars and researchers, in the attempt to find solutions to the retention and graduation problem, have conducted studies suggesting that community college students’ success depends on their motivations (Fong et al., 2017; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Liao et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014), ability to balance competing priorities (Hawley & Harris, 2016; Martin et al., 2014; Peterson, 2016), ability to self-regulate their learning (Fong et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2014), and their ability to enroll full-time (Nakajima et al., 2012). While these researchers place the responsibility of community college students ‘success on the
students, other researchers have proposed more proactive approaches that place the retention and success responsibility back on the institutions through the development and implementation of engagement strategies (Coronella, 2018; Kuh, 2012; Kuh et al., 1991; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Rojas & Liou, 2017).

Researchers who have conducted studies on proactive approaches of community college students’ persistence such as cocurricular engagement believe that when institutions prioritize cocurricular involvement, students tend to have better academic performance (Price & Tovar, 2014), increase their opportunity of developing soft-skills (Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Soria et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2013) and cultivate the desire of getting involved in campus activities (Bell et al., 2016; Garcia & Cuellar, 2018; McElroy & Cobb, 2010). While some researchers place the retention and graduation challenges of community college on student’s deficiencies and others on the community colleges’ inability to engage them, researchers who have conducted studies on student support service’ programs believe that the responsibility relies on both the students and the institutions (Acevedo-Gil & Zerquera, 2016; Lopez, 2016; Tovar, 2015; Watson & Chen, 2019). These researchers believed that when community college students are presented with the choice and opportunity to participate in student support service programs that integrate academic, social-emotional, and financial support, students outperform their peers at a higher rate (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Price & Tovar, 2014; Sommo & Ratledge, 2016; Watson & Chen, 2019).

The literature review of community colleges, cocurricular involvement, and student support service programs indicate that there is a need for further studies to gain a better understanding of factors that contribute to community college students’ success.
(Fong et al., 2017; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013; Martin et al., 2014; Peterson, 2016), and the effect of cocurricular engagement on students’ (a) academic performance (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Coker, Heiser, Taylor, & Book, 2017; Wilson et al., 2014; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014), and (b) career skill development (Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Soria et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2013). In addition, the literature review on holistic student success programs, reporting on positive outcomes on students’ retention and graduation is still limited, and the few available studies are only quantitative (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Sommo et al., 2018; Watson & Chen, 2019). Researchers consistently recommend qualitative studies as a method to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of community college students (Bell et al., 2016; Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017; Bowman, 2013; Martin et al., 2014; Nakajima et al., 2012; Peterson, 2016; Soria et al., 2018). Therefore, this study attempted to fill a gap in the current literature by conducting qualitative phenomenological research that explored community college graduates’ perceptions of their cocurricular and student support services program participation, and its effect on their academic success and career skill development.

Chapter 3 presents the research design methodology using the phenomenological approach, as described by Nkwi, Nyamongo, and Ryan (2001) and Moustakas (1994). Rendòn-Linares’ (1991) validation theory was used to develop the research questions.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore community college graduates’ perceptions of their cocurricular involvement and its effect on their academic success and career skill development as a result of their participation in the City University of New York’s Accelerated Studies in Associate Programs. Although researchers have recommended involving students in cocurricular activities to improve the retention and success studies assessing the effect of cocurricular involvement among community college students remain limited (Dewey, 1997; Fried, 2012, 2013; Keeling, 2006; Kuh, 1991, 2001, 2008; Miettinen, 2000).

As community colleges attract first-generation and non-traditional students (Bailey & Belfield, 2019; Barbatis, 2010; Martin et al., 2014; Nakajima et al., 2012), Rendón-Linares (1994) believed non-traditional students should be validated as learners in order to keep them engaged. Prior to college, many of the experiences for nontraditional students may not have been positive, and validation may offer these students the confidence and social integration to succeed (Baber, 2018; Barnett, 2011; Rendón-Linares, 1994; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011). As ASAP provided community college students with social-emotional, career development, financial support, and social integration through the participation in required cocurricular activities (Davidson, 2017; Kirp, 2019; Strumbos et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2019), graduates from this program could
provide a unique opportunity to understand better factors related to cocurricular involvement that contribute to students’ academic success and career skill development.

ASAP was created in 2007 as a response to the low college graduation rates in the United States to increase graduation rates of community colleges by 50% in 2 to 3 years (Davidson, 2017). ASAP focuses on removing barriers to degree completion by providing full-time community college students with student affairs-like services and programming (Kolenovic et al., 2013). Besides the required participation in cocurricular activities catered to enhance students’ experience and development, ASAP’s benefits include “comprehensive advisement, consolidated scheduling, cohort-course taking, career and employment services, tutoring, summer, and winter course-taking” as well as tuition waivers, MetroCards and free use of textbooks (Strumbos et al., 2018, p. 101).

Due to ASAP’s success in helping students to complete their associate’s degrees, President Barack Obama recognized ASAP’s model as one of the models to be followed as part of the Free Community College proposal (White House, 2015).

In addition to the low graduation rates in the United States, Arum and Roksa (2011) stated that colleges are not preparing students with the skills expected by employers nor for the jobs currently available at the job market. Employers expect new hires have developed career skills such as critical thinking, oral communication, and problem-solving (Nunamaker et al., 2017; Tulgan, 2015). Participation in cocurricular activities while in college can provide these skills (Fried, 2013; Hersh & Keeling, 2013). Researchers agree that students who engage in college cocurricular activities tend to be successful (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1991; Tinto, 1987). However, there are not enough empirical studies that demonstrate a relationship between cocurricular involvement and
students’ learning and development (Bowman, 2013). The United States’ policymakers and employers are confronting the reality that out of the small number of students who graduate from college, many of them do not have the necessary skills for the jobs currently available (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Nunamaker et al., 2017; Tulgan, 2015).

Community colleges have the challenge and opportunity to help students develop the expected skills by employers as these institutions serve about half of all students who ever graduate with a bachelor’s degree (Mullin, 2012) and have the relations with local industries to provide students with hands-on experience (Grundmann, 2013). ASAP equally offers a unique research opportunity. Besides providing social-emotional and financial support to community college’s students, ASAP requires students to engage in cocurricular activities with the goal of getting students prepared for the labor market or transfer.

This study focused on factors related to cocurricular involvement perceived by ASAP graduates that contributed to their academic success and graduation at one of seven community colleges of the City University of New York.

The following are the research questions that guided this study:

1. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success?

2. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its relation to their career skill development?

3. What role, if any, did ASAP’s curricular and cocurricular requirements contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners?
4. To what extent did factors such as academic advisement, social integration, support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP graduates to persist?

A qualitative phenomenological research method was used for this study to gain insight related to the lived experiences of ASAP graduates. According to Nkwi, Nyamongo, and Ryan (2001), qualitative studies are referred to as those that collect data that do not have ordinary values. In other words, “rather than numbers, the data are the words that describe people’s knowledge, opinions, perceptions and feelings as well as a detailed description of people’s actions, behaviors, activities, and interpersonal interactions” (Roberts, 2014, p. 143). Bowman (2013) indicated that the majority of studies assessing students’ cocurricular involvement have been quantitative and quantitative studies are not a good measure to assess soft skill development. As ASAP’s evidence of success is based on quantitative program evaluations, this study explored ASAP students’ perceptions of their experiences related to their cocurricular involvement to get a better understanding of how former ASAP students believe cocurricular development supported their academic and career goals.

A qualitative phenomenological research method is traditionally used when trying to get an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of people who have gone through a similar experience or phenomenon (Meriam, 2009). While conducting a phenomenological study, researchers collect data from individuals who have lived similar experiences and develop a composite description capturing the essence of the experience lived by people who have gone through a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). For the
purpose of this study, the phenomenon studied was the ASAP cocurricular experiences through the lens of students who have graduated from the program.

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological transcendental approach, which, according to Husserl (1970), requires the researchers conducting the study to suspend their beliefs through a process referred to as bracketing. Due to the researcher’s positionality as former Director of ASAP at the college where the study was conducted, it was important for the researcher to use bracketing to ensure that previous knowledge and beliefs about the program and its practices did not taint the data collection and analysis. Van Manen (1990) stated that phenomenological studies tend to have a transformative effect on the researcher as the “research is often itself a form of deep learning, leading to the transformation of consciousness, heightened perspectiveness, increase thoughtfulness” (p. 163). This study, instead of reviewing retention and graduation statistics collected by ASAP, provided marginalized urban community college students with the voice to express their lived experiences that influenced their behaviors toward completing their associate degrees, as well as gaining an understanding if their participation in cocurricular activities supported their career skill development.

Research Context

The study was conducted in one of the seven public community colleges of the City University of New York, where ASAP provides services to students and where the researcher was granted consent by the Office of Academic Affairs (See Appendix A). The community college is located in the borough of Queens and based on the college’s website, the college’s enrollment is between 15,000 and 20,000 students per semester, where 58% are reported to be female and 42% male. The college where the research was
conducted reports providing services to the following ethnicities: 48% Hispanic, 22% Asian, 17% Black, 11% White, and 2% other. The ASAP program provides services and support to about 25,000 students across nine different campuses of the City University of New York urban system (Smith, 2019). While the research site provides services to 19,000 degree seekers, the ASAP program where the study was conducted provides support to over 3,600 students with a similar representation of the college’s demographics. According to the CUNY Office of Institutional Research, the 3-year graduation rate at the research site is 22%, while ASAP’s 3-year graduation has consistently been over 50% since the program’s inception in 2007. In addition, ASAP, at the research site, reported a 64% graduation rate at the end of the summer of 2018, which is beyond the 50% stated by the ASAP’s goals.

**Research Participants**

Creswell (2013) recommends that participants be carefully selected when conducting a qualitative study to ensure they have experienced the phenomenon. Qualitative phenomenological studies also purposefully select participants who have lived the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A purposeful sample technique was used to ensure that the participants selected for this study met the following criteria: have participated and graduated from the ASAP program between fall 2018 and spring 2019 at the community college selected for the study, and had a 3.0 GPA or better.

After receiving site consent (Appendix A) and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from St. John Fisher College, the research site provided the requested data that included 929 ASAP graduates between fall 2018 and spring 2019. From the graduates,
548 (59%) students were determined as potential participants based on having a 3.0 GPA or better. An introductory e-mail (Appendix B) with the informed consent (Appendix C) and a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix D) were sent to the potential participants through Qualtrics. Basic demographic information was collected through the pre-interview questionnaire. Out of the potential participants, 93 (17%), completed the pre-interview questionnaire, and 76 (82%), of the responders indicated that they would be interested in participating in an in-depth interview. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 highlight demographics.

Table 3.1

*All Questionnaire Responders’ (N=93) Demographic Information – Part 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>54.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Pacific Islander</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic-Puerto Rican</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic-Other</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status While Pursuing Associate Degree:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>78.26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2

*All Questionnaire Responders’ Demographic Information – part 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parenting while Pursing Associate Degree:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>83.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Status While Pursing Associate Degree:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed for wages</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Employed</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of work and looking for work</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of work but not looking for work</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A homemaker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-Generation College Student:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>49.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Confirmation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2019</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>70.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household Income While Pursuing Associate Degree:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20,000</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>62.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 to $39,999</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 to $49,999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 to $64,999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$65,000 to $84,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$85,000 to $99,999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Occupation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed and attending school</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending school and not working</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of work and looking for work</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of work but not currently looking for work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N=93.*
From the 76 students who indicated interest in participating in an in-depth interview, 12 participants were randomly selected through a free online tool called research randomizer. Creswell and Creswell (2018), as well as Boyd (2001), recommend recruiting a sample size of three to 10 participants when studying a phenomenon as they believe researchers will gain enough insights from participant to reach saturation—"when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties" (p. 186).

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The goal of the study was to explore the lived experiences of community college graduates who have actively participated in cocurricular activities as part of the ASAP program. The researcher was interested in understanding the factors that the graduates considered as important for their graduation. The primary instrument of data collection for this qualitative phenomenological study was an in-depth one-on-one video interview of ASAP graduates from fall 2018 and spring 2019.

**Pre-interview questionnaire.** The first instrument used by the researcher was a pre-interview questionnaire to collect demographic information of the potential participants. The demographic information collected was only used for qualitative descriptive analysis, and no statistical analysis was performed. The demographic information was used to put the participants’ responses in context with the research findings. The demographic data was presented in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2 and was used to contrast the potential participants’ pool with the 12 interviewees in Chapter 4. Participants were given a 2-week window to respond to the survey to ensure the identification of a large enough sample for the study.
Interviews. The primary instrument for data collection were open-ended questions developed for the face-to-face or video conference semi-structured in-depth interviews, which helped to construct knowledge through interaction of researcher and participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with the flexibility to deviate from the interview questions by asking participants additional clarifying questions about statements made during the interview (Moustakas, 1994). Brickmann and Kvale (2015) suggested that semi-structured interviews are advantageous when the phenomenon being studied cannot directly be observed. Bentz and Shapiro (1998) stated that researchers need to allow the data to emerge while conducting the interviews.

As the perceptions of cocurricular involvement experienced by ASAP students were not known prior to this study, semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the perceived effect by ASAP graduates. The interviews were recorded through a video conference platform, and a third party transcribed the audios. The interview questions were reviewed by higher education administrators and the Director of Institutional Research at the research site. Additionally, the researcher field-tested the interview questions with three former ASAP graduates who were not part of the potential participant pool. The three students worked at the research site, and the field test helped the researcher to assess if the wording of the questions was appropriate and to estimate the necessary time for the actual interviews. The interviews were conducted between May and June, 2020.
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher received a list of all ASAP graduates from fall 2018 and spring 2019 from the Institutional Research Office at the research site. The rationale for using only graduates from the two semesters mentioned previously was to get responses from former ASAP students who have graduated and have had some separation from the program in order to have them reflect on the engagement practices that were more significant for their academic success and career skill development. Once the access to list of potential participants was granted, an introductory e-mail was sent through Qualtrics (See Appendix B), inviting ASAP graduates to participate in the study, and to complete the pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix D).

From the responders who met the criteria, 12 ASAP graduates were randomly selected for a semi-structured in-depth interview. Before conducting the interview, the researcher asked the Director of Institutional Research at the research site to review the research and interview questions for validity as well as to ensure the research and interview questions align (See Appendix E). Two additional higher education administrators reviewed the interview questions and provided feedback. The actual interviews were conducted through a video conference tool due to the public health crisis created by COVID-19. According to Easton, McComish, and Greenberg (2000), the interview setting should provide the researcher and participants an environment free of interruption and background noise. As all interviews were conducted through video conference, participants were recommended to select a time and location for the interview where they felt comfortable and were not going to be interrupted prior to the interviews. Interview sessions spanned from 25 minutes to 50 minutes in duration.
Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher verified that all electronic informed consent forms were signed. Saunders, Kitzinger, and Kitzinger (2014) emphasized the challenges of maintaining confidentiality when gathering data from a small and specific group of people. As there were over 929 graduates within the timeframe indicated for this study, the interviewees cannot be identified based on the participant’s individual descriptions provided in Chapter 4.

Creswell (2014) also suggests that it is essential for the researcher to keep data and personal information collected during the interview process safe. Privacy and safeguarding the research data are part of the ethical concerns researchers need to pay close attention to while conducting a study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). To ensure participants’ confidentiality, unique identifiers were created to protect the identities of the participants of this study. The data will be stored in a password-protected external hard drive for 3 years as required by St. John Fisher College, and after 3 years, the data will be destroyed by resetting the external hard drive (Petrova, Dewing, & Camilleri, 2014).

In qualitative research, data analysis is considered the most challenging and essential step of the research process. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to data analysis as "systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships" (p. 9). Due to its complexity and density, qualitative data analysis requires researchers to focus on aspects of the data while disregarding some of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the data analysis process recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) that suggests the researcher get the data ready for analysis, read or listen to the recorded interviews several times, organize the data in categories, identify emerging themes from categories, and describe the themes that emerged from the
data. After transcribing the data, the researcher listened to the interviews multiple times to get familiarity with the words and information provided by participants in order to develop a comprehensive sense of what participants experienced through the phenomenon (Holloway, 1997; Hycner, 1999).

Coding refers to the data analysis process that organizes data into categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, the researcher used a combination of a priori, in vivo, and descriptive coding techniques, and these codes were written at the margin of the transcribed interviews. Saldaña (2016) refers to a priori codes as those codes identified before conducting interviews and in vivo as "literal coding or verbatim coding" (p. 105). Due to the researcher's familiarity with the program and higher education practices, some codes were developed prior to the interview, and some others were created using the exact words from participants to capture their lived experiences. Additionally, the researcher used descriptive codes to "summarize in a word or short phrase" main ideas of what was described during the interviews (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102).

The data collected through the interview was reviewed, coded, and categorized in order for the themes to emerge. Inductive and deductive methods were used to develop the themes. The themes were sorted based on frequency. MAXQDA 2020 was used to develop codes, categories, and themes as well as the generation of charts and tables based on frequency. While using the codes in the margin of the transcripts, the researcher developed the categories and themes. Themes are formed by grouping codes that are similar in meaning with an umbrella term (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). While using umbrella terms, central themes were determined which, according to Hycner (1999), represent the essence of what participants described through the interview.
process. As recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the last stage of the data analysis encompassed describing the themes in "narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis" (p. 195). To illustrate the themes from the data, passages from the interview transcripts were used as part of the description.

To ensure validity, the researcher performed member checking when necessary to ensure the transcribed interviews were a true representation of participants’ feelings and experiences. Validity is the process in which the researcher ensures the credibility of the research findings (Neuman, 2013). Member checking is referred to as the confirmation of the accurate interpretation of the data by asking participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To increase the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher employed triangulation by examining different sources of data collected through the interview transcripts, audio recordings, and memoing. Triangulation refers to the process of validating data from different types of sources (Creswell, 2014). As a measure to ensure validity, the researcher also gave the codes, categories, and themes to a qualitative research expert to confirm their validity.

**Chapter Summary**

Although researchers recommend engaging students in cocurricular activities to increase college retention and graduation rates (Dewey, 1997; Fried, 2012, 2013; Keeling, 2006; Kuh, 1991, 2001, 2008; Miettinen, 2000), and despite the continuous low graduation challenges facing community colleges (AACC, 2015; Barnett, 2011; Martin et al., 2014), studies regarding the effect of community college students involvement in cocurricular activities are limited. It was the goal of the study to understand what factors support academic success and career skill development of students who, despite the low
graduation of community colleges, successfully complete their degrees. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to explore how cocurricular involvement was perceived to contribute to the academic success of community college graduates. Data from in-depth interviews were analyzed and described in Chapter 4. The goal of this study is to offer insights on how to improve the retention and graduation of community college students.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

As community college graduation rates have remained discouragingly low with only 32% of students graduating within 3 years (NCES, 2019a), scholars have suggested that students’ retention and graduation rates can be improved by having students engage in cocurricular activities (Dewey, 1997; Fried, 2012, 2013; Keeling, 2006; Kuh, 1991, 2001, 2008; Miettinen, 2000). Unfortunately, the studies exploring the effect of cocurricular involvement among community college students continue to be limited. In contrast, the literature on community college students’ retention and success states that when community college students are presented with the choice and opportunity to participate in student support service programs that integrate academic, social-emotional, and financial support, students outperform their peers at a higher rate (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Price & Tovar, 2014; Sommo & Ratledge, 2016; Watson & Chen, 2019). This study sought to explore community college graduates’ perceptions of their cocurricular involvement as it related to their academic success and career skill development. The research focused on the perceived relation between cocurricular involvement and factors that contributed to students’ success by community college graduates. Some of the factors included career readiness, personal development, structured environment, advisor mentorship, appreciative institutional practices, financial support, and social and academic integration.
This study used feedback from 12 urban community college alumni who participated in the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs at one of the seven community colleges of the City University of New York. ASAP was created in 2007 to address the low graduation challenges faced by CUNY. ASAP provides students with social, emotional, and financial support, as well as social integration with the goal of graduating a minimum of 50% of its cohorts in 2 to 3 years (Kirp, 2019; Strumbos et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2019). Participants of this study graduated with a 3.0 GPA or better between fall 2018 and spring 2019. The community college used as the research site serves between 15,000 to 20,000 students from the following ethnic backgrounds: 48% Hispanic, 22% Asian, 17% Black, 11% White, and 2% other. This study employed a phenomenological, qualitative research method to understand the lived experiences of community college graduates who participated in cocurricular activities while in CUNY’s ASAP. The primary tool of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one video conference interviews. A pre-interview questionnaire was used to identify interested participants and collect demographical information. The demographic information collected was only used for qualitative descriptive analysis, and no statistical analysis was performed.

The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the factors regarding cocurricular involvement perceived by community college graduates as contributors to their academic success and preparation for their careers. This study aimed to increase the body of literature related to cocurricular factors that contribute to the increase in community college student’ engagement, career skills development, retention, and graduation rates. This study can be used by higher education institutions to create
deliberate cocurricular opportunities and supportive institutional practices that foster the
development of transferable skills that students can use not only for their academic
success, but for their future careers. As participants of this study were provided with a
very structured experience and financial support through the CUNY’s ASAP program,
this study can be used by policymakers in support of educational initiatives and policies
that promote similar experiences for community college students.

Rendón’s (1994) validation theory was used as the framework of the research.
Validation refers to the proactive and intentional affirmation of students’ experiences
inside and outside the classroom (Rendón, 2011). Rendón (1994) argued that many of the
low-income students and first-generation students who attend community college have
not had a positive experience with education before college, and they need to be validated
as learners for them to be successful. For Rendón (1994), “validation is an enabling,
confirming and the supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster
academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44).

The theory of validation has six elements that promote students’ involvement,
development, retention, and persistence: (a) initiating contact with the students, (b)
motivating students’ learning through appreciative practices, (c) validation empowers
students to be confident and to get involved, (d) occurs inside and outside the classroom,
(e) must be seen as a developmental process that may continue over time, and (f) requires
validation as early as the first few weeks of the college experience (Rendón-Linares &
Muñoz, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994). Based on the understanding of validation theory
and the engagement practices employed by the ASAP program, this study focused on
factors that validated ASAP students through the program’s structure and required
cocurricular involvement.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, the research questions and
interview questions are presented. Second, research participants are described. Third, the
qualitative methods employed by the researcher are highlighted. Fourth, the findings
based on the research questions are reported. Last, major findings are summarized.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its
effect on their academic success?

2. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its
relation to their career skill development?

3. What role, if any, did ASAP’s curricular and cocurricular requirements
contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of
graduates as learners?

4. To what extent did factors such as academic advisement, social integration,
support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP
graduates to persist?

The semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one video interviews were the method of
qualitative data collection employed in the study. Each interview was conducted
following the protocol described in the Appendix C. As the literature on community
college students’ involvement in cocurricular activities is limited, the interview questions
associated with the Research Question 1 were developed to gain a deeper understanding
of the graduates’ perceived relation between their cocurricular involvement and their academic success. Due to the embedded support geared towards the career preparation of the ASAP program, the interview questions related to Research Question 2 were devised to gain a better understanding of the effect of cocurricular involvement in developing skills that can be transferable to the job market. The interview questions aligned with Research Questions 3 and 4 were designed to explore what factors from graduates’ lived experiences were the most important for their success, and if ASAP requirements validated them as learners. Table 4.1 presents the interview questions in alignment with the research questions.

The interview questions were open-ended, which allowed for follow up questions, and participants were able to reflect about their unique experiences while pursuing their associate degrees. The questions were peer-reviewed by two higher education administrators and by the director of institutional research at the research site. In addition, the questions were field tested with three graduates of the ASAP program who were not part of the identified population for the study. Through the field test, the researcher was able to get an understanding of how the interview questions were interpreted by former ASAP students. The feedback gathered during the field test helped the researcher make modifications to the interview questions to ensure participants could understand what was being asked.
Table 4.1

*Interview Questions in Alignment with Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success? | 1. Please describe what role the ASAP required activities played in your progress towards graduation?  
2. Please describe how participating in ASAP required activities supported you academically? |
| 2. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its relation to their career skill development? | 3. Please describe what role the ASAP required career activities played in your preparation for your career? Do you feel you gained any skills through these experiences? If so, what kind? If not, why do you think you did not? |
| 3. What role, if any, did ASAP's curricular and cocurricular requirements contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners? | 4. What role did ASAP required activities play in your motivation to graduate? Did you feel connected to the campus through the ASAP required activities? If so, which of the activities helped to develop this sense of connection? If not, why do you think you did not?  
5. Did ASAP's requirements, such as full-time enrollment, tutoring, group advisement, and blocked-courses, help you develop connections with different members of the college community? If so, could you explain how developing a connection was helpful for your college experience? If not, why do you think you did not? |
| 4. To what extend did factors such as academic advisement, social integration, support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP graduates to persist? | 6. What challenges, if any, you had to overcome in order to graduate? If so, what role, if any, ASAP played in helping you navigate these challenges?  
7. Please rank the following factors in order of importance to your graduation, 1 being the most important and 8 being the least important:  
  - Connection and access to your academic advisor  
  - Feeling that you belong to the college community  
  - The support of family and friends  
  - The support of ASAP staff  
  - The support of college's professors  
  - Ability to work with a career advisor through the college experience  
  - Ability to get Financial Aid  
  - Ability to get ASAP financial incentive  
8. Could you explain why you consider your number 1 factor the most important one? |
Research Participants

Twelve graduates of one of the seven CUNY community colleges who completed the ASAP program participated in the study. Each participant was purposefully selected from a pool of 548 graduates from the fall 2018 and spring 2019 with a 3.0 GPA or better. The following tables display demographic information of the participants of this study. Table 4.2 shows the gender classification for each interviewee, and Table 4.3 provides an aggregate of the interviewees’ gender distribution. A total of eight females and four males participated in the in-depth video conference interviews, and they had been given the pseudonym of Participant followed by their assigned number.

Table 4.2

Participants’ Gender Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.3

Participants Gender Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the eligible population of ASAP graduates, 186 (34%) of the students graduated in fall 2018, and 362 (66%) graduated in spring 2019. Table 4.4 displays the semesters when the participants of this study graduated with their associate degrees. Even though the research participants were randomly selected out of the 93 graduates who responded to the pre-interview questionnaire, six (50%) research participants graduated in fall 2018, and the other six (50%) in spring 2019.

Table 4.4

Summary of Participants’ Associate Degree Completion by Semester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester of Graduation</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2018</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2019</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants of this study graduated with a 3.0 GPA or better and attended the same community college as full-time students. To be eligible for ASAP, students need to enroll in college full-time and participate in cocurricular activities on a monthly basis. The description of each interviewee is provided below:

- Participant 1 received her associate’s degree in industrial design in the spring 2019. She identified herself as Black, non-Hispanic, and fell within the 25-34
age group. While pursuing her associate’s degree, Participant 1 was employed for wages and was raising her daughter as a single mother. At the time of her interview, Participant 1 was attending CUNY’s City College pursuing a bachelor’s degree in architecture.

- Participant 2 received his associate’s degree in criminal justice in spring 2019. He identified his race as other, and he fell within the 18-24 age group. While pursuing his associate’s degree, Participant 2 was employed for wages. At the time of the interview, Participant 2 was employed for wages and attending CUNY’s John Jay College, pursuing a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice.

- Participant 3 received her associate’s degree in communications in the spring 2019. She identified herself as Hispanic, and fell within the 18-24 age group. While attending community college, Participant 3 was out of work but not looking for a job. At the time of the interview, Participant 3 was not working but attending CUNY’s Lehman College, pursuing a bachelor’s degree in speech pathology.

- Participant 4 received her associate’s degree in accounting in the fall 2018. He identified himself as Hispanic, and fell within the 25-34 age group. While pursuing his associate’s degree, Participant 4 was married and employed for wages. At the time of the interview, Participant 4 was employed and attending CUNY’s Baruch College. Participant 4 was pursuing a bachelor’s degree in accounting.

- Participant 5 completed his associate’s degree in business administration in the spring 2019. He identified himself as Hispanic, and fell within the 18-24
age group. While pursuing his associate’s degree, Participant 5 was employed for wages. At the time of the interview, P5 was employed full-time and had taken a year off from his studies. Participant 5 was accepted at CUNY’s Baruch College for the fall 2020 semester and planned to pursue a bachelor’s degree in business administration.

- Participant 6 completed his associate’s degree in criminal justice in the fall 2018. He identified himself as White and fell within the 35-44 age group. While attending his community college, Participant 6 was employed for wages. At the time of the interview, Participant 6 was looking for a job while pursuing a bachelor’s degree in human biology at CUNY’s Hunter College.

- Participant 7 received her associate’s degree in human services in the fall 2018. She identified herself as Hispanic and fell within the 18-24 age group. While pursuing her associate’s degree, Participant 7 was raising a child as a single mother and was employed for wages. At the time of the interview, Participant 7 was employed and attending CUNY’s Hunter College, pursuing a bachelor’s degree in sociology.

- Participant 8 graduated from her associate’s degree in liberal arts in the fall 2018. She identified herself as Hispanic and fell within the 18-24 age group. While attending community college, Participant 8 was employed for wages. At the time of the interview, Participant 8 was working and pursuing a bachelor’s degree in women studies at CUNY’s Hunter College.

- Participant 9 received her associate’s degree in computer science in the spring 2019. She identified herself as White and fell within the 25-34 age group.
While pursuing her associate’s degree, Participant 9 was a homemaker. At the
time of the interview, Participant 9 was employed and pursuing a bachelor’s
degree in computer science at CUNY’s City College.

- Participant 10 completed her associate’s degree in early childhood education
  in the spring 2019. She identified herself as Hispanic and fell within the 25-34
  age group. While pursuing her associate’s degree, Participant 10 was
  employed for wages. At the time of the interview, Participant 10 was looking
  for work and attending CUNY’s Brooklyn College, pursuing a bachelor’s
  degree in early childhood education.

- Participant 11 completed her associate’s degree in accounting in the spring
  2019. She identified herself as Hispanic and fell within the 25-34 age group.
  While pursuing her associate’s degree, Participant 11 was a homemaker and
  was raising a young daughter with her husband while attending community
  college. At the time of the interview, Participant 11 was not working but
  pursuing a bachelor’s degree in finance at CUNY’s Baruch College.

- Participant 12 graduated in spring 2019 with an associate’s degree in travel,
tourism, and hospitality. She identified herself as White and fell within the 45-
54 age group. While pursuing her associate’s degree, Participant 12 was out of
work but looking for a job. At the time of the interview, Participant 12 was
not working but pursuing a bachelor’s degree at CUNY’s City College of
Technology.

Qualitative Research Methods
This phenomenological study was conducted following a qualitative research methodology. The unique lived experiences of participants were recorded through in-depth interviews: one-on-one, video conference interviews. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed, and the resulting data were used to answer the research questions. Additionally, the demographic data collected through the pre-interview questionnaire were used to describe the research participants and provide context to their responses.

**Questionnaire data.** As the literature on community colleges indicates that the majority of students who attend these institutions are first-generation and minority students (Ma & Baum, 2016; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011), the demographic data collected through the pre-interview questionnaire was important to understand the participants’ backgrounds. Although demographical information of the participants was collected, the data gathered through the pre-interview questionnaire was only used for descriptive qualitative purposes, and no quantitative analysis was performed. Ninety-three (17%) of the graduates responded to the pre-interview questionnaire, while 12 participants completed the interview process.

While attending community college, the age of the responders to the pre-interview questionnaire fell within a wide range. The majority (55%) of the responders fell within what is considered by Martin et al. (2014) as traditional college-age—18-24. Graduates between the ages of 25-34 were the second largest (34%) age range represented by the responders. The age ranges of the interviewees were similar and are described in Table 4.5.
Table 4.5

All Participants’ Age Range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>18-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All respondents (N)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees (n)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=93.

As illustrated in Table 4.6, the majority (95%) of the respondents were considered students of color. The overwhelming majority of respondents (55%) were Hispanic, and the second larger ethnic group was Asian (22%). The representation of people of color among the respondents to the pre-interview questionnaire was more substantial than national data, which indicated that students of color represent 51% of the total students attending public community colleges around the United States (Ma & Baum, 2016). The interviewees’ and respondents’ statistics were similar.

Table 4.6

All Participants’ Ethnic Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Native American</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents (N)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees (n)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=93.

Table 4.7 indicates that 51% of the respondents were the first in their family to obtain a college degree. Although first-generation students represent the majority (51%) of the respondents, those who are not the first in their families to graduate from college
are equally represented among the interviewees. The literature on community college indicates that these institutions attract a large number of first-generation students.

Table 4.7

*Participants Who Are First in Their Family to Graduate from College*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Generation Student</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents (N)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees (n)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=93.*

As can be seen in Table 4.8, the majority (79%) of the respondents had never been married, and only 17% of them were married while pursuing their associate’s degree. During the interviews, participants who were married did not refer to their spouses while describing their experiences.

Table 4.8

*All Participants’ Marital Status While Attending School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Separated</th>
<th>Never Married</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents (N)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees (n)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=93.*

Only 16% of respondents were parents while they were attending school, as illustrated in Table 4.9. The different diverse ethnic groups, as well as parent and nonparent groups, were represented among the participants of this study. For those who
were parents among the interviewees, they spoke about the challenges they faced managing multiple competing priorities while attending college.

Table 4.9

*All Participants’ Parental Status While Attending School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting Status</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Not Parents</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents (N)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees (n)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=93.*

The majority of the respondents came from low-income families. Sixty-two percent of the participants’ family annual income was less than $20,000. The participants’ demographic information was similar to what is described by the literature on community colleges which indicated students who attend community colleges are often referred as to underprepared low-income, first-generation students who in their majority are students of color, immigrants, and adult learners (Bumphus, 2018; Cohen et al., 2014; Pratt, 2017).

Table 4.10 describes the family income of participants and those who participated in the interviews, while they attended their community college. A substantial number (58) of respondents had incomes of less than $20,000. Similarly, 50% of the interviewees reported having an income of less than $20,000 while pursuing their associate degrees. This data supports the literature that indicating community college students come from low-income families (Bumphus, 2018; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Pratt, 2017).
Table 4.10

*All Participants’ Household Income While Attending School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>&lt;$20,000</th>
<th>$20,000-$39,999</th>
<th>$40,000-$49,999</th>
<th>$50,000-$59,999</th>
<th>$65,000-$84,999</th>
<th>$85,000-$99,999</th>
<th>$100,000+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=93.*

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (71%) held jobs while pursuing their associate degrees. A small percentage (17%) of the respondents were looking for jobs. Both the respondents' and interviewees’ responses are presented in Table 4.11. The data in Table 4.11 indicates that the overwhelming majority (88%) of the graduates needed to work while attending college. The graduates who participated in the interviews spoke about the difficulty of prioritizing school over personal commitments and family demands. The demographic data of Table 4.11 support what researchers have shared about the challenges community college students face when balancing competing priorities while attending school (Hawley & Harris, 2016; Martin et al., 2014; Peterson, 2016).

The data highlighted in Table 4.12 show that the majority (60%) of the graduates transferred to a 4-year institution to pursue a bachelor’s degree while 92% of the interviewees were at their last year at baccalaurean schools. As part of their experience in CUNY’s ASAP, the interviewees shared how they felt nudged by advisors and the different activities to transfer immediately after completing their associates’ degrees. The research participants also spoke about what they learned through their cocurricular
involvement while in community college and how they were able to use some of those skills at their new institutions.

Table 4.11

*All Participant’s Employment Status While Attending School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Employed for wages</th>
<th>Self-employed</th>
<th>Out of work and looking for work</th>
<th>Out of work but not looking for work</th>
<th>A homemaker</th>
<th>Unable to work</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents <em>(N)</em></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees <em>(n)</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=93.*

Table 4.12

*All Participants’ Occupation at the Time of the Interview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Occupation</th>
<th>Employed full-time</th>
<th>Employed part-time</th>
<th>Employed and attending school</th>
<th>Attending school and not working</th>
<th>Out of work and looking for work</th>
<th>Out of work but not currently looking for work</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents <em>(N)</em></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees <em>(n)</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=93.*

Additional data from the pre-interview questionnaire is presented in this chapter. The data collected through the pre-interview questionnaire were relevant to this study as it allowed the researcher to put participants’ demographic information in context with
national data related to community college students. The demographic data collected were used to put the interviewees’ lived experiences in context with their responses.

**Interview data.** The primary mean of data collection was one-on-one interviews. The in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted through a video conference application due to the world’s public health crisis created by COVID-19. Twelve graduates participated in the interviews. The individual interviews had a duration of 30 minutes to 45 minutes each. From the interview’s transcripts, 40 individual themes and 42 subthemes were identified. From the themes, eight factors emerged as the most persistent related to the graduates’ participation in cocurricular activities while being part of the CUNY’s ASAP.

**Identification of themes.** The themes of this study were identified through the inductive and deductive process. The available literature on cocurricular involvement suggests that students who actively engage in cocurricular activities tend to persist (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 1991; Tinto, 1987b), and perform better academically (Heart Research Associates, 2013; Kuh, 2008; McClenney et al., 2012; NACE, 2011). However, the available studies on cocurricular involvement have been conducted in 4-year institutions. As the effect of cocurricular involvement among community college students is understudied, understanding the participants’ experiences provided an opportunity to understand the factors related to their cocurricular participation that promoted their academic success and career skill development. The participants of this study graduated from a community college with a 3.0 GPA or better and participated regularly in cocurricular activities as part of the CUNY’s ASAP program. Through the selection
criteria, the research explored the perceived effect of participants’ cocurricular involvement as it relates to their ability to graduate and preparation for their careers.

Through the interviews, different themes emerged, and eight factors were identified from the phenomena that the participants experienced. The themes were organized based on persistence factors, and some themes were broken down into subthemes. The eight factors identified from the data were used to answer the research questions. These factors are: (a) career readiness, (b) personal development, (c) social integration, (d) advisor mentorship, (e) structured environment, (f) appreciative practices, (g) academic integration, and (h) financial support. Four out of the eight factors were directly related practices that demonstrated appreciation for the students, as described by Rendón’s (1994) validation theory, and the other four were directly linked with the structure of the ASAP program.

**Description and frequency of themes.** Table 4.13 displays the eight factors that emerged from the interviews with their corresponding themes, as well as the description of each factor. Table 4.14 presents the frequency of each theme and Table. 4.15 identifies the 14 subthemes with their frequency. Through the frequency of themes from the different statements made by the interviewees, the researcher was able to organize the factors in order of importance for the graduates. The most persistent theme was the one related to career readiness (CR). Career readiness is defined as the student’s exploration and preparation for future careers through the engagement in career-focused cocurricular activities. Out of the 447 comments that were mapped to the themes, 116 were related to career readiness (CR). The reoccurring subthemes related to career readiness were preparation for job hunting (Jh), interview skills (Is), career preparation (Cp),
communication skills (Cs), learning to be professional (Lp), teamwork (Tw), organization skills (Os).

Personal development (PD) emerged as the second most important factor for the graduates. Out of the 447 comments, 113 were mapped to personal development (PD). Personal development refers to the students’ ability to learn and develop confidence in themselves through their college involvement. The reoccurring subthemes related to personal development were confidence about myself (Cm), keeping an open mind (Om), balancing competing priorities (Cp), overcoming obstacles (Oo), confidence to speak in public (Cs), learning from activities (La), broadening my perspectives (Bp), and finding sense of purpose (Sp).

Social integration (SI) played an integral role in the academic success of the graduates. Seventy-six themes were related to social integration (SI). Social integration was described by the graduates as their sense of belonging and ability to make meaningful relationships within the college community. Social integration (SI) included the subthemes of making friends (Mf), feeling I belong (Fi), interconnected with the campus (Ic), relationship with professors (Rp), and learning while having fun (Lf).

Advisor mentorship was identified as a crucial factor towards the graduates’ academic success. Advisor mentorship (AM) was viewed as the close relationship, partnership, and trust developed by the graduates with their assigned academic advisor. Fifty-two quotes were cataloged as factors related to advisor mentorship. Advisor support (Ap), relationship with my advisor (Ra), having someone who cares (Sc), and advisor connected me with others (Ac) were some of the themes mapped to advisor mentorship (AM).
The graduates revealed the importance of the structured environment provided by the ASAP program. The interviewees believed that the structure of the program supported them through graduation. Forty-eight quotes were directly linked to a structured environment (SE). The themes associated with this factor were being a requirement (Br), feeling accountable to someone (Fa), keeps you focused (Kf), transfer preparation (Tp), and setting an academic plan (Sp).

Appreciative practices (AP) played an integral role in keeping the graduates motivated toward the end goal. Appreciative practices (AP) refers to institutional practices that allow students to feel comfortable within the institution, which enables them to see themselves as capable learners. Thirty-six quotes were mapped to appreciative practices, and the themes included: supportive environment (Se), comfortable to seek help (Ch), emotional support (Es), not feeling judged (Fj), and excited about the future (Ef).

Graduates shared that practices that promoted their academic integration were crucial in developing academic confidence and staying focused on their studies. Nineteen quotes were directly mapped to academic integration (AI). Academic integration refers to students’ abilities to seek supplemental academic support in order to improve his or her academic development. The four themes linked to this factor were: tutoring support (Ts), focus on my study (Fs), practicing what was learned in class (Pl), and proving myself academically (Pa).

Interviewees shared the importance of having the financial support of the ASAP program to stay focused on their studies. Financial support (FS) was a determinant factor in the graduates’ success. Although the literature on community college student’s success
indicates the importance of students having financial aid (Price & Tovar, 2014), the graduates did not mention financial support as frequently as the other seven factors already stated. Seventeen quotes were linked to financial support, and the themes connected to this factor were: financial support removed obstacles (Fa) and financial literacy (Fi).

To better organize the results, the researcher grouped the eight factors into two categories. Four of the eight factors were grouped under validation as they were closely related to practices described by Rendón’s (1994) validation theory. The other four factors were related directly to the structure of the ASAP program. The factors related to the validation category consisted of personal development (PD), social integration (SI), advisor mentorship (AM), and appreciative practices (AP). The factors directly linked to the ASAP structure were career readiness (CR), structured environment (SE), academic integration (AI), and financial support (FS).

Tables 4.13 - 4.15 illustrate how the categories emerged from the themes and subthemes. Table 4.13 presents how the themes were group allowing for the categories to emerge. Additionally, Table 4.13 provides a description for each category that emerge from themes. Similarly, Table 4.14 shows the frequency of the themes and categories and how the categories were organized from the most relevant to least relevants based of the frequency of the themes. Table 4.15 presents the frequency of the subthemes and how they were mapped to the themes. Additionally, Table 4.15 only shows themes that were mapped to subthemes as not all main themes had subthemes.
Table 4.13

**Description of Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description of Categories/Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Readiness</td>
<td>Pj—Preparation for Job Hunting</td>
<td>The students’ exploration and preparation for future careers through engagement in career focused cocurricular activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is—Interview Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cp—Career Preparation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cm—Confidence about Myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Om—Keeping an Open Mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cp—Balancing Competing Priorities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oo—Overcoming Obstacles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Development</td>
<td>Cm—Confidence about Myself</td>
<td>Students’ ability to learn and develop confidence in themselves through college involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Om—Keeping an Open Mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cp—Balancing Competing Priorities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oo—Overcoming Obstacles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Integration</td>
<td>Mf—Make Friends</td>
<td>Students’ sense of belonging and ability to make meaningful relationships within the institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fb—Feeling I belong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ic—Interconnected with the campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor Mentorship</td>
<td>As—Advisor Support</td>
<td>Students’ close relationship, partnership and trust developed with their assigned advisors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ra—Relationship with My Advisor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured Environment</td>
<td>Br—Being a Requirement</td>
<td>This term refers to students’ responsiveness to a structured environment that allows them to engage and stay focus to the end goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fa—Feeling Accountable to Someone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciative Practices</td>
<td>Se—Supportive Environment</td>
<td>This term refers to institutional practices that allow students to feel comfortable within the institution, which enables them to see themselves as capable learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ch—Comfortable to Seek Help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Integration</td>
<td>Ts—Tutoring Support</td>
<td>Students’ ability to seek supplemental academic support in order to improve his or her academic development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fs—Focus on My Studies Academically</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Support</td>
<td>Fa—Financial Support</td>
<td>When students receive financial support from federal, state, scholarships, and the institution, they are able to focus on their education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Removed Obstacles</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Table 4.14

*Frequency of Factors/Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career Readiness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(CR: 116)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cp—Career Preparation</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is—Interview Skills</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cs—Communication Skills</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lp—Learning to Be</td>
<td>Professional (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tw—Teamwork</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Os—Organization Skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Development</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PD: 113)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cm—Confidence about</td>
<td>Myself (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Om—Keeping an Open Mind</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cp—Balancing Competing</td>
<td>Priorities (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oo—Overcoming Obstacles</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cs—Confidence to</td>
<td>Speak in Public (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La—Learning from</td>
<td>Activities (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bp—Broadening My</td>
<td>Perspectives (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp—Finding Sense of</td>
<td>Purpose (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Integration</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SI: 76)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mf—Make Friends</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fb—Feeling I belong</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ic—Interconnected with</td>
<td>the campus (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rp—Relation with</td>
<td>Professors (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lf—Learning while</td>
<td>Having Fun (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Advisor Mentorship</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>(AM: 52)</td>
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<tr>
<td>As—Advisor Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ra—Relationship with My</td>
<td>Advisor (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ac—Advisor Connected Me</td>
<td>with Others (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structured Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SE: 48)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Br—Being a Requirement</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fa—Feeling Accountable</td>
<td>to Someone (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kf—Keeps You Focused</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tp—Transfer Preparation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sp—Setting Academic Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appreciative Practices</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(AP: 36)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se—Supportive Environment</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ch—Comfortable to</td>
<td>Seek Help (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es—Emotional Support</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fj—Not Feeling Judged</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ef—Excited about the</td>
<td>Future (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Integration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(AI: 19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ts—Tutoring Support</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fs—Focus on My Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pl—Practicing what was</td>
<td>Learned in Class (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa—Proving Myself</td>
<td>Academically (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Support</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(FS: 17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fa—Financial Support</td>
<td>Removed Obstacles (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fl—Financial Literacy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>Subthemes</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR—Career Readiness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cp—Career Preparation</td>
<td>rw—resume writing (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lp—LinkedIn profile (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cv—cover letter (9)</td>
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<td>cb—career benchmarks (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pb—strong professional base (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ce—career exploration (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>te—technical skills (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cs—Communication Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ws—writing skills (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lp—Learning to Be Professional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tw—Teamwork</td>
<td>is—improve my skills (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PD—Personal Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cm—Confidence about Myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>us—using skills after graduation (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lb—language barrier (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd—self-doubt (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>so—stepping out of comfort zone (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aq—courage to ask questions (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sd—self-determination (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>it—Independent thinker (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Op—Keeping an Open Mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gp—helped me grow personally (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rh—realizing activities were helpful (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ba—being adaptable (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gk—gave me more knowledge (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rk—realizing I did not know (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ro—respecting others (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sr—self-respect (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cp—Balancing Competing Priorities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oo—Overcoming Obstacles</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tm—time management (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cs—coping with stress (3)</td>
</tr>
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<td>ny—navigating for yourself (2)</td>
</tr>
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<td>to—thinking outside the box (1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ps—problem-solving (1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ne—navigating challenges (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SI—Social Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mf—Make Friends</td>
<td>ps—peer support (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pg—peers with similar goals (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ip—interaction with peers (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tp—trusting peers (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fb—Feeling I belong</td>
<td>bg—being part of the group (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fa—not feeling alone (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fg—feeling good about participating (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ic—Interconnected with the campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AM—Advisor Mentorship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As—Advisor Support</td>
<td>ah—my advisor was helpful (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE—Structured Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Br—Being a Requirement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>om—one-on-one required meetings (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fr—being full-time helped me develop relationships (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fa—being full-time helped me engage in activities (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

The interviews provided valuable information regarding the lived experiences of the participants as it related to their participation in cocurricular activities. This section offers the result of the interviews as they pertain to the four research questions of the study. Notable quotes from the participants’ interviews were used to provide further support to the themes and findings. Due to the number of quotes and the responses’ length, the researcher did not use quotations in their entirety.

Research Question 1. Research Question 1 asked: *What is the perception of ASAP graduates’ cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success?*

When asked the interview questions related to this research question, participants immediately made a connection to the relationship they developed with advisors and students, and the fact that many of the cocurricular activities were required as part of the ASAP program, such as tutoring. By the time of the interviews, the participants had graduated either 1 year or 1½ years before, and they were able to remember the factors that were more influential to their success. Most cocurricular activities identified by the participants as essential to their academic success were directly connected to factors related to academic integration, social integration, advisor mentorship, and structured environment.

*Academic integration.* A factor that the participants found important to their success were the cocurricular activities that promoted academic integration. As ASAP activities have a major focus on the cocurricular aspects of students’ lives, academic integration only had a frequency of 19, and within academic integration, tutoring support (Ts) was the most relevant theme for the graduates. Participant 2 stated, “So, getting
involved in ASAP going to tutoring, I met some of the most amazing tutors that to this day still help me with my essays, with my math homework.” Participant 1 also shared how having tutoring support helped her navigate her classes and improve academically. Participant 1 said,

I've used the tutoring for precalculus because it was a challenge. So it was good to have someone able to just literally sit there with me knowing that I know zero, anything about precalculus, and just have that patience to help me get through those other hurdles or precalculus. But it was really good to have those resources to better myself academically.

Participants shared that the cocurricular involvement was instrumental in their academic success as the activities helped them develop meaningful relationships with other students and staff. They shared they were able to establish a sense of belonging to the campus, and they felt that having the requirement to participate in the cocurricular activities made them engage with the campus community. Through the campus involvement, the participants felt comfortable seeking the academic support they needed for the classes. When asked about the activities that they engaged in while in college, participants consistently referred to the career-focused events as they felt they learned a lot of useful information while preparing for their careers.

**Social integration.** Many of the graduates found social integration as an essential aspect of their cocurricular participation and their academic success. Participant 7 indicated that participating in cocurricular activities helped her with confidence (Cm) and helped her not feel alone. Participant 7 said, “It made me feel more confident about myself, and it made me feel like I wasn't alone, that there was a lot of students sharing the
same story that I carry.” The graduates shared that having community support was important for their motivation and focus. Similar to Participant 7, Participant 1 found it important to develop friendships (Mf) and share the journey with other students through cocurricular involvement. Participant 1 said,

I mean, for the ASAP required activities, it really allowed me to not only just focus on my studies but also to network with other students. It also gave me that opportunity to not only say okay, yes, I got a diploma from . . . but, also, I know I have friends. I've made friends that I can say, okay, hey, this is what we did together.

Advisor mentorship. The graduates shared that the required monthly meetings with assigned advisors were instrumental in helping them develop connections not only with their advisors but with others on campus. Advisor mentorship emerged as a significant factor for the graduates' ability to navigate academic and personal challenges. Participant 4 said,

She helped me out getting letters of recommendation. She told me, okay, you need to go here to speak with this person to start your application. You need to go over there to write your application essays. You need help with this. So it's all those connections that one person can coordinate for you. That was the biggest help for me.

Participant 6 said,

Besides, I would say everything else was just about my advisor . . . . I really liked her. The kind of job she did is the human-related job, so I know it's very difficult, but she always was nice. She always cared about what's going on, and since I'm
by myself in the country, from her I got those feelings that someone cares about me, like someone worries if I will graduate.

**Structured environment.** The graduates also felt that the structures put in place by the ASAP program were helpful to keep them focus, but also to realize the benefits of participating in cocurricular activities. Structured environment was a factor not anticipated to be as relevant based on the literature, but the student believed that having requirements helped them engage. Participant 4 expressed,

I think they helped me a lot. All the required activities were . . . I don't know they were designed to motivate me, but they were definitely designed to keep me on track. At the beginning, they felt just like an obligation. But, in the end, I started seeing like what difference has made . . . So I think all those activities were geared towards get you from point A to point B and was very structured and in a [way] kind of kept me on track.

Similar to Participant 4, Participant 3 felt she would not have participated in the cocurricular activities and learned additional information if they were not a requirement for the ASAP program. Participant 3 said,

It was so with the career benchmarks first. There is a lot of benchmarks, like I mentioned before, that I didn't want to do. But when I did them, I realized, wow, this was so helpful. I really was grateful for them and then the group meetings. At times I did find a little, I guess, bothering, annoying, but no, when you actually went to them, you didn't regret going because you did get so much information.

**Research Question 2.** Research Question 2 asked, *What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its relation to their career skill*
development? The data supported career readiness as the most important factor that impacted the participants’ career skill development through cocurricular involvement. As the graduates have separated from the institution between a year and a year and a half, the graduates were mainly able to remember the activities with concrete outcomes such as those with career focus. Out of the 447 quotes obtained through the interviews, 116 were mapped to career readiness. The participants spoke about how their participation in cocurricular activities prepared them for the job search (Pj) and provided them with skills such as communication (Cs), professionalism (Lp), teamwork (Tw), and organization (Os). The literature on cocurricular involvement, based on the experiences of students in 4-year institutions, revealed that students could obtain similar skills like the ones described by participants of this study (Carter et al., 2016; Massaro, 2019; Nunamaker et al., 2017).

**Career preparation.** All participants spoke about how participating in cocurricular activities prepared them for job hunting (Pj) by helping them create a resume, cover letter, and LinkedIn profile. The participants felt that by participating in career-focused activities, they were able to practice their interview skills (Is). Participant 12 shared,

They had this benchmarks with resume, with the cover letter. They gave you suits if you need it for interviews. These benchmarks were very strict, and they have meetings for them. They reenacted the interview. So it's very, very helpful. So it will help me when I apply for a better job than I have now.

Similar to Participant 12, Participant 4 felt that by participating in career-focused activities, he was able to create a resume and get a better job. Participant 4 said,
But the major aspect that helped me was the resume because I used that resume that somebody else corrected, and it was very nice and very proper. And I used that resume to get my next job, which is the one I'm currently at right now. And that was a better job than the one I had. So, I think a major takeaway for me was to be able to write a very good resume that would stand out among other resumes that they received.

The participants also shared about how participating in mock interviews supported their preparation for future interviews (Is). Participant 7 stated, “for the interview, I feel more comfortable talking to a stranger than I used to be before, because of the strategy that they taught us in the mock interviews.” Participant 3 said,

I was nervous about the mock interviews because I felt that they were going to go very tough on us, but it was very calm and, you know, open to questions. They were just giving you all this advice, and it just felt really good to be there. They made it enjoyable. But you still got something from it. So definitely, I used the skills. Last summer, I applied to be a camp counselor and definitely the cover letter, the resume, and mock interview, definitely, helped how I approached this job search.

Similar to Participant 7, Participant 5 found the career preparation (Cm) instrumental in getting him ready for the job search and securing a job while attending college. Participant 5 explained:

Just making sure my LinkedIn is prepared and really just putting me in the habit of constantly checking in on my LinkedIn, constantly checking on my resume. I've gotten some opportunities, like the job I currently have . . . Definitely, a lot
of those things were pointers that I got from ASAP, and it was information that I took to heart, and I acted upon it, and I say I'm a lot happier with, you know, the opportunities that I have now.

Similar to Participants 11 and 5, Participant 3 was initially hesitant about attending the career-focused activities, but after participating, she found them helpful and helped her get excited about her future. Participant 3 said,

Also, the career benchmarks that I was a little hesitant. I was like, I have to do all these career benchmarks and have to get them all done by graduation, but they were actually really helpful. They actually make you more excited about the future of, you know, being an actual professional. I guess you are more prepped up because when you're in the classroom, it's just studying, studying and, you know but this really gets you into the mindset. And so that was really helpful.

Participants described the skills they gained from their cocurricular involvement focused on career readiness. Although researchers have identified competencies that students can gain through participation in cocurricular involvement, community college students do not get involved as they need to balance competing priorities (Dudley et al., 2015; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Martin et al., 2014). What is interesting from the participants’ responses is that they shared that they gained skills very similar to those described by business leaders as the skills they look for in recent graduates (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2011). Participant 2 shared how participating in cocurricular activities related to career readiness helped him improve his communication skills. Participant 2 said,
For example, the speech... I haven’t done it before. No one had told me how to do a speech. I never practice it, whatever it may have been, but due to the fact I did the speech, I learned how to perfect my writing. I learned how to use proper nouns. It helped to speak to certain persons. Most importantly, I learned how to publicly speak more professionally in this case.

Similar to Participant 2, Participant 11 also shared how her cocurricular involvement helped her improve her communication skills. Participant 11 shared,

I got communication skills... The one that I can tell you I improved the most is communications. I don't like talking and hear me, I'm talking right now, but I don't like talking. I don't like being in front of a camera or in front of other people talking. And I'm like, I'm so ready for this. They gave me confidence.

Participants also described how participating in cocurricular activities made them be more professional. Participant 2 shared, “they helped me prepare for my professional career, just by establishing the professionalism that's expected from anyone in this case.” Participant 5 described a professional behavior he learned through his cocurricular experience an essential for the professional world. Participant 5 said, “I decided to improve my punctuality and making sure that in constant replying to emails when I'm always making sure to outreach to people in case I need support.” Similarly, Participant 1 described how she learned the proper way to dress while participating in cocurricular activities. She started, “Like really let me know that, you know, for an interview, you need to dress a certain way and stuff like that, so that just helped improve a lot of the skills that I've already had.”
Other skills described by the participants were teamwork (Tw) and organization skills (Os). Participant 3 shared how participating in activities helped her with her organization. Participant 3 said, “and yes, I would say those are definitely the skills and organization . . . Yes, organization, it has taught me to be prepared. Well, not only in jobs, it has helped me in class as a student.” Participant 11 shared the following when referring to cocurricular activities with career readiness focus, “they helped me also to work with my classmates.” Participant 2 went into more specific skills he gained through the experience. Participant 2 said,

It has taught me skills, such as accountability. It taught me skills of communication skills, teamwork, time management, problem-solving. It has taught me skills by using Microsoft Word and many things I didn't know how to use besides how to write an essay in Times New Roman. There were so many different things you can utilize to check your grammar, your spelling. It taught me how to use Excel. It has taught me how to use Publisher and Microsoft Teams and all those different tools that I’ll utilize in the professional world.

Participants felt that their participation in cocurricular activities helped them with their career skills development by preparing them for the job search process. Additionally, they felt it helped them be mindful of expected professional behaviors, improve their interview skills, as well as their communication, teamwork, and organizational skills.

**Research Question 3.** Research Question 3 asked, *What role, if any, did ASAP’s curricular and cocurricular requirements contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners?* The required cocurricular
activities of the ASAP program had a significant impact on the validation of the graduates as learners. According to Rendón (1994), “validation is enabling, confirming and the supportive process initiated by in-and-out-of–class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). The graduates shared how their participation in ASAP required cocurricular activities supported their academic and interpersonal growth through validating agents such as personal development, social integration, advisor mentorship, and appreciative practices. All factors identified by participants as part of their response for the Research Question 3 are connected to the validation category.

**Personal development.** Within personal development, the most persistent reoccurring theme was “confidence about myself” (Cm). Participant 7 shared that the experience she had while in ASAP “made me feel more confident about myself, and it made me feel like I wasn't alone, that there were a lot of students sharing the same story that I carry.” Similar to Participant 7, Participant 2 shared how the cocurricular involvement gave him the confidence to navigate the college proactively. Participant 2 said, “when doing those cocurricular activities, you're more thinking for yourself . . . You are moving; you're navigating for yourself.” Participant 4 shared, “and so that built the confidence in me to be able to speak with somebody to show the best way of me.” Similarly, Participant 1 referred to developing the confidence to reach out to others and inquire about different opinions. Participant 1 said, “it kind of helped me step out of my comfort zone and ask questions and really, like, get different opinions.”

Participants spoke about the importance of keeping an open mind (Op) while engaging in the required ASAP cocurricular activities and how keeping an open mind allowed them to gain important information for their own development. When sharing
about how she was hesitant to participate in activities but learned relevant information, Participant 8 said,

Yes, yes, yes. I didn't think it would at the beginning because, as a student, sometimes you can be stubborn, or not interested. But, attending like you know how to make a budget or how to destress, or something like that, you know, like those types of events that were offered, they were quite useful. So, they were very useful.

Participant 11 shared how keeping an open mind about her cocurricular involvement allowed her to gain from the ASAP experience. Participant 11 said,

But like everything that you're gonna gain from them is so much more than those hours that you have to spend with them because you're not only learning, you develop yourself and your own sense of the person that you want to be outside college working with them because they don't make a meeting with you to talk about math. They do a meeting with you to talk about real-life things.

Participants also acknowledge that as part of their personal development, they learned to overcome obstacles (Ob). Participant 2 said,

I have to be adaptable. I have to make modifications to learn to overcome obstacles at the last minute. I have to be able to face the unexpected that may come in the near future that I didn't foresee. So, participating in those activities in ASAP showed me how to work with a team, how to overcome obstacles.

Participant 8 said,

I mean, if you think about it, the students that seek help from ASAP is because we need the extra financial help and that extra financial help . . . I'm talking to my
own experience; it just means that there's other stressors. So, people are students like I, who had to juggle a job while at school. So I had to do work and go to school and handle family affairs. And still followed ASAP requirements. That's a lot of stress.

**Social integration.** Social integration was an important factor stressed by the participants during the interviews as it helped them develop meaningful connections around the campus. Among the different themes related to social integration, participants shared they were able to make friends (Mf), develop a sense of belonging (Fb), and felt interconnected within the campus (Ic).

Participant 4 indicated how making friends was an important validating agent not only during his community college years but now at his current institution. He shared that he has connected with some of his friends at the 4-year institution. Participant 4 stated,

> Also, besides the regular activities with my advisor, we also have time to interact with other students. We had different meetings with other ASAP students, and I'm still keeping contact with some of my ASAP friends who are at XXX College, and you know we try to go to the same class. So it helped me also pass community college and into my bachelor's degree because I created some connections that I would [have] otherwise not made.

Similar to Participant 4, Participant 7 indicated that participating in cocurricular activities helped her connect with many people and make friends that introduced her to different resources. Participant 7 said,
A lot of activities that I volunteered for, I got to know a lot of different people. Well, I got to know a lot of students. And I got to make friends that helped me to get to know a lot of different resources around the college.

Participant 10 also shared about why making friends was important for her while attending college. Participant 10 shared,

Yeah, I mean, the group things we used to have for fun. I think this is to make you meet other students and make friends. And so you do not have to be alone yourself. You're not worrying on your own. You have other people with similar questions, or they struggle with something similar. So you basically talk to each other, and then you're with other people on the same page.

Within the social integration factor, students described how feeling they belonged (Fb) to the institution were important not only for their success but for the confirmation they were accepted as students who were capable of learning. Participant 12 described the importance of feeling like she was home while attending college. Participant 12 stated,

First of all, to be your best, you need to feel that you belong, that you are accepted, and you belong, and you know your way around is like going to your apartment. You know, where is this and that, and it's not just a bunch of strange doors, and everyone is doing their jobs behind the doors, and you don't know anything. It's very important to don't feel a stranger, especially in community colleges or in colleges. That's a big danger, I think. Because you feel insecure, you really feel oh, everyone knows so much more about your way around.

Participant 8 also described the importance of developing a sense of belonging through her cocurricular involvement while attending college. Participant 8 shared,
And like I would go and help out with the decoration or just help out with the presentation. I guess talking people that makes you feel closer to the campus just being part of like an activity that requires some type of leadership.

Graduates also shared how feeling interconnected (Ic) within the campus helped them with their social integration and their success. Participant 9 said,

definitely helpful because first of all, I knew the director of the scholarship. I got a scholarship by interviewing with him. I knew a lot of professors. I was doing some projects and published articles, so I was like really involved in … student life, and after a while that I know people, I got the job in college. I was a math tutor for students with disabilities. Next to college, there is a middle college high school, and I got a job there as a teacher assistant.

Participants 2 and 12 also shared how they felt interconnected with the campus by participating in the ASAP required activities and the value of maintaining relationships. Participant 12 indicated,

Indirectly and directly, I made connections. Well, just being forced to go to this meeting in that room, then I discovered the production areas, the theater, the movies, and probably that's how I mean I circulated more on the campus, and I was more confident. I knew my way around more because I have to attend all these ASAP events.

Participant 2 said,

So, that being said, ASAP pushed me to interact with the writing center, the ASAP tutors. You get more interconnected with the campus itself. Also, it showed me the valuable asset maintaining relationships after the class pass[ed].
So there's benefits of maintaining those connections, and I still do the same at . . . College. Now, I still keep in contact with them because I never know when I'm going to need them.

**Advisor mentorship.** The graduates expressed the integral role that advisors played through their guidance and support. The graduates described having a deeper connection with their advisors as they felt advisors cared about their success, and they could rely on their support when needed. Participant 6 said, “yes, I feel somebody was there like somebody knew that I was working really hard on getting everything done.” Similarly, Participant 7 described her relationship with her advisor as a friendship. Participant 7, shared “he was like my friend from day one... He was my advisor, and I knew if I had a problem, I could go to him, and he wouldn't judge me for anything. Similar to Participants 6 and 7, Participant 2 described his relationship with his advisor as having an older brother. Participant 2 stated, “So that being said, you always want to maintain this professional [relationship], it can be friendly like with my advisor . . . I've become more of a brother to him than just an advisor and student in this.”

Participants also described their advisors as their cheerleaders reminding them of their goals and pushing them to move forward. The relationship defined by the participants resembled a mentorship as the participants were able to discuss and get support in academic and personal matters. Participant 3 shared,

Someone who clearly wants you to push forward, who's giving you all this help so you don't get lost in other things. There is some reminding you of, what's your goal here and what are your new goals. So it keeps you in that same mindset. It keeps you from drifting off. So, it definitely helps when someone you know
reminds you of the main goal, so you don't get distracted by other things from outside.

Participant 11 also described the mentorship nature of her relationship with her advisor but also shared how different her experience is at her new institution. Participant 11 stated,

Going to any school and having a meeting one-on-one to one advisor that knows you, that knows who you are, that knows you by your own name, and knows your own specific necessities is difficult. I'm going to my second college now doing a bachelor's, and I don't have a specific advisor. Every time I make an appointment [it] is with a different advisor that doesn't know me that only knows what is on paper.

Appreciative practices. During the interviews, participants shared how the appreciative practices of the ASAP program played a role in their motivation and success. Appreciative practices refers to institutional practices that allow students to feel comfortable within the institution and enables them to see themselves as learners. Participant 2 described how feeling emotional support enabled him to have the confidence to keep on trying. Participant 2 said,

Those simple emotional supports went a long way and driving me and motivating and inspiring me to keep on going. And even if I let's say I didn't get that grade I wanted in the class, at least I don't count it as a failure because I only would have failed if I would have given up. That being said, it pushed me to keep on going.

Similar to Participant 2, Participant 3 shared how the supportive environment she experienced in ASAP helped her take advantage of the resources. Participant 2 stated,
I guess everybody was so not uptight. Everybody was so chill with each other. Everybody was, I guess, supportive and okay with questions, and just everybody wanted to help each other. There's really no judgment, and yeah, it made you more prepped up to get through this program and really take advantage.

Participant 12 also described the impact of having a supportive environment for her persistence and success. Participant 12 indicated,

I mean, to be honest, it was 10 years ago that I went to . . . to sign up for college, and the person at the front desk said “oh, go online and sign up.” And that was the end of it. So for me, I really needed that personal touch, the communication with a person, and thank God I found it. But thank God because probably that was my glue. I mean, I don't know how [it] directly helped me academically, but for me, it was because I had no other support.

Participant 11 shared how she misses the appreciative practices she experienced through the ASAP program now that she was pursuing her bachelor’s degree without the same supportive environment. Participant 11 said,

It was important because I miss that. I got used to that, and now I go to a college that is fast. It is quick, and you have to go in get out. They're not babying you to do good. And I mean, the environment at the community helped me fostered not only education, but it also fostered friendship, fostered respect.

Through the participants' responses, validating agents were described consistently, and factors such as personal development, social integration, advisor mentorship, and appreciative practices emerged as the most important factors for students’ affirmation of internal motivation to persist and graduate.
**Research Question 4.** Research Question 4 asked, *To what extent did factors such as academic advisement, social integration, support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP graduates to persist?* During the interviews, the participants were asked to rank eight factors in order of importance to their success, one being the most important to eight being the least important. The eight factors were (a) connection and access to your academic advisor, (b) feeling that you belonged to the college community, (c) the support of family and friends, (d) the support of ASAP staff, (e) the support of college's professors, (f) the ability to work with a career advisor through the college experience, (g) the ability to get financial aid, and (h) the ability to get ASAP financial incentives. These factors were identified based on the literature on students’ retention and the specific elements of the ASAP program. The participants were given a Qualtrics link where they were able to arrange these factors in order of importance in the middle of the one-on-one video conference interviews. The 12 participants expressed having challenges arranging the factors as they considered them all-important for their academic success. The ranking of the eight factors is presented in Table 4.17.

Similar to the interview results, the participants identified a factor related to the ASAP structure as their number one persistence factor. On the other hand, as opposed to the interview data, participants ranked financial support as the number one factor that contributed to their persistence. Table 4.16 shows that the two factors mapped to financial support (financial aid and ASAP’s financial support) received the number one, two, and four rankings when combined. Interview analysis revealed financial support as
the last factor out of the eight factors in significance to the graduate’s degree completion through the cocurricular lens.

Table 4.16

*Ranking of Persistence Factors in Order of Importance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>%</td>
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<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of Family and Friends</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASAP Staff's Support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors’ Support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Advisor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASAP’s Financial Support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to share why they ranked the factors in that particular order, participants shared that due to having the financial support, they were able to focus on their academics and engage in cocurricular activities. When asked about the way he ranked the factors, Participant 5 responded, “because of ASAP made sure that my financials were all set, I was able to focus fully on my academics, and so I knew that if I apply myself, I'd be able to pass.” Similar to Participant 5, Participant 6 said, Well, the financial support supported me academically because of the MetroCard because of the financial aspect of it. Because I was able to give up a few bartending shifts here and there, especially during finals. Because of ASAP, I was
able to do better. Had I had to pay for school, and metro card, and all these other things, I would have lost those crucial days of studying or writing a paper because I wouldn't have been able to drop one of my bartending shifts, and I would have lost that. Because I had that financial support, and I didn't have to worry about the money.

Similar to the responses from Participants 5 and 6, Participant 11 shared how having the financial support of ASAP allowed her to focus on performing well in school. Participant 11 said,

Well then, most importantly, they help you with the books and the MetroCards and then make your life more easy for you to be able to progress. So you just basically had to just go to the college to do the work, and they will take care of everything in that place. It's really a huge thing for graduation because then you don't need to think about how I would pay for MetroCard, how I would pay for the books, how they pay financial aid. So that really helps you to just focus on what you have to do.

Participants ranked having access to an academic advisor, which is mapped to advisor mentorship as the second-highest persistence factor. However, advisor mentorship emerged as the fourth factor through the interview data. When asked about the reasons for their ranking, Participant 2 shared why advisor mentorship was the most essential factor for him. Participant 2 said,

Because not to get too personal . . . you know, growing up without a father figure, I didn't have someone telling me right or wrong. I didn't have someone, you know, sitting me down and giving me a talk or seating me to tell me "you're
doing this wrong. Okay, that was right. Okay, you were wrong there, you can do better here.” I didn't have anyone to motivate me. Neither my parents nor anyone in my family had gone to college. I was first generation. So, the academic advisor, he was an advisor to me, but he was more of a friend. In this case, everything he spoke to me was to build me up in some way or fashion.

Participant 11 also shared why the relationship with her advisor was the most important factor during her college persistence. Participant 11 stated,

But knowing that the advisor that you're gonna meet knows your name, and you don't have to explain to them I'm like, oh yeah, I came last week, and I talked to this person about this, and explain your whole history to a person. Every time you meet somebody is like a person that knows me, like (participant’s name), come in, I'm gonna talk to you. And knowing that that person knows you, they know what you're going through that remembers your name. They knew that I have a daughter; they knew that I was a good student. For me, that's important for people to know I'm a good student.

From the students' ranking, it is important to highlight that sense of belonging was ranked as the fifth (33%) most important factor for students’ persistence. Sense of belonging is mapped to social integration, which was the third most important factor based on the participant’s interviews. The sixth (33%) factor based on students’ ranking and based on the student’s interviews, was the support of the ASAP staff. Support of ASAP staff is mapped to factors related to appreciative practices. The seventh (33%) factor highlighted as important by the students’ ranking was the ability to work with a career advisor. The ability to work with a career advisor was mapped to factors related to
career readiness, which was the most persistent factor based on the interview analysis. Although this may appear contradictory to the interview results, the students were able to rank the factors for Research Question 4 without associating their answers to their cocurricular experience. Additionally, the researcher linked the low persistence of the themes related to financial support to the fact that all ASAP students receive financial incentives such as MetroCards, textbooks, and tuition assistance. Therefore, financial support was not the most important factor that came to graduates’ minds when reflecting on their cocurricular experiences.

Although Vega (2016) identified support networks as one of the most important factors for student’s success, the participants ranked the support of family and friends as the least important factor. The fact that the support of family and friends did not surface during the participants’ conversations may be explained due to the participants’ ability to integrate socially and receive their advisors’ mentorship while at the campus. In addition, students were asked to reflect on their cocurricular participation, and the graduates were not able to associate family with their lived experiences at the campus.

**Summary of Results**

The findings of this study described community college graduates’ perceptions of their cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success and career skill development. The participants described in their own words how factors related to Rendón’s (1994) validation theory and elements of the ASAP program influenced their persistence, personal development, and, ultimately, their graduation. The factors that related to Rendón’s (1994) validation theory were personal development, social integration, advisor mentorship, and appreciative practices. The factors that related to the
structure of the ASAP program were career readiness, structured environment, academic integration, and financial support.

Through the factors related to validation, participants shared they were able to personally grow and develop through all the cocurricular requirements of the ASAP program. Participants described how they gained the confidence to speak and ask questions. Through their anecdotes, they shared how they were able to learn to balance competing priorities while overcoming obstacles to their education. They highlighted how their cocurricular participation facilitated their ability to develop a sense of belonging, make friends, allowed them to feel safe to take risks and have an open mind. The appreciative practices employed by the ASAP program were emphasized as another factor that contributed to their sense of being in a judgment-free environment, which was essential for their emotional safety-net while attending college.

Participants also described how meaningful for them it was having an advisor who, in many instances, they described as a friend, a brother/sister, and a mentor. They shared how that relationship helped them grow and kept them focused on the end goal. Through the relationship with their advisors, they were able to get connected to other opportunities, people, and resources. They appreciated having someone who they felt honestly cared for them, and who was looking out for their best interests. They described their ability to discuss academic and personal matters with their advisors and how important for them it was to obtain their perspectives and guidance.

Through the factors related to the elements of the ASAP program, career readiness was the most persistent factor as the graduates were able to associate the ASAP career activities with cocurricular activities. Through these activities, they described how
their participation supported their preparation for job search and future careers. The participants also described very concrete skills they developed through involvement in cocurricular activities. They all shared in their own accounts of gaining communication and organizational skills, professionalism, as well as the ability to work in teams. They shared how they had landed jobs due to the preparation they obtained through the career-focused activities, and they had been able to expand their professional network.

Another factor that was not anticipated to be as relevant for the students was having a structured environment. They described the ASAP program structure and requirements were important for their ability to gain an understanding and appreciation of the cocurricular activities. Many of the participants described having initial hesitation to participate, but because it was a requirement, they joined an event and not only enjoyed it, but also got something out of it. They also shared that the ASAP requirements gave them a sense of accountability, and they understood people in the program were paying attention to what they were doing, and that sense of responsibility pushed them to engage and develop an appreciation for the activities.

Academic integration was another factor highlighted by the graduates as important for their academic progress and success. Tutoring support was the central theme that emerged as part of their academic integration. Although some students mentioned the ASAP blocked courses, they only appreciated the fact that they were able to make friends and get support from other ASAP students as they shared the same classes during the first semester. Financial support was the least persistent factor when asked questions related to cocurricular involvement. However, when asking students to rank factors in order of importance for their success as part of Research Question 4,
financial support emerged as the number one factor. Many of the students shared that the fact that they had financial aid and the financial incentives of ASAP allowed them to engage in cocurricular activities and remain focused on their studies.

Chapter 5 will provide the implications of the findings and how they relate to previous research findings. Additionally, Chapter 5 will share the research limitations and recommendations for the future.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Community colleges serve about 45% of all undergraduate students in the United States (AACC, 2015). Due to “their geographic accessibility, adaptability to student and employer educational needs, transfer routes to 4-year institutions, and flexibility in scheduling and composition of courses,” community colleges serve a large number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Levin & García, 2017, p. 1). As community colleges represent a significant component of the post-secondary education system (Schneider & Yin, 2012), there has been an increased interest by policy makers to improve students’ persistence and graduation rates (Barnett, 2011). Although there is a public interest in improving community college graduations, the 3-year graduation rate among public community colleges around the country remains at a concerning 32% (NCES, 2019a). While the community college graduation rates remain low, many disadvantaged students who attend community college drop out without a degree (Nakajima et al., 2012), which ultimately hinders their job opportunities and social mobility capability (Levin & García, 2017).

According to Ma and Baum (2016), 51% of students attending public community colleges in the United States are considered part of minority groups. These non-White students are considered non-traditional, and they tend to drop out of community colleges because many of them do not understand what is required of them to be successful college students and due to institutional practices that do not support their unique needs.
Rendón (1994) suggested the literature on students’ retention and success was based on studies conducted in 4-year institutions, and they are not representative of the non-traditional students’ experiences of those who typically attend community college. Due to the negative educational experiences of non-traditional students, in and out of classroom practices should be intentionally designed to validate these students as learners (Rendón, 1994). For Rendón (1994), “validation is an enabling, confirming and the supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44).

Similar to Rendón’s (1994) recommendation of engaging students through appreciative practices inside and outside the classroom, other researchers have recommended engaging students in cocurricular activities as a mean to increase college retention and graduation rates (Dewey, 1997; Fried, 2012, 2013; Keeling, 2006; Kuh, 1991, 2001, 2008; Miettinen, 2000). Studies on community college students’ persistence indicate that when institutions prioritize cocurricular involvement, students tend to have better academic performance (Price & Tovar, 2014), develop soft-skills (Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Soria et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2013) and cultivate the habit of getting involved in campus activities (Bell et al., 2016; Garcia & Cuellar, 2018; McElroy & Cobb, 2010). Despite the continuous low graduation challenges facing community colleges (AACC, 2015; Barnett, 2011; Martin et al., 2014), studies regarding the effect of community college students' involvement in cocurricular activities are limited.

As a response to the low graduation rate challenges, The City University of New York created the Accelerated Study in Associate Program in 2007. At the time when
ASAP was created, 13% of community college students were able to complete their associate’s degrees in 3 years (Whalen, 2016). The CUNY’s ASAP provides full-time community college students with student affairs-like services and programming with the goal of graduating a minimum of 50% of its cohorts in 2 to 3 years (Kolenovic et al., 2013). “The program looks at the busy lives of its students and intervenes when it can to remove obstacles that block the successful pathways through education” (Davidson, 2017, p. 66). Some of ASAP’s benefits include “comprehensive advisement, consolidated scheduling, cohort-course taking, career and employment services, tutoring, summer, and winter course-taking” as well as tuition waivers, MetroCards, and free use of textbook (Strumbos et al., 2018, p. 101). ASAP requires students to engage in cocurricular activities actively and despite ASAP’s success in graduating over 50% of its students in 3 years or less (Dadgar et al., 2014; Feldman & Romano, 2019; Fogel, 2019; Kolenovic et al., 2013; Levin & García, 2017; Linderman & Kolenovic, 2013; Strumbos et al., 2018), empirical studies exploring the effect of their participation in cocurricular activities are limited. Due to ASAP success, the program was expanded to provide services to over 25,000 students across the CUNY system and the outcomes of the program have increased the overall CUNY’s community colleges graduation rate to 27% (CUNY OIRA, 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of community college graduates regarding their participation in cocurricular activities and how their involvement contributed to their academic success and career skills development. As The CUNY’s ASAP employs social-emotional and financial support as well as the requirement to participate in cocurricular activities (Kolenovic et
al., 2013; Weiss et al., 2019), graduates of this program were selected in order to gain deeper insights about how their lived experiences through their cocurricular involvement contributed to their academic success and development of career skills. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success?
2. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its relation to their career skill development?
3. What role, if any, did ASAP’s curricular and cocurricular requirements contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners?
4. To what extent did factors such as academic advisement, social integration, support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP graduates to persist?

Participants of this study identified eight factors as important for their graduation and career skill development when asked to reflect on their cocurricular involvement and how getting involved contributes to their academic success. The eight factors that emerged from the study were described in Chapter 4, and they are: (a) career readiness, (b) personal development, (c) social integration, (d) advisor mentorship, (e) structured environment, (f) appreciative practices, (g) academic integration, and (h) financial support. These factors were divided into two categories to provide clarity for the readers—validation actions and ASAP structure. Understanding these factors is important
to higher education administrators in order to support academic success, college involvement, and the unique needs of community college students.

This chapter presents the implications of the findings, followed by the limitations of this qualitative study. Additionally, this chapter discusses recommendations for changes in practices and policies and future research exploring the effect of cocurricular involvement on students’ success. Finally, the conclusion and final thoughts are shared by the researcher.

**Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study expand the limited literature regarding cocurricular participation and the factors related to cocurricular involvement that contribute to community college students’ success (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Webber et al., 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). This phenomenological study was based on the lived experiences of 12 participants who graduated from one of the seven community colleges of the City University of New York and who participated in the ASAP program. Eight factors emerged from the in-depth semi-structured interviews as important for the participants’ academic success and career skill development. These factors are: (a) career readiness, (b) personal development, (c) social integration, (d) advisor mentorship, (e) structured environment, (f) appreciative practices, (g) academic integration, and (h) financial support. The participants explained how these factors, which are either related to Rendón’s (1994) validation theory or elements of the ASAP program, contributed to their academic success and career skill development.

To provide a better understanding of the factors, they were broken up into two categories, and these categories are validation and ASAP structural factors. Factors
related to the validation are personal development, social integration, advisor mentorship, and appreciative practices. Career readiness, structured environment, academic integration, and financial support were factors directly related to the unique structure provided by the ASAP program.

**Validation.** The findings of this study support the literature that suggests that in order to succeed, community college students need to be validated through appreciative practices that take place, not only inside the classroom, but outside the classroom as well (Rendón, 1994). The theory of validation was developed by Rendón (1994) and included six elements that promote students’ involvement, development, retention, and persistence. The six elements of validation are: (a) initiating contact with the students, (b) motivating students’ learning through appreciative practices, (c) validation empowers students to be confident and to get involved, (d) occurs inside and outside the classroom, (e) must be seen as a developmental process that may continue over time, and (f) requires validation as early as the first few weeks of the college experience (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994). Participants of this study described experiencing validating actions through the following factors: personal development, social integration, advisor mentorship, and appreciative practices.

**Personal development.** As suggested by Rendón’s (1994) validation theory, participants of this study described how, through cocurricular involvement, they experienced personal growth and development. “When students are validated on a consistent basis, they are more likely to feel confident about themselves and their ability to learn and get involved in college life” (Rendón, 2011, p. 18). Similar to the second element of validation, which states that validation empowers students to be confident and
get involved (Rendón, 1994), the participants shared how they developed confidence in themselves. They also described developing the courage to speak in public and the ability to keep an open mind, which enabled them to get involved and grow. Rendón (2011) shared that students who feel validated get “proud when they are recognized as capable learners, and can develop a strong sense of confidence in themselves as students” (Rendón, 2011, p. 20). In addition to Rendón’s (1994) validation theory and the findings of this study, other researchers have concluded that participating in cocurricular activities help students learn, grow, and develop academically and interpersonally (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Waryas, 2015).

**Social integration.** Because of the validating agents of the ASAP program and through participation in cocurricular activities, participants stated that they were able to develop meaningful friendships. Additionally, participants felt interconnected with different areas of the campus, which helped them develop a deeper sense of belonging. When non-traditional students feel validated, they “acquire a confident, motivating, ‘I can do it’ attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student” (Rendón, 2011, p. 15). As the participants felt validated through their lived cocurricular experiences, they developed a sense of appreciation and belonging to the institution and the college community. Many of them shared having a shared sense of purpose with other ASAP students as they understood they were all going through similar experiences and learned to rely on each other while moving forward with their educational goals.

Similar to Rendón’s (1994) and the findings of this study, researchers have indicated that students who engage in academic and social activities while in college earn
higher grades and report a higher level of satisfaction with the college experience (Webber et al., 2013) while developing social skills (Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017). Additionally, students who engage and build support networks within the institution tend to persist at a higher rate than students who do not socially integrate (Vega, 2016).

**Advisor mentorship.** Participants of this study described developing a close relationship with their academic advisor as part of their required monthly meetings. Through their anecdotes, they shared that their academic advisors embodied the role of a friend, a guide, and a mentor. For the participants, having that close relationship with their advisors made them feel that someone cares for them and that they mattered to someone at the campus. Similar to what the participants described, Rendón (2011) states that “validating actions should be authentic, caring and nonpatronizing” (p.18). The participants explained the importance of having an assigned advisor they felt knew them well, so they didn’t have to tell their life stories to different people every time they needed assistance. They also explained how their advisors initiated contact with them until they felt comfortable to seek guidance regarding academic, career, and personal challenges. In addition to supporting Rendón’s (1994) validation theory, advisor mentorship is a factor supported by several researchers that emphasizes the importance of regular advisor-student engagement for students’ persistence and success (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Price & Tovar, 2014).

**Appreciative practices.** One example of appreciative practices is when “A validating team of faculty and counselors can provide students with care, encouragement, and support, as well as key information needed to transfer and academic skills needed to be successful in college” (Rendón, 2011, p. 21). Additionally, the participants of this
study shared feeling supported through the appreciative practices they experienced through their cocurricular participation. Participants shared how members of the ASAP office created an office environment where they felt emotionally supported and not judged. The supportive environment that participants experienced enabled them to seek help and build excitement about the future. Other researchers support the findings of this study and stress the importance of providing a supportive environment through all aspects of the college experience to promote community college students’ persistence and graduation (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Linderman & Kolenovic, 2013; Price & Tovar, 2014; Sommo et al., 2018; Watson & Chen, 2019).

**ASAP structural factors.** Students who participate in CUNY’s ASAP program benefit from having “comprehensive advisement, consolidated scheduling, cohort-course taking, career and employment services, tutoring, summer, and winter course-taking” as well as tuition waivers, MetroCards, and free use of textbook (Strumbos et al., 2018, p. 101). In addition, ASAP students are required to meet with their dedicated advisors a minimum of once per month, attend an engagement activity once per month with the goal of developing a sense of community, as well as preparing them either for transfer or the job market (Kirp, 2019; Kolenovic et al., 2013). As the participants engaged in the ASAP program while attending community college, they described how elements of the program supported their academic success and career skills development. The factors that emerged from the data analysis process were: career readiness, structured environment, academic integration, and financial support. The structural factors described by the participants support the literature that indicates that community college students who
receive a supportive, structured environment are more likely to succeed (Kolenovic et al., 2013; Watson & Chen, 2019).

**Career readiness.** As ASAP students are required to regularly participate in cocurricular activities with career focus as well as meeting with a career and employment specialist on a semester basis, participants described how engaging in these activities supported their preparation for the job searching process. Participants shared they were able to develop resumes, cover letters, LinkedIn profiles as well as completing a mock interview session. After the data analysis, career readiness was the most persistent factor mentioned by the participants. The high frequency of themes related to career readiness in this study are substantiated by the findings of a study conducted by Bell et al. (2016), which concluded that in order for low-income students to get involved in cocurricular activities, the activities need to be catered to specific needs, culture, or goals. The findings of Bell et al. (2016) also showed that when students understand the concrete outcomes related to cocurricular involvement, they are more inclined to participate. As the elements of the ASAP program related to career preparation are catered to a specific need and provided concrete outcomes, participants not only felt they got something out of the experience, they were able to remember the themes related to career readiness more often during the interviews.

Besides explaining their understanding and importance of their participation in cocurricular activities with a career focus, participants indicated gaining career skills similar to those described by Arum and Roksa (2011) as skills expected by employers. Some of the skills employers expect in recent graduates are written communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Similar skills
were discussed by the participants of this study as an outcome of their cocurricular experience. The skills that emerged through the data analysis were: professionalism, teamwork, as well as communication and organizational skills. The skills the participants gained through their cocurricular participation in ASAP, support the findings of Kuh (2001) study that noted that some of the skills developed through cocurricular involvement were problem-solving, teamwork, intrapersonal development, interpersonal competence, leadership, and ethics. Besides Kuh’s (2001) findings, the findings of this study are supported by recent researchers exploring the effect of cocurricular involvement (Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Fried, 2013; Massaro, 2019; Nunamaker et al., 2017; Peck & Preston, 2018).

Structured environment. As ASAP cocurricular activities are required for ASAP students, it was surprising for the researcher to discover that the participants described the required nature of the activities as a positive factor for their success. Participants shared that being required to participate in cocurricular activities forced them to get involved despite having to balance competing priorities, and a result, they discovered the positive value of the events. Researchers have suggested that due to the complicated lives and multiple commitments of non-traditional students, these students do not get involved in cocurricular activities nor with other members of the college community (Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013) which make their education an isolated experience (Sáenz et al., 2018). For the participants of this study, having the requirement to participate in out of the classroom activities enabled them to get involved, develop meaningful relationships, and ultimately, graduate successfully.
As part of the structured environment of ASAP, participants described feeling accountable to someone through the program’s requirements and how the sense of accountability supported their ability to stay focused on their graduation goals. Additionally, participants shared how the program’s requirements guided them through the transfer process while setting up an academic plan for beyond the associate degree completion. This finding is supported by studies that indicated students who enroll in structured programs that integrate academic, social-emotional, and financial support while in community college are more likely to attain their associate degrees (Bell et al., 2016; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Jenkins, 2011; Price & Tovar, 2014).

**Academic integration.** During the interviews, participants described how the requirements of the ASAP program promoted their academic integration while pursuing their associate's degrees. The participants shared how the ASAP tutoring support was integrated as part of the program’s services and requirements. They shared that they were able to get academic support in different subjects. In some instances, participants developed close relationships with tutors, which made them feel comfortable seeking frequent academic support. Through their cocurricular involvement, participants stated that they were able to stay focused on their studies, prove themselves academically, and practice what they learned inside the classroom. This factor supports the literature that indicates that students who develop the ability to regulate their learning and understanding of how they best learn, tend to graduate successfully (Fong et al., 2017; Nakajima et al., 2012).

**Financial support.** The graduates described how the financial support of the ASAP program removed obstacles toward their degree completion. Although the
majority of the ASAP students are federal and state aid recipients, they receive other financial benefits such as tuition waivers, MetroCards, and free use of textbooks as part of their affiliation with the ASAP program (Strumbos et al., 2018). As the main focus of this research was exploring the perceived effect of the cocurricular participation of the graduates, financial support was the factor with less frequency at the conclusion of the data analysis from the interviews. The reason for the low frequency of this factor was that the graduates were not able to link cocurricular involvement with financial support.

However, when participants were asked to rank factors in order of importance for their success as part of Research Question 4, financial support emerged as the number one factor. The graduates organized the following factors in order of importance: (a) connection and access to your academic advisor, (b) feeling that you belong to the college community, (c) the support of family and friends, (d) the support of ASAP staff, (e) the support of college's professors, (f) ability to work with a career advisor through the college experience, (g) ability to get financial aid, and (h) ability to get ASAP financial incentives. When asked about the rationale for their ranking, many of the graduates shared that due to having financial aid and the financial incentives of ASAP, they did not have to work additional hours, which enabled them to engage in cocurricular activities, remain focused on their studies, and graduate successfully.

The financial support factor is supported by the literature that suggests that “students who attend community colleges that provide a supportive environment through academic advising; non-academic supports, and financial supports are more engaged and more engagement around the support for learners’ benchmark is predictive of higher institutional graduation rates” (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 779). Additionally, the researcher
linked the low persistence of the themes related to financial support during the interviews to the fact that all ASAP students receive financial incentives such as MetroCards, textbooks, and tuition assistance. Therefore, financial support was not the most relevant factor that came to graduates’ minds when reflecting on their cocurricular experience and its relationship with their academic success.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. First, the study focused on a small sample size of 12 participants. The sample was purposefully selected and limited to graduates that participated in the ASAP program from the same community college of the City University of New York. The inclusion of students from the other six CUNY community colleges would have facilitated the presence of different viewpoints and better understandings of how diverse the ASAP graduates’ experiences were depending on the campus’ culture. Additionally, only students with a 3.0 GPA or better were included in the pool as part of the definition of success for the study. Therefore, the perspectives of students who graduated with a GPA between 2.0 and 2.99 were not represented in this study. Having the perspectives of graduates with a GPA below 3.0 may have provided a different viewpoint on the effect of cocurricular involvement for students who struggled academically.

Second, the findings of this study do not represent the perceptions of students while going through the ASAP experience. It might be important to compare how the perceptions of graduates differ from students who are currently going through the ASAP program and making positive progress towards graduation. Third, due to the public health crises created by COVID-19, all the in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted
through video conference rather than in-person. The data collection might have been more robust if in-person interviews were possible. Lastly, the researcher is an administrator at the research site, and although the researcher did not have direct contact with the participants when they were students, the researcher's positionality may have affected the way participants responded to the questions. Having someone not affiliated with the education institution may reduce the study’s potential bias and subjectivity.

**Recommendations**

The findings of this study enabled the researcher to formulate recommendations that can be used to inform and enhance the current community college’s engagement and retention practices. The recommendations should be adopted by higher education administrators, student affairs practitioners, and policymakers to improve community college students’ success.

**Student-advisor assignment.** Participants of this study shared the importance of their relationship with their advisors and how this relationship enabled them to develop a sense of belonging and better integrate themselves with the campus. College leadership may improve retention by creating structures that provide students with consistent and individualized advisement from the point of entry through graduation. The participants of this study had an assigned advisor who helped them navigate the college and helped them understand the importance of getting involved. Having an assigned advisor may help students clarify their educational goals (Hawley & Harris, 2016) and set an individualized academic plan to complete their degrees successfully. Several researchers highlighted in Chapter 2 have indicated that providing a supportive environment through academic advisement may improve students’ retention and graduation rates (Kolenovic et al., 2013;
Price & Tovar, 2014; Strumbos et al., 2018; Vega, 2016). Given the capacity and financial challenges of assigning all students to professional academic advisors, integrating faculty and peer-mentors as part of the student-advisor assignment process may reduce the student to advisor load and improve the quality of interactions needed to engage and support students proactively.

**Outcome-driven cocurricular activities.** Participants of this study found their cocurricular involvement beneficial to their development as well as their social and academic integration. As community college students typically do not get involved in cocurricular activities due to their complicated lives and competing priorities (Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013), higher education administrators should coordinate and provide cocurricular activities with concrete learning outcomes in mind. The literature indicates that low-income students typically get involved when the cocurricular activities are catered to specific needs, culture, or goals (Bell et al., 2016). Based on the structured experience of the participants, cocurricular activities should be an intentional, coordinated effort by faculty, advisors, career, transfer, and student life offices to ensure students have the opportunity to get involved through all aspects of the college experience. For the participants, they not only had an assigned advisor, but they were required to participate in activities catered to helping them prepare for future careers and transfer to a 4-year institution. As career readiness was the most persistent factor after the data analysis, career services offices should work closely with faculty, academic advisors, and student life offices in promoting and assisting students developing not only professional competencies, but a career readiness toolkit that includes a resume, cover letter, LinkedIn profile and the experience of going through a mock interview. Besides
remembering these concrete activities, participants shared they were able to gain skills such as communication, organization, and teamwork as part of their participation in career-focused activities.

**Structured, supportive environment.** Participants of this study indicated that the structure of the ASAP program helped them get involved and develop a sense of belonging with the institution and confidence to seek help. Price and Tovar (2014) stated that “students who attend community colleges that provide a supportive environment through academic advising, non-academic supports, and financial supports are more engaged and more engagement around the support for learners’ benchmark is predictive of higher institutional graduation rates” (p. 779). In addition to the structured, supportive environment suggested by Price and Tovar (2014) and Jenkins (2011), programs such as CUNY’s ASAP and Ohio’s Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL) demonstrate the impact of the structured environment and financial support in students’ success, as these programs have doubled the 3-year graduation rates when compared with students who do not participate in these programs within the same institutions (Sommo et al., 2018; Strumbos et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2019). Looking at the supportive elements and structured cocurricular activities of programs like ASAP may provide insights into how to improve the retention and graduation of community college students.

**Future research.** This qualitative phenomenological study explored factors related to cocurricular involvement contributing to students’ academic success and career skill development through the lens of community college graduates who participated in the CUNY’s ASAP program. The literature review and this study’s findings uncovered the opportunity for further research to inform and improve community college students’
involvement, retention, and success. The opportunity for further research are highlighted below.

- Future studies should be conducted among community college students who are participating in the ASAP program while making positive progress towards graduation. This information may help to compare how the ASAP experience is perceived by current students who have to balance multiple priorities and the demands of the ASAP program versus students who have graduated and had some time separation from the institution. This information may help program administrators to make necessary adjustments, if any, to current business practices in order to improve the experience of current students.

- Future studies on this topic should use a quantitative methodology to capture the perspectives of a larger group of community college graduates who have participated in supportive, structured programs to assess if the factors identified by the participants of this study differ from other students based on their experiences. This information could help college administrators to intentionally embed the factors identified by this study in their student retention and success strategies.

- Future research should be conducted among community college graduates who have actively and voluntarily participated in cocurricular activities with a career focus. It would be beneficial to assess if the career competencies identified by the participants of this study are described by other students who have gone through similar experiences. Future studies in the area may provide data that can support the integration of career development theories in different aspects of the
cocurricular planning to better assess the competencies gained by students as a result of their participation.

- Future studies should explore how the effect of cocurricular involvement may differ among students from different age groups. Based on the findings of this study, students in the age group between 18-24 described friendship with peers and the relationship with their advisors as essential elements of their college experience. On the other hand, students older than 25 emphasized the relationship with their advisors as more important than having peer friends. This information could be important for college administrators to develop support programs catered to the specific needs of adult learners.

- Future studies should explore the effect of cocurricular involvement among community college students who receive a structured, supportive environment but without the additional financial incentives received by the participants through ASAP. Participants of this study shared that they were able to engage due to having financial aid and the financial incentives of ASAP. It would be beneficial to assess the likelihood of students’ participation in cocurricular activities based on the validating agents of a supportive environment without having the financial perks as an incentive.

**Conclusion**

Community colleges contribute to the academic advancement of almost half of the bachelor’s degree recipients in the United States as 45% of the graduates started their education in a community college (AACC, 2015). Although community colleges contribute to the bachelor’s degree completion, the 3-year graduation rate for these
Educational institutions remain at a discouraging rate of 32% (NCES, 2019b). Traditionally, community colleges have served as a gateway for underrepresented communities and non-traditional students into higher education (Levin & Garcia, 2017). Seminal studies conducted by Tinto, Astin, and Kuh at traditional 4-year institutions, established that student involvement has a positive impact on student persistence (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1991; Tinto, 1987). The challenge with generalizing the seminal work of Tinto, Astin, and Kuh for community college students is that their studies were conducted in 4-year institutions, and their models do not take into account how the background of non-traditional students may affect their ability to engage (Braxton et al., 2004; Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Activities labeled as cocurricular contribute to the students’ development of cognitive and relational skills that are frequently endorsed as learning outcomes by higher education institutions and are skills that employers seek when hiring recent graduates (AACU, 2013; Kuh, 2008; NACE, 2011; U. S. Department of Labor, 2000). The problem is that due to the complicated lives and multiple competing priorities of community college students, they tend to have an isolated experience (Sáenz et al., 2018) as they are not able to engage in activities outside the classroom while in college (Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013). Therefore, most of the available literature on students’ involvement stems from 4-year institutions and the literature review of cocurricular involvement in community colleges indicates that there is a need for further studies to understand the factors that contribute to community college students’ success (Fong et al., 2017; Hawley & Harris, 2016; Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013; Martin et al., 2014; Peterson, 2016), and the effect of cocurricular engagement on students’ academic
performance (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012; Coker et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2014; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014), and career skill development (Benjamin & Boettcher, 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Soria et al., 2018; Webber et al., 2013).

The purpose of the study was to explore community college graduates’ perceptions of their cocurricular involvement and its effect on their academic success and career skill development as a result of their participation in the City University of New York’s Accelerated Studies in Associate Programs. ASAP is a program that has doubled the graduation rate of community college students through the coordination of support services that include frequent academic advisement, social integration through participation in required cocurricular activities, and financial incentives (Kirp, 2019; Kolenovic et al., 2013; Smith, 2019; Weiss et al., 2019). As Price and Tovar (2014) indicated, institutions that provide students with structured academic, social-emotional and financial support tend to have higher graduation rates, this study aimed to increase the body of literature regarding cocurricular factors that contribute to the increase in community college students’ engagement, career skills development, retention, and graduation rates.

Rendón’s (1994) validation theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Validation theory derives from Astin’s (1984) seminal study on students’ retention and persistence. Rendón (1994) realized that Astin’s (1984) findings were mainly applicable to 4-year college students and not to community college students who, in their majority, are low-income and first-generation students. Validation refers to the proactive and intentional affirmation of students' experiences inside and outside the classroom through supportive practices (Rendón, 2011).
Rendón (1994) stated that non-traditional and low-income students tend to have negative and invalidating experiences with education before college, and by providing a positive and affirmative environment, students develop confidence in themselves as learners. The theory of validation has six elements that promote students’ involvement, development, retention, and persistence: (a) initiating contact with the students, (b) motivating students’ learning through appreciative practices, (c) validation empowers students to be confident and to get involved, (d) occurs inside and outside the classroom, (e) must be seen as a developmental process that may continue over time; and (f) requires validation as early as the first few weeks of the college experience (Rendón-Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1994).

The researcher used Rendón’s (1994) validation theory as the theoretical framework and the following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success?
2. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its relation to their career skill development?
3. What role, if any, did ASAP’s curricular and cocurricular requirements contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners?
4. To what extent did factors such as academic advisement, social integration, support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP graduates to persist?
This study explored the lived experiences of 12 community college graduates who participated in the CUNY’s ASAP program and their perceived effect of their cocurricular involvement in their academic success and career skill development. The researcher employed a qualitative, phenomenological data collection method for this study. The data was collected through a pre-interview questionnaire and in-depth one-on-one interviews. This study supports the literature that suggests that community college students who are validated through affirmative and supportive practices (Rendón, 1994, 2011) and “through academic advising; non-academic supports and financial supports are more engaged and more engagement around the support for learners’ benchmark is predictive of higher institutional graduation rates” (Price & Tovar, 2014, p. 779).

Through the data analysis of the participants’ interviews, this study revealed eight factors that contributed to the students’ academic success and career skill development through their required participation in cocurricular activities as part of the ASAP program. These factors are: (a) career readiness, (b) personal development, (c) social integration, (d) advisor mentorship, (e) structured environment, (f) appreciative practices, (g) academic integration, and (h) financial support. These factors are either related to Rendón’s (1994) validation theory or elements of the ASAP program, and the participants indicated how they all played a role in their academic success and career skill development.

This study provides recommendations that can be used to inform and enhance the current community colleges’ engagement and retention practices. The recommendations include student-advisor assignment, outcome-driven cocurricular activities, and structured, supportive environment.
First, in order to ensure community college students are validated through proactive and supportive practices, they should be assigned to an advisor that can connect them with the rest of the campus and guide them with academic and personal challenges from the point of entry through graduation. The advisor role can be embodied by faculty, peers, and other campus support areas. Second, to get community college students to participate in cocurricular activities, these activities need to provide clear and tangible outcomes. The activities should be coordinated through areas of the campus to ensure many of the activities can be embedded through different curricular and cocurricular functions. Third, institutions should try to adopt practices employed by programs such as ASAP in order to provide a more structured experience for community college students. By ensuring community college students receive social-emotional support and validation through curricular and cocurricular practices, institutions may improve the overall retention and success of their students.

This study contributes to the body of literature related to community college students’ retention, graduation, and cocurricular involvement, as discussed in Chapter 2. This study gave a voice to 12 community college graduates who, despite the current statistics on community college graduation, were able to graduate with a 3.0 GPA or better and have moved on with their plans to pursue their bachelor’s degrees. Through the participant’s voices, this study provides alternatives as to how to increase community college students’ involvement in cocurricular activities while supporting their social and academic integration. The insights provided by this study may help other researchers and practitioners in the field of higher education to address the persistence and graduation challenges faced by community college students.
References


Appendix A

Letter of Support

April 27, 2020

St. John Fisher College
Education Doctorate in Executive Leadership (Ed.D.)
Iona College Extension Site

Dear Colleagues,

I’m writing to express CUNY’s [Redacted] Community College pledge of cooperation in support of Ramon De Los Santos’ proposed research, a qualitative phenomenological study to explore community college graduates’ perceptions of the effect of co-curricular involvement on their academic success and career skill development.

In addition, we understand that Mr. De Los Santos is interested in learning about what factors of the CUNY’s ASAP required practices contributed to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners.

Furthermore, we understand that Mr. De Los Santos’ proposed data collection method involves interviewing [Redacted] ASAP graduates from Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 either at [Redacted] Community College or through a video conference platform.

We support Mr. De Los Santos’ proposed research and will help him in any way possible, within the parameters approved by the IRB at St. John Fisher and CUNY, to conduct this important study. Thank you for your consideration and support.

Sincerely,
Appendix B

Qualtrics Introductory email

Dear Student,

I’m a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College completing a dissertation study entitled: *Community College Graduates’ Perceptions of the Effect of Cocurricular Involvement on Their Academic Success and Career Skill Development.*

I’m contacting you to request your participation in my online questionnaire that may lead you to be selected for my research study. Based on the date of your graduation from at XXXX Community College and your completion of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), you have been selected to participate in a questionnaire that can be accessed in the following link: XXXX

After completing the questionnaire, you may be contacted to participate in an in-depth interview. I hope you consider this interview request, as it is important for me to hear your stories.

The benefit of participating in this study will be having the satisfaction that you have helped educators and policymakers learn about experiences and resources that may support students in completing their associate degrees. Your participation in this study could also impact future opportunity programs and resources designated to support community college students through graduation around the U.S.

Please feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email me at XXXX@SJFC.edu if you have any questions before answering the online survey.

Thank you for your time.
Appendix C
Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral student who is in pursuit of a Doctor of Education in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College. You are asked to participate in this study because you are a community college graduate who also completed the Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP) either in the Fall of 2018 or the Spring of 2018. The Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College has approved this study. There is no penalty for not participating in this study.

Title of the Research Study:
Community College Graduates’ Perceptions of the Effect of Cocurricular Involvement on Their Academic Success and Career Skill Development.

Investigator:
Ramon De Los Santos

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to explore community college graduates’ perception of their cocurricular involvement, and its effect on their academic success and career skill development.

Participation:
Your participation will involve completing a face-to-face or video conference semi-structured interview. The interview process should take no longer than 90 minutes to complete. The interview will take place in the summer of 2020, either at the college from which you have graduated or through a video conference.

Risks:
The level of anticipated risk is minimal, as you may become uncomfortable answering some of the questions.

Benefits:
The benefit of participating in this study will be having the satisfaction that you have helped educators and policymakers learn about experiences and resources that support students in completing their associate degrees. Your participation in this study could impact future opportunity programs and resources designated to support community college students through graduation around the U.S.

Compensation:
You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study.
Audio/ Video Recording
To aid the researcher with the accurate documentation of the participants’ responses, interviews may be recorded using an audio or video recording device. You have the right to disallow such recording without penalty. All digital recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer-stored securely in the private home of the researcher. Electronic files will be assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; they will not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study. The digital recording, transcripts, questionnaires, and informed consent forms will be kept by the researcher for a period of three years following the dissertation publication. After three years, the data will be erased, and documents will be shredded.

Please select one of the following options:
I consent to audio or video recording: □ Yes □ No

Confidentiality
To ensure confidentiality, each participant will be assigned alphanumeric codes for identification purposes. Consent forms will be protected in a locked safe at the college for three years. Audio recordings and transcribed data will be kept in a password protected cloud storage application for three years following the interview.

Participant Rights:
You can decide to be a part of this study or not. Once you start, you can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions from the study. You have the right to view your responses to questions of the study. You have the right to be informed of the results of the study.

Questions/Comments:
If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me by e-mail: XXX@SJFC.edu or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. For questions about your rights as a study participant, or any concerns or complaints, please contact St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board via e-mail at IRB@sjfc.edu.

Signature and Acknowledgement:
By signing this form, you agree that you understand the nature of the study, the possible risks to you as a participant, and how your identity will be kept confidential. When you sign this form, this means that you are 18 years old or older and that you give your permission to volunteer as a participant in the study that is described in this consent form.

Signature of the participant ________________________ Date ______________
Printed name of participant ________________________ Date ______________
Signature of the researcher ________________________Date ______________
Appendix D
Qualtrics Pre-Interview Questionnaire

1) **Age:** What is your age?
   a) 18-24 years old
   b) 25-34 years old
   c) 35-44 years old
   d) 45-54 years old
   e) 55 years old or older

2) **Gender Identity:** To which gender identity do you most identify?
   a) Female
   b) Male
   c) Transgender Female
   d) Transgender Male
   e) Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
   f) Other _____________
   g) Prefer not to answer

3) **Race:** How would you identify yourself given the following choices?
   a) Asian, Pacific Islander
   b) Black, Non-Hispanic
   c) Hispanic-Puerto Rican
   d) Hispanic-Other
   e) Native American
   f) White-Non-Hispanic
   g) Other

4) **Marital Status:** While pursuing your Associate Degree, were you?
   a) Married
   b) Widowed
   c) Divorced
   d) Separated
   e) Not Married

5) **Parenting:** Were you a parent when pursuing your Associate Degree?
   a) Yes
   b) No

6) **Employment Status:** while pursuing your Associate Degree, were you…?
   a) Employed for wages
   b) Self-employed
c) Out of work and looking for work  
d) Out of work but not looking for work  
e) A homemaker  
f) Military  
g) Retired  
h) Unable to work

7) **Household Income**: When pursuing your associate degree, what was your total household income?  
a) Less than $20,000  
b) $20,000 to $39,999  
c) $40,000 to $49,999  
d) $50,000 to $64,999  
e) $65,000 to $84,999  
f) $85,000 to $99,999  
g) $100,000 or more

8) **First Generation**: Are you the first in your immediate family, consisting of your parents, siblings, children, or primary caretakers, to complete a degree at a higher education institution?  
a) Yes  
b) No

9) **Graduation**: When did you obtain your associate degree?  
a) Fall 2018  
b) Spring 2019

10) **Occupation**: Are you currently…?  
a) Employed full-time  
b) Employed part-time  
c) Employed and attending school  
d) Attending school and not working  
e) Out of work and looking for work  
f) Out of work but not currently looking for work

11) **Interview Interest**: Would you interested in participating in an in-depth interview?  
a) Yes  
b) No

12) **Interview Modality**: How would you prefer to have an interview?  
a) In-person interview  
b) A virtual interview through Zoom

13) **Contact Information**: how do you prefer to be contacted?  
a) E-mail.__________________________  
b) Phone: _______________________
## Appendix E

Research and Semi-Structured Interview Questions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
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| 1. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its effect on their academic success? | 1. Please describe what role the ASAP required activities played in your ability to graduate?  
2. Please describe how participating in ASAP required activities supported your academic progress? |
| 2. What is the perception of ASAP graduates' cocurricular participation and its relation to their career skill development? | 3. Please describe what role the ASAP required career activities played in your preparation for your career? Do you feel you gained any skills through these experiences? If so, what kind? If not, why do you think you did not? |
| 3. What role, if any, did ASAP’s curricular and cocurricular requirements contribute to the affirmation of internal motivations and the validation of graduates as learners? | 4. What role did ASAP required activities play in your motivation to graduate? Did you feel connected to the campus through the ASAP required activities? If so, which of the activities helped you develop this sense of connection? If not, why do you think you did not? |
| 4. To what extend did factors such as academic advisement, social integration, support networks, career planning, and financial support influence ASAP graduates to persist? | 5. What role, if any, did ASAP’s requirements such as full-time enrollment, tutoring, and blocked-course participation play in your academic progress and your ability to develop connections with different members of the college community? |
| 6. What challenges, if any, you had to overcome in order to graduate? If so, what role, if any, ASAP played in helping you navigate these challenges? | 7. Please rank the following factors in order of importance to your graduation, 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important:  
- Connection and access to your academic advisor  
- Feeling that you belong to the college community  
- The support of family and friends  
- The support of ASAP staff and college faculty  
- Ability to work with a career advisor through the college experience  |

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|   | Ability to get Financial Aid  
|---| Ability to get ASAP financial incentives  
| 8. | Could you explain why you consider your number 1 factor the most important one? |