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# A Mixed Methods Study of Community College Students on Academic Probation: The Limiting Effect of Academic Doublespeak

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# A Mixed Methods Study of Community College Students on Academic Probation: The Limiting Effect of Academic Doublespeak

## **Abstract**

A mixed methods study of students placed on academic probation at Onondaga Community College (OCC) in Syracuse, New York, revealed that voluntary participation in an intervention program yielded limited change in participants' grades when compared to probationary students who did not participate. Only 29% of participants and nonparticipants improved their grades to return to good academic standing. Grades were compared between the program participant group and the non-participant group and a statistical analysis applying an independent sample t-test (comparing the mean GPAs), as well as an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (comparing the means of three groupings) resulted in no statistically significant differences between the treatment and nontreatment groups. Through semi-structured interviews, students expressed a strong desire to complete a college degree, but exhibited limited actions to improve their ability to meet this goal. The academic doublespeak of colleges promotes the concept that students should come to college prepared as independent learners but seek assistance when needed. The participants associated independence in college with growing up, working on their own, and therefore, succumbing to supports such as the probation program, was considered failure. Colleges should explore this conflicting message further. The students' lack of engagement in success-oriented academic behaviors provided the researcher with data to conclude that the offering of academic assistance without explicit or mandatory direction to use it, limits the success of probationary students at this community college.

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A Mixed Methods Study of Community College Students on Academic Probation: The  
Limiting Effect of *Academic Doublespeak*

By

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

Supervised by

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family who sacrificed to support me during this program and the writing of the dissertation. My husband, John, provided me with encouragement throughout the process and his unwavering confidence inspired me to continue, even in the wee hours of the morning when sleep would have been preferred. His love and dedication as a father and husband hold a special place in my heart. My sons, Jack and Sean, have given up many hours with their mother, which included vacation time. They patiently awaited my return each weekend I spent away from home. There are not enough words to thank them for that. I hope they will have the opportunities to pursue their dreams with passion and persistence.

I would also like to thank my parents, Jan and Amity Kokochak, for providing me with the necessary means to attend college and I am grateful for their continued support and encouragement. Additionally, I dedicate this to my late grandfather, Hiram Winsor, who provided me with a solid foundation of work ethic, integrity, and spirit to pursue all my dreams and goals.

Finally, I honor those who came before me to make higher education a reality for all who wish to attend. It is this mission of access that inspires my daily work, this study, and more to come.

## Biographical Sketch

Kristine Duffy is currently Associate Vice President of Enrollment Services at Onondaga Community College. Ms. Duffy attended the State University of New York at Brockport from 1983 to 1987 and graduated with a Bachelor of Sciences degree in Business Administration. She attended Russell Sage College/Sage Graduate School from 1989 to 1993 and graduated with a Master of Sciences degree in Guidance and Counseling. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2008 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Duffy pursued her research in student retention at community colleges under the direction of Dr. John Travers and received the Ed.D. degree in 2010.

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## Abstract

A mixed methods study of students placed on academic probation at Onondaga Community College (OCC) in Syracuse, New York, revealed that voluntary participation in an intervention program yielded limited change in participants' grades when compared to probationary students who did not participate. Only 29% of participants and non-participants improved their grades to return to good academic standing. Grades were compared between the program participant group and the non-participant group and a statistical analysis applying an independent sample *t*-test (comparing the mean GPAs), as well as an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (comparing the means of three groupings) resulted in no statistically significant differences between the treatment and non-treatment groups.

Through semi-structured interviews, students expressed a strong desire to complete a college degree, but exhibited limited actions to improve their ability to meet this goal. The *academic doublespeak* of colleges promotes the concept that students should come to college prepared as independent learners but seek assistance when needed. The participants associated independence in college with growing up, working on their own, and therefore, succumbing to supports such as the probation program, was considered failure. Colleges should explore this conflicting message further. The students' lack of engagement in success-oriented academic behaviors provided the researcher with data to conclude that the offering of academic assistance without explicit

or mandatory direction to use it, limits the success of probationary students at this community college.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Introduction and Background*

Community colleges play a major role in educating Americans, enrolling nearly one-half of all undergraduates and providing access to many students who might not otherwise attend college (AACC, 2008). The ability for all, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, and previous academic success, to pursue higher education is the hallmark of the community college mission. Those who support this mission are “...dedicated to the belief that all individuals should have the opportunity to rise to their greatest potential” (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 10). The advancement of open access occurred in 1947 when President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education introduced the concept of access for all by supporting the growth of the community college (Cohen & Brawer). The spread of community colleges introduced college education to communities across the country, expanding from 650 colleges in 1947 to 1,091 in 1970 (p. 15) at which time growth slowed. The most recent data available indicates the number of community colleges to be 1,177 (AACC, 2009).

College completion is important to society and its citizens. Job possibilities and subsequently, higher earning potential relate directly to the completion of higher education and both increase with each level of degree attainment. Information from the U.S. Census Bureau for 2000 indicates the average annual earning difference between a high school graduate and associate’s degree recipient was \$8,000 (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004). Educational attainment is increasingly considered the most important

factor in improving and maintaining the country's economic stability (McClenney, 2004). Additionally, the social role that community colleges play in providing opportunity for those who have been marginalized in society cannot be overlooked. "There is no more important work in American society than this work. Furthermore, it may be said with conviction that *to be successful in this work is not just a professional challenge. It is a moral obligation*" (McClenney, p.13). The work ahead for many community colleges in maintaining their moral obligation is to contend with increasing enrollments and declining student success, as measured by retention and graduation rates.

Enrollment in public, community colleges across the nation reached 6.3 million in 2007, which is a considerable increase from 1963 when enrollment at community colleges was less than 1 million students ([http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08\\_189.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_189.asp) ). However, only 29% of students nationwide who begin at a community college complete a degree within 3 years compared to 51% of four-year college students who earn a degree within 5 years (ACT, 2008). The graduation rate (defined as a cohort of first-time, full-students who complete a degree within 150% of the prescribed time) became government standard when The Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act of 1991 was enacted. This legislation required institutions, both four-year and two-year colleges, to publish graduation rates in order to inform students about a college's success in graduating students (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006).

The state of retention of diverse populations (identified in this context by race/ethnicity) when comparing underrepresented students with those who are White, is significantly lower as indicated in a descriptive analysis of national data on two and four-

year college enrollment and retention (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005). A review of all undergraduate student enrollments over a 10-year period (1992-2002) indicated growth of Hispanic and African American students from 8% to 12% and 10% to 12% respectively. Community colleges enroll a larger proportion of Hispanic and African American students than four-year colleges (Bailey et al., p. 13). African American community college students have the lowest rate of completion (defined as completion of a certificate, associates degree, baccalaureate degree or transfer to a four-year institution) within 6 years at 37%, compared to Hispanic students (42%) and White students (52%). Although the rate of attendance of African American and Hispanic students (the largest percentage of non-White students enrolled in college) has been increasing, it is clear that retention is a considerable problem for these groups of students. Therefore, the data described here suggests that a problem exists when large numbers of community college students are not successfully completing degrees and particularly those who have historically been underserved in higher education.

This national retention problem is also evident at Onondaga Community College (OCC) in Syracuse, New York, the setting for this study. The latest report from the Office of Institutional Research and Planning revealed a 3-year graduation rate of 22% for the cohort of students who began at OCC in 2001. The same graduation rate declined to 16% for the 2003 cohort but has increased to 20% for the 2005 cohort (OCC 2009a). This result is far below the national average reported in 2001 of 32% (ACT, 2001). In reviewing the rates of retention for underrepresented students at OCC, the results also mirror the national statistics. The fall 2007 student cohort was studied, and results indicated that 60% of White students retained to the following fall semester whereas 40%

of African American students retained (OCC 2008a). Graduation rates are one measure of student success but are built upon successful completion of each semester a student is enrolled at the college. Supporting the success of students who enroll in college is a fundamental obligation of the college, as well as an expectation of the student enrollee when the student and institution form a partnership or a “covenantal relationship” (Hirsch, 2001, p. 2) to meet the student’s goal.

### *Problem Statement*

Many studies have been conducted in an attempt to identify the causes of this retention problem at both four-year and two-year colleges. The studies have focused on demographic characteristics such as age (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985), socioeconomic background (Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986; Schmid & Abel, 2003), race/ethnicity (Mohammadi, 1994; Weissman, Bulakowski, & Junisho, 1998, Wells, 2008), as well as academic preparation (Adelman, 2006; Astin, 1977; Hawley & Harris, 2005). Additionally, the characteristics of various colleges have been studied and are also considered to be important factors contributing to the retention problem (Bailey et al., 2005). Finally, a student’s academic performance, particularly in the first year of college, has been considered an influential factor on college departure (Adelman, 2006; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005; Tinto, 1987).

Approximately 8% of OCC students placed onto academic probation at the end of the fall 2008 semester. Academic probation is a designation for students who have attempted 12 credit hours in a given semester and earned a cumulative grade point average of 1.45 (on a 4.0 scale) or below (OCC, 2009d). The percentage of students



placed on academic probation has risen in the past four years from 6.6% in 2005 to 7.9% in 2008 (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1

*Students Placed on Probation*

Semester of review	Fall 2005	Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008
Total number reviewed	4718	5278	5569	5793
Number on probation	315	424	423	458
% on probation	6.68%	8.03%	7.60%	7.91%

To further illustrate the low achievement of students at OCC, data from the college's student information system reveals that of all the first-time, full-time students who began their studies in the fall of 2007 (n=1529), 33% (n=504) had not earned any credits and, therefore, received an end-of-semester GPA of 0.00. Students earning low grades and consequently not earning credits towards a degree are at risk of either being dismissed from the college or voluntarily withdrawing with no success. Consequently, they add to the declining retention and graduation rates at OCC. The college has done little to intervene with failing students until a new initiative was put in place by the Counseling Department in the spring 2009 semester. The Counseling Department's program was designed to improve student success and ultimately increase the college's retention rates.

### *Setting of the Study*

The study was conducted at OCC, a unit of the State University of New York. The college was founded in 1961 and is a large, publicly funded, urban community college with nearly 12,000 students ([http://www.sunyocc.edu/about.aspx?coll\\_id=0](http://www.sunyocc.edu/about.aspx?coll_id=0)). The main campus is located in Syracuse, NY, a mid-sized city in the county of Onondaga. The county's population in 2008 was 452,000 and the City of Syracuse population was 138,000 (US Census, 2008). The area has suffered from job losses in manufacturing (2000 jobs were lost between 2008 and 2009) and the unemployment rate approached 10% in June of 2009 (NYS DOL, 2009). Enrollment for the fall 2009 semester at OCC grew for the fourth consecutive year and the economic climate in the Upstate New York region has prompted many more students to choose a community college as an affordable option to begin their college careers (<http://students.sunyocc.edu/life.aspx?id=22580>).

The majority of OCC students come from Onondaga County. Nonetheless, there are students enrolled from counties throughout New York State, as well as 20 foreign countries and 25 states (OCC 2008b). The college grants associates degrees and certificates in 49 programs with the largest numbers of students in general studies; liberal arts: humanities and social sciences; liberal arts: mathematics and science; business administration; and criminal justice (OCC, 2008b). Although the students at OCC are primarily a commuting population, there are 585 students residing in suite-style residence halls on campus. These residence halls were built in 2006 and provide housing to students who seek a more traditional college experience. This residential component has challenged the college administration and faculty to provide expanded services and

support to students. The residential component at OCC has yet to be studied in terms of its impact on retaining students.

The college has a tremendous impact on the local community and economy through its large workforce, who generally live in the area and students who typically stay in the region upon graduation. OCC employs 593 full-time and 946 part-time faculty, staff, and administrators who primarily live in the community. The revenue generated by the college operations is estimated at more than \$50 million annually for the region it serves through its operating and capital spending (Robison & Christophersen, 2008). Enrollment has grown since 2003, and the trend is expected to continue based on the demand for education. This upward enrollment trend has become increasingly apparent in large part due to substantial company layoffs and difficult economic times. Therefore, the strain on the college's resources and its ability to support students continues to be a significant challenge for college administrators.

*Researcher's role.* The planning of strategies to address OCC's retention and enrollment challenges has become a primary job responsibility of the researcher. Serving as the Chief Enrollment Officer, the researcher's job requires among other important responsibilities, exacting attention to the enrollment issues facing the institution. The Chief Enrollment Officer is responsible for facilitating the process of enrollment planning in order to optimize resources to recruit and to retain students. The researcher is deeply involved in collecting data and reporting trends and through this work discovered gaps in the college's support systems and programs to help students succeed. Low grades and lack of course completion at OCC present a significant problem for the college, as well as the impacted students. This problem guided the development of this study.

To address the retention and graduation problem at OCC, a committee has been created of faculty and administrators. This committee coordinates the efforts on campus to support success, to gather relevant data, and to conduct research to determine the roots of this retention problem. This study was an example of the work requested by the retention committee. It is hoped that the results of the study of students placed on academic probation will assist OCC in addressing its retention problem.

### *Theoretical Rationale*

The ability of students to integrate fully into the college experience, both academically and socially, will determine whether a student voluntarily withdraws from college and are key concepts of the theoretical framework constructed by Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993). The theory of student departure is constructed on the premise that students will depart an institution if they determine the institution does not support their goals and commitments. In other words, the ability of the institution to support students' integration into the academic and social life will either strengthen or weaken their commitment to continue.

Relationships with peers and faculty in the classroom, positive feedback, and intellectual stimulation are contributors to academic integration. Social integration variables (although separate but considered interdependent) would include involvement in extra-curricular activities, as well as opportunities to meet with peers and create friendships (Tinto, 1987). Therefore, the experiences of adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation are four forms described by Tinto as influencing departure. One example of incongruence occurs when a student's academic ability does not match an institution's expectation, which causes the student difficulty and frequently results in

departure. If students cannot meet the academic rigor of the college, then the institution has to determine how and when to intervene in order to assist students in improving their commitment (motivation) and clarifying their intentions (goals) to improve their academic success. This particular construct is the focus of the study at OCC as it relates to students who are not succeeding in the classroom and are demonstrating a lack of congruence with the college's academic expectations.

There are limitations to the theory of student departure when applied to the community college setting because students typically commute to campus. Therefore, the students have limited opportunities to engage in social activities beyond what can be accomplished in the classroom. In addition, this theory, according to Tinto (1993), is intended to provide colleges with an understanding of individual student departure and he posits less than 15% of withdrawal is due to academic failure. This contradicts a recent finding at OCC where data from the college's student information system indicated that 70% of the students who did not return to the college between fall 2007 and fall 2008 earned below a 2.0 GPA. Therefore, it may be that in the community college environment where students are considered less prepared for college level work, academic performance plays a larger role in determining whether students stay or leave.

The focus on academic integration (defined as academic success through intellectual development and connections in the classroom) as a key construct is the framework for this study of students on academic probation at OCC. Tinto (1987) proposes the creation of an early warning system as a guiding principle in assisting higher education leaders to improve the academic integration of students. Seidman (2005) provided a formula to guide higher education leaders in developing strategies to improve

retention rates on any college campus (both four and two-year colleges). Drawing from one of Tinto's principles of early intervention, the Seidman Retention Formula (Seidman, 2005, p. 296) states  $RETention = Early_{Identification} + (Early + Intensive + Continuous)_{Intervention}$  or  $RET = E_{ID} + (E + I + C)_{IV}$ . This formula described by Seidman provides guidance to colleges in improving retention rates by indicating the need to identify students early who are most at risk for dropping out. The key component of this formula is early identification, which is the reason colleges use a warning system such as placing students on academic probation. However, simply identifying students without intervention may yield little in helping to improve the retention of students. Therefore, it is the action colleges take with this student population that has the potential to improve student success.

### *Significance of the Study*

The college administration recognized its need to improve retention and received funding through the U.S. Department of Education Strengthening Institutions Program. The program offers grants to institutions of higher education to improve academic programs, institutional management, and fiscal stability (OCC, 2009b). This \$1.9 million grant seeks to improve the retention of students through enhanced orientation, advisement, and first-year experience programs. In addition, it establishes an early-alert system to assist college advisors to intervene with students in trouble as early as possible (OCC, 2009c). These activities have been identified as best practices by many scholars of student retention (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, (Eds.), 2005; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005; Noel, Levitz & Saluri, (Eds.), 1985; Tinto, 1987). Evaluation measures and procedures are built into the grant's guidelines and will provide continuous assessment of

the grant's goals throughout the 5-year grant cycle. The grant's identified objectives are ambitious with the primary goal of improving the retention of students through these practices. If the goals and objectives of the grant are realized, the result will be to change the way the college supports students in a fundamental way.

In contrast to having the monetary support provided by the Title III grant to implement new strategies, the college's Counseling Department members developed and implemented a pilot program in an attempt to improve the success of OCC students. This intervention program includes administering a student behavior questionnaire, developing an educational plan that includes referrals to on-campus support centers, and using a series of communication actions to monitor the students' progress throughout the semester. The goals of this pilot program included (a) assisting students in identifying behaviors that contribute to academic failure, (b) developing an academic achievement plan to improve performance, (c) monitoring the progress of students by gathering feedback from faculty and support resource staff on campus, and (d) following up with students in one-on-one counseling sessions to encourage and monitor progress.

Unlike the U. S. Department of Education Strengthening Institutions Program, there was no financial support for the probation intervention program. This circumstance limited the department's ability to accommodate a large number of students. Additionally, there are no systematic evaluative measures or supports in place to analyze the results of this pilot program's effect on student success. There are limited financial and human resources available to support new initiatives such as this. If the program administrators provide no evidence of its success in improving student success, it will be

difficult for them to secure more resources to support this growing population of poorly performing students.

Additionally, OCC administration has made a clear statement about the importance of assessment as indicated in the college's strategic planning document, "Systematic and routine assessment of all programs and services will be implemented to measure and plan in the interest of continuous improvement" (OCC, 2006). This action research study was intended to assist OCC in fulfilling its assessment mission and provide information on how to help more students succeed. Finally, according to Pan, Guo, Alikonis, and Bai (2008) there are limited studies available regarding the effectiveness of intervention programs. This study adds important quantitative and qualitative analysis and results to the existing body of knowledge regarding the problem of student retention at OCC.

#### *Statement of Purpose*

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to determine if the intervention program implemented to support a select group of students placed on academic probation improves their GPAs and allows them to return to good academic standing. The data collected from the participants in the intervention was compared with those probationary students who were not part of the pilot program. Additionally, the results of the study provide information about students' experiences of being placed on academic probation in order to assist college administrators in identifying ways to help more students achieve academic success.

To meet this stated purpose, three research questions guided this study:



RQ1: Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester achieve a higher GPA than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

RQ2: Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester return to academic good standing at a higher rate than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

RQ3: What is the college experience of students placed on academic probation?

### *Definitions of Terms*

Academic standing- The term used to describe a student's academic progress at the end of each semester of study. Students who fail to maintain good academic standing will be subject to probation and/or loss of matriculation as described in this policy (OCC, 2009d).

Attrition-unplanned academic-related or nonacademic-related events that occur prior to the student completing his or her educational objective (Summers, 2003).

Cohort- defined as a population of students who are in college for the first time and who are full-time in relation to their course load of 12 credit hours or more.

Extended probation- A student on academic probation who subsequently attains a semester index of at least 2.0, but who still has an unsatisfactory cumulative index, will be granted one semester on extended probation. The student must attain a satisfactory cumulative index by the end of the additional semester or he or she will be subject to loss of matriculation (OCC, 2009d).

Good academic standing- A student is in good academic standing when he/she meets the minimum satisfactory cumulative index that is determined based on attempted credit hours and associated minimum cumulative grade point average (OCC, 2009d).

GPA- grade point average

Loss of matriculation- The result when a student on academic probation fails to achieve a satisfactory cumulative index at the next academic review (OCC, 2009d).

Persistence-a student's continuous enrollment at an institution from one semester to another (Summers, 2003).

Probation- a designation for students who have attempted 12 credit hours in a given semester and earned a cumulative grade point average of 1.45 (on a 4.0 scale) or below (OCC, 2009d).

Retention-used interchangeably with persistence and defined as a student's continued enrollment at an institution from one semester to another (Summers, 2003).

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

### *Introduction and Purpose*

The problem of retaining students in colleges and universities in relation to academic progress and success has been researched at many colleges, including community colleges, and has taken multiple forms and involved many researchers during the past 40 years. Theoretical models created from psychological, sociological, economic, and behavioral constructs have attempted to provide higher education leaders with frameworks to construct solutions to retention problems on college campuses (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Many of the theories that researchers have used to guide the study of retention at community colleges were created through the study of retention patterns at four-year colleges. Practitioners in the community college setting question the value of such theories given the differing characteristics of community college students compared to those who directly enter four-year colleges (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). However, these theoretical frameworks provide useful information and important insights in addressing the problem of student retention.

The construct of academic integration in the theory of student departure described as the extent to which a student's academic abilities, skills, interests, and goals are congruent with the college's expectations (Tinto, 1987) appears to have the most significant relationship to the problem to be studied at OCC. The number of students being placed on academic probation may be an indicator that academic integration is not occurring. The college had no intervention previously in place to help students improve

their integration; therefore, it is no surprise that the college is experiencing a high percentage of dropouts. Forty-three percent of first-time students leave the college prior to their second year (OCC, 2008). Although the focus of this study is to determine if an intervention program works to support and to retain students, a full understanding of the literature will assist in understanding this complex issue, which Braxton (2004) characterized as the “departure puzzle” (p.1).

The literature reviewed will provide (a) a brief analysis of the topic of student retention, (b) theoretical development, (c) description of the theory of student departure, (d) best practices for improving retention rates, (e) models of academic probation programs, and (f) results of studies that provided background in creating this study. Additionally, an analysis of the methodologies currently being used to study this problem and recommendations to shape this study will be presented.

### *Topic of Student Retention*

In February 2009, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, said “we will provide the support necessary for you to complete college and meet a new goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (OMB, 2009). This national attention to the community college retention and graduation problem placed student success, rather than access, at the forefront of conversations about college. Student access and success receive a great deal of attention in higher education, yet all the discussion and implementation of improvement strategies has yet to yield significant gains in the retention of students to graduation. Evidence from national statistics point to a decline in 3-year graduation rates at community colleges from a high of 38% in 1998 compared to 29% in 2008 (ACT, 2008).

Programs to boost college graduation rates have been supported by private foundations, which have provided millions of dollars directly to community colleges to improve the success of their students (Gates, 2009; Lumina, 2009). In July of 2009, President Obama proposed the *American Graduation Initiative* to Congress, which promised a significant investment of money to support community college efforts to increase graduation rates. This initiative would be considered the largest investment in higher education since the 1950s. Not since the passage of the GI Bill in 1950 has an effort of this magnitude been proposed with the expressed intention of offering increased access to education for all Americans (White House, 2009). It is clear this topic is not only important to individual colleges as they seek to meet the needs of students, but is important to the White House administration of 2009, which brings a sense of accountability to this issue. Therefore, it is critical for community colleges to engage in research that provides the data to establish the best practices that support student success.

### *Theoretical Development*

The theoretical development of providing a framework for researchers to study the problem of student departure began in the decade of 1970-1980. Prior to this time, data was gathered about the characteristics of students who departed from college with the outcomes focused on identifying the problems with students but with no theoretical framework to guide this research (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Despite the growth of the community college during the 1960s, the focus of research and theoretical development remained within the four-year college and university setting. A swell of studies emerged and focused on the predominant college student of that time: the White, male student from middle to upper class society (Tinto, 1987).

The theoretical framework most often cited in the studies of retention is the theory of student departure created by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993). This theory has been cited in many studies at both four-year and two-year colleges (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bers & Nyden, 2001; Kiser & Price, 2007; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Ryan & Glenn, 2002). In fact, Braxton (2000) characterizes Tinto's work as "paradigmatic" (p. 2) in stature in the research field of student retention. The model of student departure posited by Tinto attempts to describe the direct and indirect effects of variables of a causal sequence. It provides a comprehensive approach for practitioners in creating retention strategies to help address the retention problem at both four-year and two-year colleges and universities.

*The theory of student departure.* According to Tinto (1987), less than 15% of college withdrawals are caused by poor academic performance, and the focus of the theory of student departure is to understand voluntary departure from an institution. Often referred to as an interactionist theory, Tinto describes individual student departure as a process that occurs over time and takes into account the characteristics, goals, and commitments a student brings to college and how interactions with the college influence student goals and commitment to stay at the college. This theory focuses on how the institution creates an environment that will support a student's goals and commitment to stay in college. Tinto criticized previous theoretical frameworks about student departure that focused solely on the psychological factors of individuals and ignored the impact of the college environment on a student's decision to stay or to leave.

Therefore, the sociological approach to voluntary student departure was created from the work of two researchers. Tinto created a theory through studying Durkheim's

(1951), model of suicide who posited the lack of integration in society will cause isolation and voluntary withdrawal or suicide. Additionally, he incorporated the work of social anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, who studied rites of passage to adulthood in the 1960s as the basis for understanding how colleges support transitions for young adults.

First, Durkheim's model of individual departure in the form of suicide was analogous, in Tinto's mind, to voluntary student departure from college. The parallel between suicide and college departure is congruent with a sociological viewpoint, rather than a psychological one. Tinto believed that colleges are societies that students will either adapt to or not. If adaptation occurs, students will be satisfied and wish to remain within the college. Students who find persistent incompatibility between their values and goals and the collegiate environment will withdraw from the college. The condition of incompatibility is one that frequently results in students leaving the institution. This behavior is what Durkheim (1951) described in his work on the "egotistical" form of suicide and which Tinto says, "arises when individuals are unable to become integrated and establish membership within the communities of society" (Tinto, 1987, p. 101). Therefore, the isolation a student may feel when the student's values and goals are not congruent with the norms of the college environment (or in the case of suicide; society in general) will lead to voluntary withdrawal (Tinto).

Second, studying a theory of "rites of passage" as described by Van Gennep (1960) helped Tinto (1987) to support the notion that transition is a longitudinal process and identifiable stages occur during this process. Borrowing from this theory of transition that is marked by stages of separation, transition and incorporation, Tinto argues that the

need to assimilate or acculturate into a new community requires movement through these stages. Furthermore, the abilities a student possesses to move successfully through the stages will influence the decision to leave college. The separation from former environments, according to Tinto, will assist students to integrate into the college environment. If a student is unable to separate from these former worlds (high school, family, and community), then departure will most likely occur. “The model seeks to explain how interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution lead individuals of different characteristics to withdraw from that institution prior to degree completion” (Tinto, p. 113).

*Academic and social integration.* The theory of student departure describes the process of interactions that occur between students and the academic and social environments of college. The congruence of a student’s goals and commitments with the college’s academic and social environment will determine whether a student withdraws. The more congruence between student and institution, the more likely the student will stay. Tinto (1987) describes the concept of students’ departure as a “longitudinal process of interactions” (p. 113) between the student, who brings varying skills and background, and others within the academic and social environments of the college.

The academic and social integration constructs in this model are described as being formal or informal, and both contribute to either strengthening or inhibiting the student’s commitment to the goal of graduation as well as to staying at the institution. Relationships with peers and faculty in the classroom, positive feedback, and intellectual stimulation are contributors to academic integration. Social integration (although separate but considered interdependent) would include involvement in extra-curricular activities,



which provides opportunities to meet with peers and create friendships. For colleges with residence halls, the dormitory life provides a ready-made environment to foster social integration.

Tinto's theory of student departure (1975, 1987) has been criticized for its explanatory power in the community college setting (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983), particularly in relation to its construct of social integration. Tinto's theory is based on the belief that to integrate into the system of a college comprised of academic and social communities, one must abandon previous environments to fully acculturate oneself into a new world. The environments Tinto suggest students should abandon are those in which community college students remain. Community college students, who are primarily commuters and therefore still living in their home environments, have less time on campus to participate in activities that encourage social integration. The community college student may not desire to engage or integrate into a new community. Tinto's concept that separation must occur for the student to feel engaged and, therefore retain, may not be a factor of student departure for community college students.

*Support for Tinto's model.* Few studies of community colleges support Tinto's theoretical construct of social integration as influencing student retention. One exploratory study of 3,797 students at a community college, compared degree completion and grade point average of students who indicated participation in campus clubs and activities (n=104) to those who did not (n=3,693). The students who participated in clubs and activities presented a higher rate of degree completion (22%) than those who did not participate (13%). Utilizing a Pearson chi-square analysis, the researcher concluded that

the relationship between club participation and degree attainment ( $p < .01$ ) as well as drop out ( $p < .01$ ) was significant. The results of this study supported this researcher's notion that campus involvement has a positive influence on retention and degree attainment (Derby, 2006).

Social integration was found to have a modest effect on fall to spring persistence at a community college where 420 randomly selected freshmen English students were surveyed using a 30-item questionnaire intended to measure factors of academic and social integration (Bers & Smith, 1991). After conducting a setwise discriminate analysis, variable sets for social integration showed a significant impact on students who persisted to the spring term ( $r^2 = .008, p < .05$ ).

Academic integration, as a measure of student retention, has been supported more often than social integration in the research of community college students. Hawley and Harris (2005) found that students who indicated academic engagement (measured by survey responses about participation in tutoring services and understanding of academic policies) retained at a higher rate than those who did not. Halpin (1990) attempted to test the constructs of academic and social integration through a study conducted at an Upstate New York community college. By employing a survey instrument that included variables of academic and social integration, Halpin found that integration variables were distinct amongst the categories of students who retained, withdrew, or were dismissed. Academic integration factors such as faculty concern for teaching and student development, academic and intellectual development, and interaction with faculty had a higher level of influence on student persistence than social integration factors. Halpin, through a

discriminate function analysis, concluded that interactions with faculty had a positive effect on whether students retained.

Another study at a community college yielded similar results. Schmid and Abell (2003) used variables, such as time with faculty outside of class and interactions with peers both informally and in study groups to measure the impact of these interactions on retention. Survey results from three distinct categories of students were compared and students who graduated indicated a higher participation rate in study groups, more discussions with faculty outside of class, and increased numbers of hours studying.

A longitudinal study of two-year college students aspiring towards a bachelor's degree supported Tinto's assertion that both academic and social integration directly affects students' commitments to persist towards earning a degree (Pascarella et al., 1986). The researchers concluded that the experiences colleges provide to assist students to integrate into the academic and social environments on campus might mitigate pre-college variables considered barriers to successful college completion.

An earlier study by Pascarella and Chapman (1983) found academic integration as the most important variable influencing persistence at two-year colleges. Social integration was found to have no influence on persistence for community college students when they attempted to validate Tinto's model across multiple types of institutions. Community college students have limited time to spend on activities outside of class. This lack of ability to participate in campus life that is most often associated with Tinto's construct of social integration is one of the reasons researchers dispute Tinto's social integration construct when applied to the community college student (Bean & Metzner,

1985, Braxton et al., 2004). Therefore, some researchers have challenged the notion of social integration as an integral influence on student retention at community colleges.

*Limitations of Tinto's theory.* Tinto's theory of student departure has been criticized by researchers as not applicable to the community college setting, particularly in relation to the social integration as part of the construct (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Braxton et al. reviewed empirical studies across multiple institution types (liberal arts colleges, residential and commuter universities, and two-year colleges) to test Tinto's theory. The research results indicated that variables predicting student persistence on residential campuses supported almost one-half of Tinto's propositions in relation to student characteristics, commitment, goals, and abilities to integrate socially and academically influence departure. However, studies of community college campuses supported only one proposition; "student characteristics directly affect the likelihood of students' persistence in college" (p. 17). Therefore, it was concluded that academic communities play an even larger role at a community college due to the absence of a structured social setting.

Bean and Metzner (1985) were the first to discuss the application of Tinto's theory to the nontraditional student and agreed that academic integration has a direct effect on retention, but social integration did not directly influence the nontraditional students. The researchers defined the nontraditional student as one who is either older, attends college part-time, or is a commuter. The researchers asserted that the nontraditional student will not be greatly influenced by the social setting (a construct identified by Tinto as affecting a student's decision to leave); rather, it is the "environmental press" (Bean & Metzner, p. 489) that must be considered. Bean and

Metzner described this press as the impact of the student's environment outside of college, which includes less time available to interact with faculty and peers (an activity related to social integration) balanced with more interaction outside of the campus (or the student's home community which impedes separation).

Bean and Metzner (1985) proposed that these students have less time available on a college campus; therefore, social integration may have less influence on retention. As a result of this knowledge, the path model proposed by Bean and Metzner identified four factors influencing departure, including: (a) academic performance prior to arrival on campus; (b) performance in the classroom; (c) students' goals and intentions; and (d) the environmental factors such as family, financial, and job-related obligations that influenced student departure. The distinctions provided by Bean and Metzner in studying the nontraditional student at community colleges (older, part-time, and commuter) provide researchers with an expanded use of Tinto's model. Although not a population found only in community colleges, this model has more applicability in this sector of higher education.

Pan et al. (2008) examined the effects of a variety of best practice interventions on student retention at a large university. The research revealed that the construct of social integration was positively correlated at a statistically significant level of  $p < .001$  with retention of students in highly selective programs. No significant relationship was found between social integration and retention for students in less selective programs. The results of this study support the critics of Tinto's social integration construct as less important in supporting retention of community college students who may be less prepared for college-level study.

Braxton et al. (2004) pointed out the limitations of Tinto's theory in relation to its applicability to explaining departure for underrepresented, particularly in relation to the social integration construct. The conflict between home and family obligations for this group of students at community colleges, who tend to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds requiring them to work and live at home, impedes their ability to engage in social interactions on campus.

Guiffrida (2006) described the challenges facing non-White students when trying to navigate in "predominately White institutions (PWIs)" (p. 451). Incongruence can occur when students in the minority, particularly African American and Hispanic students, experience feelings of isolation, which can lead to departure (Weissman et al., 1998). Guiffrida's assertion was supported by the research of others who criticize Tinto's work as "...rooted in the Western, assimilation/enculturation paradigm, ignores bicultural integration, or the ability of minority students to succeed at college while being a part of both the majority and minority cultures" (p. 452). This incongruence causes a lack of social connections for students from different cultural perspectives. Guiffrida suggested an enhanced model of studying the problem of student retention that includes drawing from social and cross-cultural perspectives in order to be more inclusive of the needs of multicultural students.

#### *Alternative Theoretical Models of Retention*

After the release of Tinto's first iteration of the theory of student departure (1975), other researchers began to develop theories to help practitioners understand the retention challenges. Astin (1977) examined longitudinal data in a national database of four-year college students to determine the predictive power of more than 110

characteristics gathered from freshmen surveys to assess retention. This work provided the basis for Astin's theory of student involvement that asserts the college environment either encourages or does not encourage student involvement. The level of student involvement will influence student departure. Similarities exist between this model of student involvement and Tinto's model of integration. The subtle difference in Astin's model is a focus on student involvement on campus in activities that match a student's interests. If those activities are not available, the student will leave the institution.

Bean (1982) proposed an alternative path model by adapting the work of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), which was created to better understand worker turnover. Fishbein and Ajzen's behavior model attributes a person's attitudes to the formulation of intentions, which then impact behavior. Bean's adaptation of this model to higher education led him to create a questionnaire to assess 10 independent variables to measure students' attitudes and their impact on intentions to leave or stay at a college.

Bean (1982) applied a multiple regression model of analysis to examine the predictability of these variables on student drop out. The results supported the researcher's theory that student attitudes towards certain outcomes (grades, selection of major, job security, and opportunity to transfer elsewhere) had direct and indirect effects on dropping out of college. The complexity of the model, however, may make it difficult for practitioners to create solutions to the retention problem. This could explain why it is not as widely cited as Tinto's model (1987, 1993).

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model supports the importance of academic integration, but includes pre-college characteristics such as academic preparation, student intentions, educational goals, and environmental variables. Adding the environmental

variable is a major distinction from Tinto's model, which does not consider this.

Mohammadi (1994) argued, "most theories on student departure do not take into account the external forces that impact upon student participation in college" (p. 3).

Guiffrida (2006) sought to strengthen Tinto's model by reviewing the relationships among motivation, cultural orientation, academic success, and retention. The use of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors as related to self-determination theory, as well as cross-cultural views that describe motivation based on the differences between individualistic and collectivist societal views, were the basis for an enhanced model for explaining student departure for underrepresented students. This culturally sensitive model of student departure emphasizes the importance of home and family connections for underrepresented students (particularly African American, Hispanic, and Asian Americans) and it was suggested that connection replace the term integration when referring to the social construct of Tinto's theory of student departure. Further research in community colleges is needed, and although there are studies to both support and contradict elements of Tinto's theory, there are valuable insights gained in reviewing theoretical frameworks of multiple scholars.

#### *Best Practices for Improvement*

Tinto (1987) posits six principles for colleges to consider when creating retention strategies. The strategies include: (a) entering students should already have or have the opportunity to gain the academic skills necessary to achieve, (b) providing opportunities for integration that is personal, (c) providing systematic actions to meet many needs, (d) intervening early with struggling students, (e) being student centered, and (f) understanding that education is the goal with retention as the result (Tinto, p. 138).



Colleges are then challenged to examine how they provide support for these principles and if not, what practices need to be put in place to support a student's integration into college. The emphasis of these principles is placed on the institution as the responsible party in supporting retention, rather than suggesting students are solely responsible for their success.

An alternative viewpoint is offered by Bean (2005) when he proposed nine themes to consider when identifying strategies to improve student retention. These themes have been shaped by a behaviorist theory that is described as "intention is based on prematriculation attitudes and behaviors that affect the way a student interacts with the institution. On the basis of this interaction, the student develops attitudes toward their experiences and norms related to student behavior" (Bean, p. 218). The nine themes include intentions, institutional fit and commitment, psychological processes and key attitudes, academics, social factors, bureaucratic factors, the external environment, the student's background, and money and finance. The attitudes the student presents towards the institution and being a student will influence retention and Bean suggests colleges must better understand these influences when providing services to students. The primary factor that distinguishes Bean's model and Tinto's principles is the influence of attitudes on the students' behavior and the college's ability to shape the attitudes and behaviors. Bean encourages colleges to develop strategies such as giving support to students from differing backgrounds than the majority of those on campus, providing administrative offices that are easy to use and friendly, establishing rapport with students to influence positive attitudes towards the institution, and identifying improvement areas through talking with students who leave.

Many researchers identify new student orientation programs and first-year college transition programs as best practices (McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005; Noel et al., 1985; Tinto, 1987). These best practices are thought to provide opportunities for students to learn the norms of a college campus, meet other students and faculty, and become more connected to the college. Strong advising programs that allow for proper guidance for students and increased interactions between faculty and students have also been identified as best practices (Halpin, 1990; Noel et al., 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Seidman, 2005). The connecting nature of advising is described by Beatty-Guenter (1994) as one of four categories of retention strategies necessary to implement a comprehensive retention program. Advising is a central component to many early intervention programs, which are also described as best practices in improving student retention (Crockett, 1985; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayak, 2006; Tinto, 1987). It is therefore, incumbent upon colleges to identify the pre-college characteristics of students at-risk of dropping out, create opportunities to support these students, and evaluate the success of strategies in place to determine if they are making a difference.

#### *Academic Probation Program Models*

Many colleges have implemented programs for probationary students with varying strategies and degrees of success (Engle, Reilly & Levine, 2003; Hsieh, Sullivan & Guerra, 2007; Isaak, Graves & Mayers, 2006; Molina & Abelman, 2000; Romano, 1995). Lacking any intervention, the outlook for students placed on a probationary status may be limited. Ryan and Glenn (2002) studied the performance of 1504 students placed on probation to determine the role of academic performance on retention. Only 75% of this group returned in their spring semester and of that population, 44% were dismissed at

the end of their second semester. Additionally, only 28% of the probationary students returned the following year compared to 70% of the students in good standing ( $z=26.75$ ,  $p<.025$ ).

Romano (1995) conducted a study of 1454 full-time freshmen at a community college in New York to identify the factors most likely to influence drop out from fall to spring semester. Through using stepwise regression, the researcher found seven variables as statistically significant at the level of .05 in influencing retention. These variables explained 74% of the variance of retention to the next semester amongst student populations. The independent variable of probation status showed as the strongest predictor of dropping out. The author concluded that the best use of scarce college resources to improve retention should be directed towards students on probation.

Another study by Engle et al. (2003) at a mid-sized university found that participation in an intervention program for probationary students resulted in a 26% increase of students in good standing at the end of the intervention when compared with peers who did not participate in the program. Additionally, 58% of the participants retained to the next semester, compared to 28% of the non-participants. The program provided intensive counseling support to assist students with identifying behaviors that may have contributed to their lack of success. The goal was to help these struggling students identify strategies to improve their academic performance.

A study conducted by Molina and Abelman (2000) of randomly selected students on probation who were placed in three levels of intervention found that the more intrusive the intervention, the better the results. This study was supported by the work of Kelly (1996) who encouraged colleges to create intrusive strategies to assist students to better

understand the factors that cause poor performance. Students in this study were randomly selected to receive varying levels of intervention. The lowest level included a letter to students explaining probationary status; the moderate level included a letter and phone conversation describing ways to improve academic status; and the highest level of intrusiveness included a letter, phone call, and in-person interview. The results indicated only a modest change in grade point average (GPA) and retention rates for the low and moderate levels of intervention and the most significant change for those who received the most intrusive intervention (an 8% change in GPA as compared to a 3% change for the other two levels) which was proven to be statistically significant.

A similar intervention strategy was implemented with probationary students at a four-year college in Texas where students were placed into three different levels of intervention based on GPA (Mann, Hunt, & Alfred, 2003). The lowest GPA received the highest level of intrusiveness (number of contacts with counselors, workshops and other support services) and resulted in the largest increase in GPA occurred with the highest level of intrusiveness. Students who received any level of intrusiveness showed an increase in GPA as compared to the control group, but the students who received the highest level of intrusiveness had a mean change in GPA of .69 compared to the students who had lowest level of intrusiveness mean change of .38. An ANOVA was conducted to determine the significance of the variance in the mean GPA among the three levels and the results supported the researchers' hypothesis that the level of intrusiveness made a difference in student's grade point average.

An experimental design was used to examine the effects of probation interventions at a large, urban, community college in Southern California. Scrivener,

Sommo, and Collado (2009) provided results of studying two versions of a program to improve probationary students' GPA and academic standing. They discovered no significant impact on students' GPA or academic standing occurred when the program was offered as a voluntary condition of re-enrollment. However, when the college reorganized the program and implemented it as a mandatory condition of re-enrollment, 40% of the program group earned a GPA of 2.0 or higher, compared to 21% of the control group.

Another study of probationary students was conducted by Hsieh et al. (2007) with the intent of understanding student motivation towards learning. Drawing from the work of Albert Bandura and social learning theory (1997), the model of self-efficacy was used to determine if higher levels of beliefs in one's skills (self-efficacy) would result in adapting a particular goal orientation (described by the researchers as performance avoidance, performance approach, and mastery goals). The results indicated that probationary students who exhibit a high level of self-efficacy also display a performance avoidance goal orientation (hiding one's abilities to others), which may have contributed to their poor performance. The researchers recommended that college officials work closely with these probationary students to assist them in changing their orientation away from "self-sabotaging beliefs and goals" (p. 470) in order to improve their success.

Another study of students placed on academic probation by Isaak et al. (2006) revealed similar results in relation to students' perceptions of abilities versus realities of achievement. The study of a program called the College Recovery Program (CRP) used a study habits self-assessment to compare students' perceptions of their skills with a standardized assessment of study habits with students not on probation. The results

indicated a discrepancy between what students said about their study habits in a self-assessment as compared to the results of a standardized inventory.

### *Contributing Factors for Low Retention Rates*

The following review provides information to inform this study. Studies of the characteristics of students who leave college, as well as institutional practices and policies that have been found to support or encourage students who drop out, are described in this section. Furthermore, additional research studies have been conducted to provide refinements of the measures currently used for student retention and help to illustrate the complexities of the issue of student retention in community colleges.

*Academic preparation.* Early research identified high school grade point average, high school rank, and quality of high school as the primary predictors of retention (Astin, 1977). The influence of high school preparation in relation to grade point average has been described as one of the best predictors of college success and has been supported by multiple researchers (Astin, 1977; Bers & Smith, 1991; Hagedorn et al., 2001; Pascarella et al., 1986). The preparation for college is the starting point in the process of student departure and a strong predictor of retention (Adelman, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1987). As Kuh et al. (2006) stated, “The academic intensity of the student’s high school curriculum still counts more than anything else in pre-collegiate history in providing momentum toward completing a bachelor’s degree” (p. xviii). If academic preparation is considered highly predictive of retention, then it is no surprise that community colleges, which enroll large percentages of under-prepared students, have a difficult time retaining them to graduation.

This lack of preparation is evident in the fact that 43% of students enrolled at community colleges in 2004 had taken at least one developmental course compared to 29% of all students at four-year, public institutions (SAS, 2008). Developmental courses are often needed by students to improve basic academic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. These courses are considered pre-college coursework and provide no college credit. When students do not earn college credit, they are not able to progress towards a degree. “Of the students in the class of 1992 who took three or four developmental courses in college, only 19% received a bachelors degree by 2000” (SAS, p. 4). When combining race with need for remediation, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports an 11% difference in need between African American students (42%) and White students (31%). Hispanic students show a 10% difference between their White peers when 41% indicated a need for remediation (SAS, 2008). The opportunity provided by community colleges to assist students to build their academic skills appears to be necessary in order to improve student retention.

The completion of developmental courses in reading and math were shown as positive correlates to retention in a study by Fike and Fike (2008). The quantitative study was conducted at a community college in Texas and compared retention from fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall semesters with variables most often cited in retention research: age, gender, ethnicity, completion of developmental courses and financial aid. A corollary analysis was conducted and found the strongest positive correlate to retention was successful completion of developmental reading and math ( $r=.409$ ; reading and  $r=.263$ ; math,  $p<.01$ ). However, Hawley and Harris (2005) conducted an exploratory study at a community college to determine predictors of fall-to-fall retention and discovered that it

was the number of developmental courses that correlated with dropping out. The researchers concluded that the more developmental courses required, the higher probability that the student would drop out. The role of developmental education in improving student success is clearly important given the statistics of the numbers of students in need of remediation.

Retention success in college is measured by positive credit accumulation and earning a grade point average that is acceptable by the institution to avoid dismissal from the college (Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1987). Therefore, understanding how these indicators predict retention has been studied by researchers for a number of years. Kiser and Price (2007), in an attempt to find accurate predictive variables in determining fall-to-fall retention, showed significant correlation between credit hours earned and persistence. This finding is further supported in studies conducted by Fike and Fike (2008); Hagedorn et al. (2001); and Mohammadi (1994) where the number of credit hours accumulated showed a positive correlation to retention. One institution altered its view of retention by identifying completion of two-thirds of semester credits with at least a 2.0 grade point average (on a 4.0 scale) as the standard of measurement (Sydow & Sandel, 1998). The identification of “first year credit generation” (Adelman, 2006, p. xxv) as one of five factors institutions can address in order to improve retention was proposed after a longitudinal study was conducted and identified this factor as a primary influence on the retention of college students.

*Underrepresented populations.* The success of underrepresented students, particularly when comparing retention and graduation rates with their White peers, is a source of concern at many levels. According to NCES (2003), only 26% of African



American students and 29% of Hispanic students attained any type of degree within a 6-year period, compared to 38% of White students and 39% of Asian American students (Price, 2004). Studies of these populations have attempted to identify risk factors to create appropriate intervention strategies in hopes of improving the success of this population of students.

Hagedorn et al. (2001) attempted to find predictive variables of semester-to-semester retention for African American males at a community college. The researchers used institutional data to follow 202 African American males and developed a logistic regression model to predict barriers to success. The results of the study indicated high school average and entering college directly from high school were positive predictors of retention. Additionally, completed credit hours and an expressed goal to complete college were also positively associated with retention. These results were supported by Hawley and Harris (2005) whose study at a predominately African American and Hispanic community college campus indicated high school preparation as a positive predictor of success. Academic preparation as a predictor of student retention has been supported in studies of all community college students regardless of race/ethnicity (Adelman, 2006; Tinto, 1987).

Representation of a student's race/ethnicity mattered in a study conducted by Hagedorn, Chi, Cepada, and McClain (2007) in the Los Angeles Community College District. The concept of critical mass relating to the numbers of students from similar backgrounds was introduced by Hagedorn et al. (2007) and defined as "a level of representation that brings comforts or familiarity within the educational environment" (p. 74). Results from a 47-item questionnaire intended to collect student attitudes, beliefs,

and aspirations, as well as data from the colleges' databases, formed the basis of this quantitative study. The researchers introduced "representational value (RV)" (p. 79) as a factor to describe levels of critical mass. A formula was used that divided the number of Latino students by the total campus enrollment resulting in three subcategories: high, moderate and low. For example, a high RV would indicate a large representation of Latino students. The sample included 5011 students from 241 different classes on nine campuses of this large, urban community college district. The results indicated strong predictive ability of grade point average (GPA) with high correlation coefficient between RV and GPA ( $r=.675, p<.01$ ). The results indicated that a large number of Latino students and faculty had a positive impact on Latino student success.

A targeted effort to improve the retention of African American students at a community college in Maryland incorporated intensive support to reach out to a marginalized population (James, 1991). In evaluating the effectiveness of this program that included mentoring, career counseling, and academic support, the results were impressive. Although a voluntary participation program, which may skew the results, spring-to-fall term retention for program participants was 71% as compared to non-participant African American students (59%). In the second year of implementation, the fall-to-spring retention increased to 83%, a rate that was above all student populations at the college. Results of the study showed that African American participants receiving the intensive support services completed more credits, had higher GPAs and persisted from semester to semester at higher rates than their African American peers who did not participate and in some cases their White peers (James, 1991, p. 61). Programs that involve mentoring, academic supports and career counseling are examples of best

practices to engage and to connect with students (Noel et al., 1985; Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1987).

The theme of targeted programs and interventions to understand the unique needs of marginalized students was investigated in a qualitative study of community college students (Weissman et al., 1998). The researchers used a focus group method to understand the different transition and college experiences of White, African American, and Hispanic first-time, students (n=71). Results indicated differences in the ways in which each population transitioned to college with African American students expressing the most difficulty in academic skills, understanding college processes, and expressing lower aspirations than both Whites and Hispanics. The results of this study reinforced the need to sensitize staff and faculty to the unique needs of special populations and the feelings of isolation that often occur in colleges and universities. This is a concept identified by Tinto (1987, 1993) as a major variable of causing students to drop out.

*Student intentions.* The measurement of goals and intentions of students in relation to retention has received much attention in the research literature. Tinto's model of student departure (1987, 1993) highlights the influence of a student's level of goal commitment, which is then either strengthened or weakened based on the college's ability to provide conditions for academic integration and social integration (although studies are inconclusive about the impact of social integration variables at community colleges). The understanding of a student's intent in enrolling is particularly relevant at community colleges because of the multiple missions of community colleges, which are to provide opportunity to prepare for transfer (with or without a degree), to prepare for a career, and to take courses for personal enrichment or job training (Voorhees & Zhou,

2000; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). These course enrollment patterns will mean that some students only intend to stay one semester, 1 year, or through to graduation. Therefore, measuring success of community college students would take multiple forms and be based on student intention (Bailey et al., 2005).

Polinsky (2002) described a concept entitled positive attrition when students met their goals and negative attrition when they did not as an enhanced view of student retention at community colleges. In other words, success could be defined in relation to the goals and intentions identified by the student, not the institution. Voorhees and Zhou (2000) supported this measurement after surveying 3,219 community college students in the State of Colorado to determine students' intended goals at the start of college and whether the intention changed during college. Results showed that 79% of respondents indicated their goals had not changed from the start of their college career. Within the large group of students who did not change their goals, a positive relationship was established with credit hours accumulated and the perception of goal attainment. The researchers recommended colleges gather data to measure success based on progress towards students' goals.

A refined measure of student and institution success supports the growing concern by community college leaders regarding accountability measures that do not accurately reflect the multiple types of community college students and success relative to students' goals and objectives (Bailey et al., 2005; Schuetz, 2005; Summers, 2003; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Additionally, multiple studies of retention have found that a student's goal directly relates to retention (Bers & Smith, 1991; Mohammadi, 1994; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Identifying students' goals upon entrance into college and monitoring those goals

provides community colleges with new ways of understanding and measuring student retention as not solely a measure of semester-to-semester persistence, but relative to students' goals (Caison, 2007; Seidman, 2005; Voorhees & Zhou, 2000).

*Institutional characteristics.* Although most community colleges have an open access mission, it is the size, location, and practices of each institution that will vary (Bailey et al., 2005). Comparing institutional characteristics with measures of retention provides a more refined look at how these factors can influence outcomes for students. Bailey et al. (2005) used data from the NCES to identify variables such as location (urban, rural, and suburban), types of degrees awarded, size, faculty composition, demographics of student population and cost to compare with standard retention to graduation rates. Lower graduation rates were found for large, urban community colleges (3.5% lower than rural) and those with a higher percentage of minority students. These findings support the research cited earlier in this paper regarding the challenges facing African American and Hispanic students in achievement. However, the results also showed that even when controlling for race in the colleges with a higher percentage of minorities, graduation rates were lower. The results call for attention to institution practices and policies that may improve student success by learning from higher performing colleges.

Researchers have evaluated college processes and policies that may, in fact, encourage students to leave and made suggestions to revise these policies to improve their graduation rates. Adelman (2006) analyzed student records for 8 years to track their success in attaining a bachelor's degree regardless of where they started their education. He points to completion of 20 credit hours by the end of the first year, institutional policy

that cuts the excessive amounts of withdrawals that attribute to credit accumulation, and eliminating delay of entry as factors that could be implemented by the institution to improve the graduation rates of students. Completing credits is highly dependent upon academic preparation and progress, but how institutions support this determines their effectiveness in meeting student needs. Changing policies that discourage excessive withdrawals could influence credit accumulation.

Community colleges have attempted to make the process of enrolling easy, requiring little commitment by the student. Bers and Nyden (2001) point to one-stop enrollment practices, which may not even require the student to come on campus and meet with an advisor, generous refund policies if students do not attend, and ability for students to withdraw from courses far into the semester. They studied a group they called, “the disappearing students” (p. 206) defined as students who register for courses, but only attend between 1 day and 3 weeks. This population accounted for 10% of their total enrollment. Bers and Nyden concluded that retaining a portion of the disappearing student population they describe could have a positive effect on the institution’s retention and graduation rates.

Summers (2003) also noted research at community colleges that evaluated dropout rates of students who register for courses close to the start of the term, sometimes the day before. Results from the research indicated that only 25% of students who registered one week prior to the start of a term returned the next semester as compared to the college’s overall persistence rate from term to term of 63%. In a similar study at a community college, Freer-Weiss (2004) discovered that students who applied for admission three weeks or closer to the start of a term had lower end-of-term GPAs than

students who applied prior to that date (44% of the late applicant cohort had a 2.0 end-of-term GPA or below as compared to 29% of the general population). Freer-Weiss also reported a significant relationship between weak academic skills with late applicants, a population typically identified at risk of retaining. The lack of an admission deadline is a common practice considered good customer service (Bers & Nyden, 2000). However, results of the studies described here would indicate this practice may act as a contributor to the retention problem.

The campus culture at a community college also includes a large number of part-time faculty. In some institutions, nearly two-thirds of the entire faculty are part-time employees and are frequently unavailable to interact with students outside of the classroom (Schuetz, 2005). Applying Tinto's integration theory (1987) that says it is interactions between students and faculty that will affect the decision to stay or leave would mean that the lack of available faculty at community colleges could diminish student connectivity. If college administrators viewed student retention from an institutional perspective, they may consider creating more conditions for students to gain access to faculty. Tinto (1987) suggests that both student and institution are responsible for creating and engaging in situations that will have a positive effect on student retention.

The results of the studies identified in this review are primarily focused on student characteristics or institutional characteristics that may be causing students to withdraw prior to the next semester, to the following year, and to graduation. Although some have criticized this descriptive approach as failing to provide "actionable items" for colleges to

implement (Heverly, 1999), they serve as a solid body of research to consider in the process of determining new directions to address this problem area of student retention.

### *Retention Research Methodologies*

Studies of student retention have focused primarily on providing a descriptive analysis of students most likely to drop out using a quantitative approach in evaluating data. Autopsy studies were typical forms of research prior to the 1970s, which sought to determine why a student dropped out by describing his or her shortcomings, rather than through the lens of a theoretical framework (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987). The studies conducted through the 1970s and early 1980s focused on longitudinal approaches of following a cohort of students to identify characteristics associated with dropping out (Casion, 2007).

*Quantitative methodology.* As presented by Cottrell and McKenzie (2005), quantitative analysis is used to determine the cause-and-effect relationship, which could be why many studies of retention have been quantitatively based. Researchers have been trying to determine what causes students to drop out and have used varying methods to explore this topic and determine the answer to what has been called “the departure puzzle” (Braxton, 2000, p. 1). Researchers have used methods such as surveys, analysis of available data within the individual colleges or nationally, and collection of new data and statistical analyses to determine the significance of causes and effects.

The use of national survey results from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) freshman survey, founded in 1966 at the University of California, Los Angeles Higher Education Research Institute, has been the instrument of choice in



studies on retention both at the individual college level (Hawley & Harris, 2005; Kiser & Price, 2007) and across institutions (Astin, 1977; Pascarella et al., 1986).

Each year, approximately 700 two-year colleges, four-year colleges and universities administer the Freshman Survey to over 400,000 entering students during orientation or registration. The survey covers a wide range of student characteristics: parental income and education, ethnicity, and other demographic items; financial aid; secondary school achievement and activities; educational and career plans; and values, attitudes, beliefs, and self-concept (HERI, 2009).

The CIRP survey instrument has not been tested for content validity, defined by Creswell (2009) as measuring what it says it is supposed to measure. There has been no factor analysis conducted by the authors of the survey to determine if the survey questions truly measure the constructs they are intended to measure. However, the authors suggested that due to the fact that users of the survey have conducted factor analysis on the questions to measure its ability to test the intended constructs, they consider the survey a valid instrument. It was also stated by the authors that it is reliable based on the 40 years of its existence and results that have remained constant (HERI, 2009).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) developed the Student Involvement Questionnaire (SIQ), which sought to measure the academic and social integration factors identified in Tinto's model of student departure (1975, 1987). The creation of this instrument assisted researchers in using a quantitative measure to validate Tinto's theory within a particular college. The authors of the SIQ provided factor analysis correlates that were judged adequate in the study conducted at the time of its implementation on one

college campus. Halpin (1990) utilized an adapted form of the SIQ at a community college and resulted in supporting Tinto's model. Researchers created other surveys used locally, and some studies provided no information as to tests conducted to determine if they were valid and reliable.

The majority of studies utilized data from a college's student information system to gather information about student demographics, grades, credits accumulated, race/ethnicity, courses taken and selected majors. Caison (2007) examined the usefulness of institutional data as compared to survey data collected from the SIQ and determined that variables gathered from institutional data outperformed the predictability of survey results when adding variables such as parents' education, major, and goal commitment. The researcher performed a series of statistical tests to determine goodness of fit and conducted a regression analysis for predictive ability to determine this outcome. This study would assist colleges with limited resources in administering lengthy surveys in finding alternative methods to studying retention.

As described earlier, much of the research to date has focused on identifying the characteristics of students at risk of dropping out, and this has been done primarily by exploring the causes (identified by many researchers as academic performance) on the outcome, and retention (as the dependent variable). Limited evidence of a qualitative approach to understanding the problem of student retention was discovered in this review. Summers (2003) and Schuetz (2005) recommended research approaches that get to the experiences of students to help better understand the complex nature of student retention.

*Qualitative methodology.* According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), the qualitative research paradigm attempts to "...investigate topics in all their complexity, in context" (p. 2). They describe attempts by researchers to "make meaning" in an attempt to answer questions about a particular phenomena. It is therefore surprising that little research to date has been uncovered that uses a qualitative approach to try and unravel what has been called the "complex roots of student departure" (Tinto, 1987, p. 184). Because qualitative research was born out of sociology and anthropology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) and Tinto's theory of student departure was based on the work of a sociologist and anthropologist, it would seem logical that this methodological approach would be appropriate for studying student retention. However, as described in previous sections, there are limited qualitative studies of the student retention problem.

Some studies have emerged, however, that applied qualitative or mixed methods approaches to the study of student retention. Bers and Nyden (2001) conducted a mixed methods study of students who leave college within their first semester. After determining the characteristics of students who left the college, a random selection of dropouts were phoned to gather reasons for leaving. Although the results indicated that most of the reasons students cited for leaving were beyond the college's control (family and work obligations), this study was an attempt to understand student experiences. Another qualitative approach was used by Heverly (1999) in a study of student experiences with college processes. A two-part phone survey was conducted to learn about students' experiences with various college processes. The results of the survey were categorized as positive and negative. The negative comments focused on the need for more information and better quality information regarding instruction, financial aid,

and billing. The findings assisted the college in identifying needed changes to college processes such as increased staff for financial aid and improving training for advisors.

Grice and Grice (2007) conducted a case study of four, White, male students enrolled at a four-year university, to learn about their interactions with faculty in relation to retention. Semi-structured interviews revealed that interviewees' felt disconnected from faculty members. Grice and Grice attributed this lack of connection to the students dropping out of college.

Interviewing was used in another study, but this time the researchers interviewed the college staff who provided services to a group of students deemed at risk of dropping out (Escobedo, 2007). The interviewees cited the need for increased hours, improved communication with faculty, and support from the college administration to require students to participate in advisement, orientation, and assessment. This research method provided important information to the college that was used to improve a grant-funded intervention program for first-year students in need of support.

Kinnick and Rick (1993) presented a study at a large, urban university using quantitative and qualitative methods to assist the university in identifying retention challenges and practices to improve student success. Through the use of student focus groups, the researchers described the process as "listening to student voices" (p. 60). They learned about students' perceptions and concerns and responded with enhanced funding for projects and programs to support students. The authors concluded by saying, "Retention cannot be reduced to pure numbers when educational improvement is the aim. Qualitative methods can provide an understanding of local intervening variables that

taken together affect the nature and quality of the student's educational experience" (p. 68).

### *Summary*

Although progress has been made in studies specific to the community college student, there is a lack of a theoretical model to guide this research. Tinto's model of student departure (1975, 1987, 1993), based on the traditional aged student in a four-year, residential setting, provides the basis for most of the studies conducted over the past 40 years. Yet, this research seems to have yielded little in the way of providing concrete strategies that will make a significant impact on retention (Braxton, 2000; Heverly, 1999). Results of quantitative analyses of the characteristics of students who drop out across institutions and within individual institutions are fairly similar and have provided few new insights for practitioners interested in improving student retention. However, the intervention strategies used with students placed on academic probation described in this review provides insight into other theoretical frameworks that may be useful in understanding the motivational aspects of students' commitments to college and could provide a new direction in studying the retention problem.

The review of many of the quantitative studies resulted in a similar conclusion. The academic preparation of students affects their ability to progress with acceptable grade point averages and accumulating enough credits to meet degree requirements. Coupling this understanding with the notion of college access for all, makes the retention problem at community colleges more complex because open access means giving all students the chance to succeed. The strategy of intervening with students in academic jeopardy was described in this review and is the focus of this study to better understand

its ability to improve the success of students and, consequently, improve student retention.

The value in understanding predictors of retention and then creating strategies to respond to these predictors will be beneficial for community college leaders. However, the data collected need not only illustrate the numerical outcomes (grade point averages and accumulation of credits towards the student's goal), but also provide meaning to the numbers. This meaning can only be generated by a more focused approach that centers on listening to student stories and identifying themes that can be used to inform research. This inductive approach to research (as described in qualitative work) will provide a more comprehensive lens for researchers of college student retention at community colleges and encourage a qualitative approach in learning more about the factors that contribute to lack of academic success.

Although this approach has been minimally applied within the research reviewed for this study, there is an opportunity to add to the body of research on student retention by applying a mixed methods approach in understanding the retention problem at community colleges. A preponderance of the studies reviewed here have been grounded in quantitative methodology and have taken a postpositivist approach by testing theories through quantitative methods of data analysis and generalizing to the larger college student population (Creswell, 2009). This approach has been beneficial to colleges by providing outcomes that are measurable in the traditional sense. However, as indicated by examining the national statistics on degree attainment, the challenge of supporting students in college remains to be a problem. Tinto (1993) describes student departure as “a highly idiosyncratic event, one that can be fully understood only by referring to the

understandings and experiences of each and every person who departs” (p. 37). Certainly, colleges have limited resources to listen to every student’s story, but adding student stories to the experimental design of evaluating cause and effect will create a more robust body of research that informs the complex problem of college student retention.

## Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

### *Introduction*

The fall-to-fall retention rate at OCC for the 2007 first-time, full-time student cohort was 57%, which represents a decline when compared to the fall 2003 rate of 63% (OCC retention analysis, 2008). The decline in students continuing their enrollment from one semester to the next appears to have an impact on the college's graduation rates, which have decreased from 22% in 2001 to 16% in 2004 and has increased to 20% in 2005 (OCC, 2009a). Students earning low grades and, consequently, not earning credits towards a degree are at risk of either being dismissed from the college or voluntarily withdrawing with no success, thereby, adding to the declining retention and graduation rates at OCC. It is a problem for the college when a large number of students are placed on academic probation as this is a warning that students are not progressing successfully towards graduation. Data from the college's student information system indicated that the percentage of students placed on probation has increased from 6% in 2005 to 8% in 2008.

The college's counseling department has attempted to intervene with students who are performing poorly. Counseling department members developed an intervention program that incorporated strategies such as individual counseling, self-analysis, creation of an academic improvement plan, and regular follow-up to monitor students' academic progress. The strategies used at OCC in this intervention program have been found to improve student retention at other colleges and universities (Engle et al., 2003; Mann et al., 2003; Molina & Abelman, 2000). All of these studies reviewed in Chapter 2 of this



document identified strategies that appeared to work in improving student success, such as intensive counseling, academic support services to improve skills, and assisting students to identify areas of weakness. Therefore, this study sought to determine if the program at OCC yielded similar results, as well as, gave voice to the students who were not experiencing academic success. The experience of students who are performing poorly at OCC is one that had not yet been studied from a qualitative perspective.

Thus, it was the researcher's intent to assist the college in identifying the impact of the program from the quantitative perspective (resulting grades and academic standing) as well as understand the common experiences of poor-performing students to examine the problem more fully. Results of this study could provide the information needed to identify preventative strategies in support of student success. The study of the academic probation program at OCC utilized a mixed methods approach in order to address the three research questions indicated below:

RQ1. Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester achieve a higher grade point average than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

RQ2. Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester return to academic good standing at a higher rate than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

RQ3. What is the college experience of students placed on academic probation?

The study also provided data that allowed the researcher to examine the constructs of academic and social integration within the model of student departure (Tinto, 1987). The application of this theoretical model within the context of community colleges has been

challenged by various scholars as inadequate in explaining the large numbers of students who drop out of community colleges. These limitations were described in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, and the researcher used the results of this study to explore the theory further in Chapter 4 of this document.

#### *Probation Intervention Program*

The program studied was implemented by the college's counseling department for the first time in the spring 2009 semester for students who were placed on probation at the end of the fall 2008 semester. The initiative was intended to be a pilot program to determine its effectiveness with the hopes of expansion throughout the campus by utilizing faculty advisors within academic departments. The counselor who coordinated the development of this program identified the following goals for program participants.

1. Students who participate will improve their GPA in order to return to good standing.
2. Students will identify areas of improvement and seek the help needed to improve grades.
3. Students who participate in the program will retain from fall-to-fall semesters at a higher rate than those who do not participate.

The pilot program continued for a new group of students who were placed onto probation at the end of the spring 2009 term and then returned to the college in the fall 2009 semester. This study focused on the fall 2009 enrolled students placed on academic probation. The targeted population for this intervention consisted of students placed on academic probation for the first time (but not necessarily first-time students at the college) and who were enrolled in one of six targeted degree programs of business

administration, computer information systems, criminal justice, general studies, liberal arts: humanities and social sciences, and liberal arts: mathematics and science. The counselors limited the student selection to these six degree programs due to limited staffing to assign to potential participants. The identified programs represented the largest percentage of the OCC degree-seeking population.

*Program selection process.* The targeted student population to participate in the intervention program received a customized letter from the college's registrar after grades were computed from the spring 2009 term. The letter invited them to contact the counseling department to learn more about this program (see Appendix A). The targeted number for participants, as determined by the counseling department, was 100. This number represented 25% of all students placed on academic probation in the spring 2009 semester. Participants were randomly assigned to five full-time and three part-time counselors in the counseling department. Any probationary program students who were also enrolled in the Collegiate Science and Technology Program (CSTEP) were purposefully assigned to one full-time CSTEP counselor; CSTEP is a state-funded program to support underrepresented students studying math, science, or technology programs([http://www.sunyocc.edu/admissions.aspx?id=2753&TierSlicer1\\_TSMMenuTargetType=1&TierSlicer1\\_TSMMenuID=72](http://www.sunyocc.edu/admissions.aspx?id=2753&TierSlicer1_TSMMenuTargetType=1&TierSlicer1_TSMMenuID=72)). Students who did not respond to the invitation letter were telephoned in the summer between the spring and fall semesters to make appointments with counselors. A third follow-up occurred within one week before the start of the fall semester as a final effort to encourage participation. If no response was received, the student was considered a non-participant in the program.

All other students placed on academic probation and enrolled in programs other than the targeted pilot populations received a letter from the registrar's office warning them of their status and encouraging them to seek assistance from academic support centers on campus. They were not invited to participate in the program and therefore formed the control group for this quasi-experimental study.

*Program components.* Counselors met with each participant to assess student goals and academic needs by utilizing a college-developed, self-assessment form (see Appendix B). As a result of completing this form, the counselor and participant developed an individualized academic achievement plan (see Appendix C) to be monitored throughout the semester by the participant's counselor. The plan may also have included a recommendation for the student to seek academic support from one of the college's support centers. All of the participant information was entered into a database entitled, Retention Alert!©, a module within the college's student information system. This database system allowed counselors to record student meetings, document referrals to support centers, and collect faculty feedback on student progress.

Academic support center staff, as well as faculty who instruct the program participants, were sent electronic feedback forms at the third, sixth, and ninth weeks of the semester. The faculty and academic support center staff were asked to provide information about the program participants regarding attendance, levels of participation, and current academic status (see Appendix D). The information provided by faculty and academic support center staff was analyzed by the student's assigned counselor. If the feedback indicated a student was not attending classes or following up on assignments, counselors requested a meeting with the program participant to discuss strategies for

improvement. The counselors set a goal of meeting with their assigned students at least three times during the semester.

The counseling department did not create this program by utilizing a theoretical framework such as Tinto's model of student departure outlined in this dissertation. However, the types of strategies the counselors have implemented to work with probationary students supported Tinto's suggested strategy for colleges to implement early intervention strategies to support the construct of academic integration (1987). The need for colleges to provide what Tinto describes as "dimensions of institutional action" (Tinto, 1993, p. 183) that include proactive intervention and assessment, monitoring of student performance, and an early warning system, are all components of the probation intervention program that was studied at OCC.

#### *Research Context*

OCC provides courses and degrees to nearly 12,000 students, with 8,353 enrolled in degree or certificate programs. The remaining numbers of students enroll in courses on campus and at a variety of off campus sites for personal enrichment and job training ([http://www.sunyocc.edu/uploadedFiles/OCC/About\\_the\\_College/General\\_Info/Institutional\\_Research\\_and\\_Planning/FastFactsF09.pdf](http://www.sunyocc.edu/uploadedFiles/OCC/About_the_College/General_Info/Institutional_Research_and_Planning/FastFactsF09.pdf)). There are more students studying full-time (55%) than part-time, and 66% of entering students are the first in their families to attend college. Approximately 16% of the students are from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds with the largest percentage of students identifying themselves as African American, non-Hispanic (9%). Like many community colleges, a large portion of students from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds attend, and OCC is no exception with 81% of its students receiving some form of financial aid, and 56% of

financial aid applicants reporting an annual income of \$36,000 or less (OCC, 2008b). These characteristics have been associated with low rates of success in college and are considered risk factors for college completion (Adelman, 2006; Tinto, 1987).

OCC maintains an open-access policy by admitting most students who apply and wish to attend college. However, all new students are assessed in English and mathematics through a placement test entitled, ACCUPLACER®. This is a computerized assessment tool that is used to place students in English and mathematics courses appropriate for their current level of achievement. In fall of 2008, 45% of incoming students required at least one developmental course in either English or mathematics. Developmental courses carry no college credit as they are considered to be at a *pre-collegiate* level. Therefore, they do not contribute to earning credits towards a degree. However, these courses are required by the college for a student to progress towards enrolling in mandated courses in English and mathematics. In addition, students are charged the same amount in tuition as they would for credit courses and may use financial aid to pay this cost. These additional costs may impede some students' ability later on to pay for college courses as federal and state financial aid programs have limits on the number of semesters students can be funded (<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/what010.htm#pell>).

The college offers several levels of developmental coursework in reading, writing, and mathematics to improve the skills required for freshman-level college courses. The large percentage of incoming students needing some type of developmental work (45% in 2008), translates into many students in need of academic support.

## *Methodology*

The research questions for this study had two distinct areas of focus. First, the researcher sought to determine if the probation intervention program had an effect on grades and academic standing. Second, there was a desire to learn about students' experiences on academic probation. This was best explored by applying a mixed methods design. Utilizing a mixed methods design allowed the researcher to apply a pragmatic view to this problem, described by Creswell (2009) as working to provide "the best understanding of the problem" (p. 11). The complexity of the issue of student retention has been well documented throughout the review of the literature, and its complex nature was what led the researcher to choose a mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method served to provide evidence and test the hypothesis that students on probation will improve their academic standing by participating in an intervention program designed to improve the problem (Creswell, 2009). However, it would not provide all the answers. There has been no research conducted at OCC that provides information about the experience of students in academic difficulty.

The studies conducted over many years and reviewed for this study indicated that students in academic difficulty in college are less likely to complete degree requirements and graduate with a degree. Therefore, it was important to OCC to understand how the national literature on student retention applied to its own student body and, in particular, whether the program to intervene with probationary students would yield the same results that had occurred at other colleges.

The exploratory nature of the phenomenon of academic incongruence lent itself to a qualitative approach. Tinto (1993) described academic incongruence as the lack of

connection between the students' abilities and the expectations of the institution. The OCC administrators did not know much about the variables that influence a student's academic success. Creswell (2009) suggested, "Qualitative research is exploratory and is useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine" (p. 18). Conducting this study with two methodological approaches sought to provide depth and breadth to this action research project. Mixing the quantitative and qualitative data provides "a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone" (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007, p. 5). As identified in the literature reviewed for this study, most studies of student retention have been grounded in a quantitative approach yielding similar results without a more thorough understanding of how students are experiencing college. In this study, the quantitative analysis assisted college administration in determining the effects of an intervention program on student success. The qualitative analysis provided stories of the experiences of students on academic probation and identified themes to inform future strategies for working with the students at OCC.

*Quantitative method.* By applying a sequential, two-phased design, the quantitative analysis helped to inform a purposeful sampling technique to guide the researcher in selecting the candidates to interview (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). The quantitative method applied in this study was quasi-experimental in that there was a treatment group, but participants were not randomly selected. This condition limited the ability to generalize results to a larger population and threatened the internal validity (Creswell, 2009). Because participants self-select, the researcher was unable to conclude



that the program had a direct effect on students' ability to improve their academic standing due to threats of history, maturation, and selection (Patten, 2007).

Students participating in the probation intervention program could have also improved their skills through what Patten (2007) refers to as "other environmental influences on the participants" (p. 91). Examples of other influences could have been increasing hours spent studying or working with peers. Additionally, Patten referred to the maturation effect that can occur when an experiment is occurring over a length of time when participants may be maturing as humans. Maturation would not be unusual for college students within a given semester. Finally, participant self-selection threatens the internal validity by not being representative of the larger probationary population. The identification of these potential threats are included in the limitations section of Chapter 5 of this study. Despite threats to validity, the quasi-experimental method provided the best approach available to study the program at OCC. Because the structure of the probation intervention program to be studied had already been established, the researcher had no ability to conduct a pure experimental study using randomly selected participants. Using an experimental design with randomly selected participants would have reduced the threats of internal validity but was not possible in this study (Patten, 2007).

*Qualitative method.* Phenomenology is a philosophical approach often used in sociological studies of human experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) in attempts to construct the experiences of participants through their own words and interpretations. The qualitative researcher, acting as the instrument of study, in the phenomenological approach attempts to identify and set aside the biases and pre-conceived notions of the experience to be studied in order to truly listen to the

experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, applying the phenomenological approach supported the theoretical framework identified in the literature review.

The theory of student departure proposed by Tinto (1987, 1993) posited that the institutional context and the way the student interacted within this context would influence student departure. Additionally, Tinto pointed out that the event of student departure could best be understood through understanding the experiences of each and every person (1993, p. 37). Therefore, the researcher chose the phenomenological approach of inquiry to try to understand the lived experience of students on academic probation through their own words. Moustakas (1994) encouraged researchers to seek out the descriptions of what happened within an experience but also identify the context in which it happened. The context in this study was OCC and the place in which students' academic experiences are described. Rather than draw limited conclusions from sources other than those who live it, the researcher learned directly from the students and applied a systematic approach to be open to these experiences. The step-by-step method described by Moustakas and Creswell (2009) provided the researcher, who is relatively new to qualitative inquiry, with a systematic approach to conducting the study. The method is described in the data collection and analysis section of this chapter.

### *Research Participants*

Probationary students were placed into three distinct groupings. It should be noted that participant categorization was bound by the program selection process already in place at OCC. The counseling department determined that a subset of probationary students would be offered the intervention in order to maintain a small number of

participants to match available resources. When the program was developed by the counselors, they were not sure how many students would respond to this voluntary program. Therefore, they estimated how many students each of the participating counselors could effectively counsel and solicited participation with uncertainty as to who may actually respond to the invitation.

The first category of participants was those who had received the treatment (the intervention). The second category was comprised of non-participant students who were offered the treatment but chose not to participate. The third category formed the control group for this study because the intervention was not offered to them, but they were placed on academic probation. For the purposes of clarity, Table 3.1 provides a coding system to simplify references to the three categories of participants as well as the number of participants in each category who were studied.

Table 3.1

*Participant Categories*

Description	Category	Number
Probationary students who elected to be in program	P1	56
Probationary students who elected not to be in program	P2	68
Probationary students not invited to be in program (control)	P3	83

Information from the college’s student information system in Table 3.2 provides the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 3.2

*Student Characteristics*

	P1		P2		P3	
	<i>n</i>	% of cohort	<i>n</i>	% of cohort	<i>n</i>	% of cohort
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>						
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%
African American	10	18%	12	18%	15	18%
Hispanic	4	7%	0	0%	2	2%
Native American	0	0%	3	4%	4	5%
White	34	61%	49	72%	54	65%
Not reported	7	13%	4	6%	7	8%
<b>Age ranges</b>						
19 and under	28	50%	28	41%	36	43%
20-24	21	38%	34	50%	44	53%
25 and over	7	13%	6	9%	3	4%
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	27	48%	32	47%	49	59%
Female	29	52%	36	53%	34	41%

The characteristics of each category were important to analyze while conducting the quantitative analysis of this study. The literature review revealed differences in student retention and academic outcomes for students of different race/ethnic backgrounds and

those who were less prepared to attend college. The participant data was analyzed to determine if students' race/ethnicity, age, gender, or academic background showed any statistically significant differences in fall semester academic outcomes. Table 3.3 presents the academic background of the probationary students.

Table 3.3

*Academic Characteristics*

	P1		P2		P3	
	<i>n</i>	% of cohort	<i>n</i>	% of cohort	<i>n</i>	% of cohort
High school graduate	45	80%	58	85%	74	89%
GED recipient	4	7%	4	6%	5	6%
Non-high school graduate	5	9%	4	6%	2	2%
Unknown	2	4%	2	3%	2	2%
Needed developmental coursework	34	61%	42	62%	42	51%
Mean high school GPA	77.66		76.9		77.44	
Mean spring term GPA	0.94		0.81		0.87	

Six students were interviewed: three from P1, one from P2, and two from P3. The interview participants represented a mix of gender, age, and race/ethnicity (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4

*Interview Participant Characteristics*

	<u>Demographic</u>		
	<u>Race/ethnicity</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>
Student A (P1)	White	M	19
Student B (P1)	White	F	58
Student C (P1)	White	M	20
Student D (P2)	African American	F	22
Student E (P3)	African American	M	20
Student F (P3)	White	F	20

To reach the targeted number of six interviewees, the researcher reviewed individual student records and identified 35 students to invite to participate. A letter of invitation was sent with the offer of a \$10 honorarium to those who participated in the interview (see Appendix E). The incentive has become common practice at OCC to entice participation.

Follow-up phone calls were conducted within 1 week of the letters being mailed to recruit participants. The researcher offered the participants a choice to meet either close to their homes or on the OCC campus. All participants preferred a location on campus because that was most convenient for each. In an attempt to create a less intimidating environment, the researcher chose an empty office that was private but not associated with the researcher's position at the college.

### *Data Collection Methods*

The mixed methods research design for this study was a two-phased, sequential approach. Quantitative data was collected and analyzed first, and then qualitative data was collected to help provide a more in-depth understanding of the students on probation. The value of collecting the data sequentially allowed the researcher to identify students who were academically successful at the end of the semester as well as those who were not. This information was not available until after the grades were verified and posted to a student's record. The quantitative analysis of all probationary students helped to inform the selection of interviewees that also matched the demographic profile provided in the descriptive analysis of the categories of the probationary population.

*Quantitative data collection.* Upon Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval from OCC on December 8, 2009 and St. John Fisher College on January 26, 2010, the researcher requested a dataset from the OCC registrar. The researcher reviewed the end-of-term data for completion and accuracy between January 26 and February 5, 2010. The researcher identified and contacted 35 students to send invitations of participation.

Characteristics described in the literature reviewed for this study included race, academic preparation such as high school GPA, delaying entry as identified by age of participants, and placement in developmental coursework. The researcher compared these characteristics of P1, P2, and P3 to determine if the probationary students exhibit the characteristics most often cited in the literature as being prone to poor academic performance, which may support the studies of student retention. Using demographic data such as this allowed the researcher to share data that could potentially be generalized to the community college student retention literature (Patten, 2007).

The registrar's office provided a report at the end of the fall term of all students in the study (P1, P2, and P3). The report included student ID, name, address, phone, email, spring 2009 term GPA, fall 2009 term GPA, cumulative GPA, academic standing code at end of fall term, ethnicity, age, gender, high school GPA, high school graduation status, and placement into developmental coursework.

The data provided by the registrar's office was extracted from the college's enterprise system, Colleague©, and then imported into Statistical Packaging Software Systems© (SPSS) version 17.0. The researcher reviewed each element for accuracy and validity. Missing data was reviewed to determine if another source could be used to complete the dataset. The researcher was able to locate data directly from each student's high school transcript, which is stored in the college's document imaging system, OnBase©. The coding of the individual student record identified students as P1, P2, or P3. This procedure allowed for comparing the academic outcomes of the three categories of students placed on academic probation. The academic outcomes were evaluated by comparing the three categories as well as analyzing the probation population as a whole in relation to characteristics identified in the review of the retention literature.

*Qualitative data collection.* In an attempt to focus entirely on the participants' experiences with academic success, the researcher wrote a personal description of experiences with academic success, a process described as bracketing (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This concept of "epoche" (Moustakas, p. 83) is meant to encourage the researcher to acknowledge and put aside preconceived judgments and analyze the phenomenon of study "naively and freshly" (p. 83). This acknowledgement of the fact that we all come to know certain things but can put this thinking aside is what separates



the positivist and constructivist worldviews. Creswell (2009) described cause and effect (positivist) and subjective meaning (constructivist) as the two worldviews that determine particular research designs. Therefore, this step, according to Moustakas, precedes the data collection in order to acknowledge biases prior to collecting and interpreting the data and “allow a phenomenon to be just what it is and to come to know it as it presents itself” (Moustakas, p. 86). The researcher documented this information in a personal journal and was referenced as the analysis proceeded.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with probation program participants and non-participants. The semi-structured interview provides a balance between open ended, everyday conversation and a structured interview. The interview questions resembled a questionnaire because the researcher was looking to explore some themes, which require structured questioning, as well as maintaining the freedom of exploring new areas based upon interviewee responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview is considered the primary method of data collection in a phenomenological study as it provides the researcher with the opportunity to hear the participant’s story in his or her own words with some guided questions to explore themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2006).

Interviews lasted between 25 and 35 minutes. A set of common questions used for all participants allowed for exploration of select themes discovered during the literature review regarding the topic of student retention (see Appendix F). The themes explored in the literature review as being identified as potentially influencing student retention included: (a) academic preparation, (b) membership in an underrepresented population, (c) student intentions, (d) self-efficacy and academic success, and (d) institutional

characteristics. In addition, the researcher attempted to explore the academic and social constructs of the theory of student departure (Tinto, 1987). These questions helped gather textural and structural information that is the basis of a phenomenological analysis of the experience. The structured questions assisted the researcher in understanding the students' experiences (textural) and the conditions or context of the experience (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas (1994) used the term *textural* to describe the feeling of the experience that he compares to the texture of objects, "descriptions that vary in intensity" (p. 91).

*Interview questions.* Interview questions were designed to explore some of the themes that emerged in the literature review as well as the theoretical framework guiding this study. Below are the questions with a brief explanation of their relevance to the student retention literature.

1. Describe your academic experiences as a student prior to coming to college.
2. What words would you use to describe yourself as a student?

Although the quantitative data could have provided background to answer the first question, the purpose here was to explore the student's perception of his or her academic experiences. Both of these questions attempted to explore Tinto's construct of pre-college characteristics and their influence on student commitment and ability to succeed (1987, 1993). This question also helped explore a concept Hsieh et al. (2007) identified in probationary students as performance avoidance when students exhibit high levels of self-efficacy and yet performance is incongruent.

3. Whenever we begin a new experience there are certain ideas we imagine about how the experience will turn out for us. Tell me about your expectations when you arrived at Onondaga.

4. Tell me about the goals you have set for yourself. Have these goals changed since you arrived at Onondaga?

These questions sought to explore whether interactions with the college may have altered the student's goals and beliefs. This was another construct proposed by Tinto when he asserted that the interactions within the academic and social context of the institution influences goals and commitments to either stay or leave the college (Tinto, 1987, 1993).

5. Tell me about your first semester at Onondaga. Describe a classroom experience that was most memorable.

This question was used to explore the student's perception of how well integrated he or she was with the academic environment and whether any relationships had been formed. Tinto's theory suggested strong faculty and peer relationships would influence student success. These variables were also supported in some of the studies reviewed for this dissertation. The researcher wished to learn if the probationary students described relationships.

6. Tell me your impressions of the college in supporting your success.

The responses to this question explored the student's perceptions about the role of the college in supporting success. The probation intervention programs reviewed for this study indicated that college intervention programs can be beneficial to students who are struggling. This finding was also supported in the student retention literature as a best practice. The researcher explored this in relation to an OCC student.

7. How did you feel when you received your letter about being placed on academic probation?

This was used to explore the student's self-concept and willingness to participate in the program. Interviewees were selected from all three categories of probationary students so themes may emerge that will be of interest in shaping the intervention program for the future.

8. How would you describe your experience this past semester?

9. What were some of the things you did to try and improve your grades? How would you describe the college's role in helping you?

These questions explored differences in the probationary students who participated in the intervention and those who did not in relation to institutional support for success.

10. What are your feelings about your future as a college student at Onondaga?

This question was incorporated to explore the theory of student departure construct of institutional interactions and their impact on student's commitment to continue.

11. What else would you like to tell me about being a college student placed on academic probation?

This provided the interviewee with an opportunity to provide additional insights for the researcher to consider when analyzing the data.

*Memo-writing and field notes.* Throughout the collection of interview data, the researcher utilized two common qualitative methods of quality fieldwork, which were memo-writing and field notes. The memo-writing technique helped the researcher to monitor biases and feelings about the research being conducted at the time it is taking place (Charmaz, 2006). The memo served as a way of clearing the researcher's mind prior to moving on to the next action and potentially open up to new ways of thinking or perspectives (Glesne, 1999). Memos were captured in the researcher's journal as soon as

IRB approval had been received and the study officially began. The memo-writing proved to be beneficial as a way to capture thoughts about the themes that emerged from the literature review. Although the researcher used the themes of (a) academic preparation, (b) membership in an underrepresented population, (c) student intentions, (d) self-efficacy and academic success, and (d) institutional characteristics as a basis for providing comments on each interview for use during data analysis, other comments arose to help guide the data analysis.

Field notes were used to describe what could not be captured during the interviews such as "...sights, smells, impressions, body language, tone of voice, and extra remarks said before and after the interview" (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). The researcher captured descriptive field notes after each interview and included the physical environment, physical appearance of the interviewee, observation of interviewee behavior, and phrases used before and after the interview that could prove relevant to the analysis (Bogden & Biklen). This provided a richer analysis in providing a full description of the data collection beyond what was recorded during the sessions.

*Interview sessions.* Interview sessions were recorded (with permission from the participants) using a digital recording device and transcribed by an outside transcriptionist to expedite the process of capturing statements and themes. Initials replaced interviewee names within the transcripts to protect the students' privacy. All recorded sessions were stored in the researcher's home on an external hard drive device and not accessible to college employees or students. The electronic files will be maintained on this external drive indefinitely to use for future studies and publication. Results of this study were shared with OCC's Provost as well as the probation

intervention program coordinator. Additionally, all written transcriptions are stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home for one year after completion and successful dissertation defense and then shredded.

### *Data Analysis*

*Quantitative data analysis.* The researcher conducted a descriptive analysis to provide information to the college on the characteristics of each student category (P1, P2, and P3). The description included demographic data and academic background variables. These variables provided information that could be useful to the college in identifying characteristics of students who exhibited poor academic progress, which placed them on probation. If there are any common characteristics identified, the college may be able to provide earlier interventions to support these students before they are placed on probation. The results are presented in a table format, and differences in the three groups are described in the text of the report.

Next, an analysis of the data provided outcomes of this quasi-experimental research study that involved the effect of an intervention on control and treatment groups. In this case, it was to specifically determine if participants in the intervention program achieved higher semester GPAs than the control group. The average means of the semester GPAs for the spring term (2009) and the fall term (2009) for each of the three categories was collected and analyzed using the descriptive statistics function in SPSS, version 17.0 ©. The analysis was completed in two ways. First, the mean scores of the experimental group (P1) and control group (P3) were compared by using an independent sample *t*-test to determine the statistical significance between two means (Patten, 2007). Next, a one-way ANOVA statistical test was applied to compare the end-of-semester

mean GPAs of the three categories. This test produces a result to indicate whether the differences in means among three categories of students are significant. The resulting  $p$  value is the common indicator in determining if results of this type are statistically significant and provides the researcher with information that will either support or reject the hypothesis that participants will have a higher mean GPA than non-participants (Patten, 2007). The researcher considered the results of all statistical tests as significant if the  $p$  value was less than .05, the standard reasonable measurement of probability (Patten, 2007).

The researcher also determined if there was any significant difference in the average gain in end-of-term GPAs amongst the three categories of students. The comparison of the mean gain between the end-of-semester GPAs between spring 2009 and fall 2009 for each category of student was compared by applying a one-way ANOVA. The results provide an outcome to help determine if one group's result was statistically significant in average GPA gains from one semester to the next. Again, significance was determined if the  $p$  value was less than .05.

Finally, the academic standing of each of the three groups was compared using a cross-tabulation function of SPSS®, version 17.0. This analysis allowed the researcher to compare two sets of categorical variables (student participant category and academic standing category). In turn, this data was instrumental in conducting a bivariate analysis, an examination of the relationship between two or more categorical variables. By applying a Chi-square analysis, a determination was made regarding the statistical significance of the findings (Patten, 2007). The results of this study were also compared to those described in the literature review to determine similarities or differences. These

methods of quantitative data analysis were determined most beneficial for this study because it provided a reasonable measure of probability that the results were an accurate description of the treatment (Patten).

In summary, the analysis involved the use of three categories of student participants as well as academic standing results that represented five categories collapsed into two: good standing or not good standing. This consolidation allowed the researcher to simplify the comparison of the collected data and meet the needs of answering the proposed research question of whether the intervention improves the academic outcomes of participants when compared to non-participants. The statistical results were displayed by using a binomial effect size display (BESD), which provides a display of data that can be easily understood by readers of this study (Randolph & Edmondson, 2005). Tables are used to present the results in Chapter 4 of the study.

*Qualitative data analysis.* An attempt to reduce a large and complex experience into a description of what happened during the student's experience on academic probation required continuous reflection in order to "grasp the full nature of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 93). The researcher listened to the recording of each interviewee while reviewing the transcription of the session to verify the accuracy of outside transcription services as well as become immersed in the data. This first step required concentrated time and effort and prepared the researcher to follow Moustakas' systematic approach to data analysis (p. 120):

1. List all possible statements relevant to the experience.
2. Reduce the statements into themes and eliminate redundancies.
3. Cluster the statements into relevant themes



4. Check the statements and themed clusters against the original transcript to ensure accuracy. If the statements are not relevant or explicitly stated, they are removed.
5. For each interviewee, write a textural description of the experience, including verbatim stat
6. For each interviewee, write a structural description that provides an analysis of the context that accounts for underlying factors contributing to the experience.
7. For each interviewee, write a full description of the experience that includes both textural and structural meanings of the experience.
8. For all interviewees, summarize the experiences that represent the experience as a whole.

The analysis of data collected through phenomenological interviews differs slightly from what is commonly proposed for other qualitative methods such as grounded theory. Using the methods of coding in grounded theory requires categorizing varying segments of data with short names and then grouping them to summarize the data (Charmaz, 2006). The data analysis in the phenomenological approach begins with what is described as “horizontalizing the data and regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). These statements were identified from the interview transcripts and were placed side by side to analyze and determine common themes or categories. The equal treatment of each statement is intended to diminish potential bias that one statement is more important than another. Statements are directly from the interviewee’s own words from the transcript. In grounded theory, these words would be referred to as “*in vivo*” (Charmaz, p. 55), but in phenomenology, these statements are the starting point for data analysis because the

philosophy is that the participants construct the experience through their own voices and are recorded as such (Moustakas).

After this process, statements were clustered together into common themes, which assisted the researcher in creating the textural and structural descriptions of the experience or phenomenon. Using Microsoft Excel© to create a table of the themes identified prior to the start of the study assisted the researcher in documenting statements in support of these themes as well as identified new themes that emerged from the analysis. The researcher collected many statements that were weighed equally until the transcript had been reviewed at least two times.

The participant statements were entered into Microsoft Excel© and reviewed for what Moustakas (1994) called “clustered themes and meanings” (p. 118). The identified themes helped form the basis of writing a textural description of the common lived experiences for each interviewee. Next, the researcher wrote a structural description about each interviewee’s experience to identify the context of the experience and its impact on the participants (Creswell, 2007). The primary process suggested by Moustakas is to “arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced, in other words, the *how* that speaks to conditions that illuminate the *what* of the experience” (p. 98).

Moustakas (1994) recommended researchers attempt to validate their findings by allowing “co-researchers,” (p. 110) or the interviewees, to review the written descriptions of their experiences to ensure they accurately represent their experiences. The researcher asked the interviewees at the time of the interviews if they would be willing to participate in this process of “member checking” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208) as college students’ time

and willingness may hinder the researcher's ability to conduct this portion of the analysis. All agreed to do this. However, only one participant responded to the researcher's request to read and respond to the textural and structural description.

All of the steps outlined above provided the researcher the ability to write a detailed and comprehensive description of all interviewees' textural and structural experiences as a whole. This "composite description" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) encapsulated the essence of the experience of academic probation through the participants' voices and researcher's interpretations. The researcher used participant statements throughout the textural descriptive summaries. Significant statements and common themes emerged within the composite description of the lived experiences of the probationary students at OCC and are provided in Chapter 4.

#### *Summary*

The mixed methods design for this study sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of the experience of students on academic probation at OCC. First, the researcher provided a descriptive analysis of the students on academic probation in the fall 2009 semester at OCC. This information provided the college with an understanding of the characteristics of students who were placed on probation. Additionally, comparing OCC students to studies reviewed, the researcher identified connections or contradictions between the results of this analysis and studies at other colleges and universities.

Second, the narrative descriptions of six interviewees illuminated, in the students' own words, the lived experience of those who are on probation. Upon analyzing transcribed interview sessions and carefully summarizing their content using student

quotations to bring their voices to the surface, the researcher attempted to connect these experiences with the themes identified in the literature review.

The mixed methods approach to this study required a disciplined timeline to ensure deadlines were achieved. The selection of the explanatory design by the researcher was purposeful because it was "...straightforward to implement, because the researcher conducts the two methods in separate phases and collects only one type of data at a time" (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007, p. 74). Progress towards accomplishing this action plan was monitored by the researcher through the use of the dissertation completion plan, organized by a task list created in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and monitored by the researcher's dissertation committee.

The written results are in Chapter 4 of this dissertation and formatted by research question with headings for quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis as suggested by Glatthorn and Joyner (2005). The results presented in Chapter 4 are analyzed and discussed in Chapter 5. The final chapter provided the researcher the opportunity to reflect on what was discovered during the study and proposes recommendations for further study of this retention problem at OCC.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### *Introduction*

The impetus of this study centered on better understanding the increased number of students placed on academic probation that contributes to the declining fall-to-fall student retention rates at OCC. The percentage of students placed on academic probation increased from 6% in 2005 to 8% in 2008 (OCC, 2008c). Students who do not successfully complete courses are at risk of not completing degree requirements.

Counselors from the college implemented a pilot program to intervene with students placed on academic probation. The program model included conducting individual counseling, using an assessment tool to identify areas of improvement, and creating an academic success plan. The goal of the program was to help students earn satisfactory grades in hopes of improving their overall grade point average (GPA) as well as to help them return to good academic standing. In an attempt to explore the impact of this new intervention strategy, as well as assist the college in learning more about the experiences of students placed on academic probation, the researcher conducted a mixed methods study to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester achieve a higher grade point average than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

RQ2: Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester return to academic good standing at a higher rate than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

RQ3: What is the college experience of students placed on academic probation?

The researcher sought to determine if the probation intervention program at OCC had an effect on participants' grades and academic standing. Data gathered from the college's student information system was analyzed using SPSS version 17.0.

In addition, the researcher explored the experiences of a select number of OCC students on academic probation, some of whom were in the intervention program, and some who were not. Qualitative data was collected through one-on-one interviews with six students. Interview transcripts were reviewed and analyzed by applying Moustakas's (1994) step-by-step approach as described in Chapter 3. Themes emerged from analyzing participant statements as well as the textural and structural descriptions of each participant. This reduction from themes to descriptions is what Moustakas described as phenomenological reduction.

According to Moustakas (1994), textural descriptions provide the essence of the experience in the words of the participants. Structural descriptions help to describe the contexts in which the phenomenon occurred. Moustakas recommended that researchers present examples of the data collected and analyzed with statements he characterized as the "horizons" (p. 184) or participant statements. Themes emerging from these statements, individual textural and structural descriptions, in addition to composite descriptions of the experience, and finally, a summary of the meanings or themes are included in this chapter. The findings from this sequential, explanatory mixed methods

study of OCC students on academic probation are presented in the order of the research questions with tables, abbreviated participant descriptions, and thematic summaries.

*Research Question One*

Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester achieve a higher grade point average than probationary students who do not participate in the program? A total of 207 students who were placed on academic probation at the end of the spring 2009 semester at OCC returned to the college in fall 2009 and were selected as the participants in this study. The students on probation were placed into distinct categories to help identify students in the program and those not in the program. The numbers of students in each category and resulting fall semester mean GPAs are outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

*Mean Fall Semester GPAs by Category*

Description	Category	Number	Mean Fall GPA	Standard Deviation
Probationary students who elected to be in program (treatment)	P1	56	1.44	1.08
Probationary students who elected not to be in program	P2	68	1.31	1.09
Probationary students not invited to be in program (non-treatment)	P3	83	1.51	1.13

*End of semester outcomes.* The data analyzed for each participant group helped to determine if students who participated in the probation intervention program achieved a

higher fall semester grade point average (GPA) than those who did not participate. Although the sample size was 207, fall semester GPAs were available for only 189 participants because 18 students either withdrew from the college or failed all of their courses during the fall semester.

The data collected to answer the research question was analyzed in three ways. First, the mean fall GPA for the treatment group (P1) was compared to the group who was not offered the treatment (P3). The non-treatment group (P3) achieved a higher mean fall semester GPA than the non-treatment group (1.51 vs. 1.44). Although the non-treatment group achieved a higher mean GPA, an independent sample *t*-test was used to compare the means of the two categories and provide a resulting *p* value. The test resulted in  $t=.344$ ,  $p=.731$ ,  $p>.05$ . Therefore, there was no statistically significant difference in the mean fall semester GPA for students who participated in the probation intervention program when compared to students who did not participate.

Second, the researcher compared the mean fall semester GPA of students in the treatment group (P1) with an expanded non-treatment group by collapsing the categories of P2 and P3 into one group ( $n=151$ ). The participants in P2 were offered the treatment but did not participate in the intervention and therefore, were considered a non-treatment group. The treatment group achieved a higher mean semester GPA (1.44) than the combined non-treatment group of P2 and P3 (1.42). However, an independent sample *t*-test resulted in  $t=.109$ ,  $p=.914$ ,  $p>.05$ . Therefore, there was no statistically significant difference in the mean fall semester GPA between the treatment group (P1) and the combined non-treatment group (P2 and P3).



Third, the literature review revealed differences in student retention and academic outcomes for students of different race/ethnic backgrounds and those who were less prepared to attend college. The participant data was analyzed to determine if independent variables such as race/ethnicity, age, gender, or academic background showed any statistically significant differences when compared to the dependent variable of mean fall semester GPA. Table 4.2 depicts the differing fall semester GPA means by the demographic characteristics of gender, race/ethnicity, and age.

Table 4.2

*Mean Fall GPA by Demographic Characteristics*

Category	Mean fall GPA
Gender	
Male (n=98)	1.41
Female (n=91)	1.44
Age category	
19 and under (n=84)	1.36
20-24 (n=91)	1.43
25 and over (n=14)	1.78
Race/ethnicity	
White (n=137)	1.44
Non-White (n=52)	1.19

*Note: Total n=189 due to 18 participants with no fall term GPA*

In order to determine if the difference in mean GPAs between two independent variables (male/female, and White/non-White, high school graduate/non-graduate) was significant, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted for each. Females in this study

earned a higher mean fall GPA, (M=1.44) than males (M=1.41). Results of the independent sample *t*-test were  $F=1.51$ ,  $t=-.175$ ,  $p=.861$ ,  $p>.05$ . Therefore, the test revealed no statistical significance. Participants identified as White earned a higher mean fall GPA (M=1.44) than those students identified as non-White (Asian American, African American, Hispanic, Native American), M=1.19. The independent sample *t*-test results indicated  $F=.253$ ,  $t=1.35$ ,  $p=.177$ ,  $p>.05$ . Therefore, no statistical significance was discovered when comparing the White and non-White participants.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates whether the differences in the mean fall GPA (the dependent variable) amongst three categories of students are significant. The mean fall GPAs for each age category were under 19 (M=1.36), 20-24 (M=1.43), and age 25 and over (M=1.78). Although the participants aged 25 and over had a higher overall mean fall semester GPA, an ANOVA test revealed no statistically significant difference;  $df=2$ ,  $F=.880$ ,  $p=.416$ ,  $p>.05$ . See Table 4.3 for ANOVA results.

Table 4.3

*Analysis of Variance Fall Mean GPAs by Age Categories*

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	F	<i>p</i>
Between Groups	2.152	2	1.076	.880	.416
Within Groups	227.431	186	1.223		

The researcher examined the academic background for the probationary student group (see Table 4.4). Comparisons of mean fall GPAs between high school graduates and non-high school graduates, as well as students who needed developmental coursework presented no statistically significant findings. Participants not required to

take developmental courses earned a higher mean fall GPA (M=1.45) than those requiring developmental courses (M=1.41). The independent sample *t*-test results indicated  $F=1.02$ ,  $t=-.189$ ,  $p=.850$ ,  $p>.05$  indicating no statistical significance between the two groups.

Participants who graduated from high school earned a higher mean fall GPA (M=1.43) than those who did not graduate from high school (M=1.41). However, an independent sample *t*-test results,  $F=1.69$ ,  $t=.009$ ,  $p=.922$ ,  $p>.05$ , indicated no statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Table 4.4

*Mean Fall GPA by Academic Preparation*

Category	Mean fall GPA
High school	
Graduate (n=162)	1.43
Non-graduate (27)	1.41
Developmental courses	
Yes (n=108)	1.41
No (n=81)	1.45

*Note: Total n=189 due to 18 participants with no fall term GPA*

*Average gain of GPAs.* The researcher examined the gain in GPAs from spring to fall semesters by subtracting the spring term GPA from the fall term GPA for each participant. The average gain in semester GPAs for each category was  $P1=.600$ ,  $P2=.492$ , and  $P3=.613$ . A one-way ANOVA was utilized to test the significance of these differences and the test revealed  $F=.205$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $185$ ,  $p>.05$ , indicating no statistically

significant difference in the mean GPA gains between spring and fall semesters amongst the three categories of students (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

*Analysis of Variance for Mean GPA Gains*

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	F	<i>p</i>
Between Groups	.541	2	.271	.205	.815
Within Groups	244.665	185	1.323		

*Research Question Two*

The second research question was: Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester return to good academic standing at a higher rate than probationary students who do not participate in the program? A univariate analysis was conducted utilizing a cross-tabulation of the treatment (P1) and non-treatment groups (P2 and P3) and compared each to the variable of academic standing. Results indicated that 29% of the treatment group returned to good academic standing compared to 29% of the non-treatment group who did not return to good standing (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

*Return to Good Academic Standing*

Group	Good standing	Not in good standing
Treatment group (P1)	29%	71%
Non-treatment group(P2 and P3)	29%	71%

The even distribution of participants and non-participants who returned to good academic standing warrants no further statistical testing. The participants who received the treatment returned to good academic standing at the same rate as the participants who did not receive the treatment.

An additional evaluation of the data revealed that when reviewing the results of all the students on probation (n=207), more than one-half (56%) lost their matriculation (LOM), which meant they were removed from a degree-seeking status. A review of all the probationary students revealed that only 29% returned to good academic standing.

### *Research Question Three*

What is the college experience of students placed on academic probation? The researcher attempted to answer this question using the interview transcripts of six participants who attended OCC. The exploration of students' college experiences was the context for placement onto academic probation. The analysis of the transcripts resulted in identifying 20 subthemes from the participants' statements specific to the general college experience. From the 20 subthemes, five themes emerged to form the essence of the college experience and two themes for the experience of placement onto academic probation. The five themes describing the college experience were (a) being academically engaged, (b) dependence versus independence, (c) memorable classroom experiences, (d) strong friends and family support, and (e) success = college degree. The two themes related to the placement on academic probation were motivation to act and avoidance. Table 4.7 portrays the linkages between the subthemes identified from participants' significant statements and the major themes of the college experience for students on probation.

Table 4.7

*Emergent Themes*

Theme	Subthemes
Being academically engaged	Self-awareness Okay to ask for help Making connections Academic needs Limited self-confidence Motivated by pressure
Dependence versus independence	Incongruence between student and structure Feelings of embarrassment Need for structure Feeling scared New beginnings Overcoming challenges
Memorable classroom experiences	Lack of challenge The learning environment Enjoyment of learning
Strong friends and family support	View of peers Role of family and friends Positive influencers
Success = College degree	Positive outlook Turning things around Success in life Determined to succeed

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The inquiry into the lived experience of college students resulted in findings that represent the college experience as a whole as well as the effects of placement onto academic probation. Through the steps of analyzing and writing textural and structural descriptions, larger themes emerged to describe these students' experiences in college and as probationary students.

Table 4.8 provides the reader with a demographic description of each participant using generic titles for each person and the probation program category. The participants' academic background is available in Appendix H.

Table 4.8

*Interview Participant Characteristics*

Demographic			
<u>Student</u>	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Age
Student A (P1)	White	M	19
Student B (P1)	White	F	58
Student C (P1)	White	M	20
Student D (P2)	African American	F	22
Student E (P3)	African American	M	20
Student F (P3)	White	F	20

Abbreviated textural (describing what happened during the experience) and structural (describing the context of the experience) descriptions as well as descriptions of the identified themes for the college experience and event of academic probation provide guidance to the reader.

*The Participants*

*Student A textural and structural description.* Student A was a 19-year-old, White male who entered OCC after spending one year in an early college program for gifted students. He was a probation program participant, but he took very little action to engage

with this support program and did not return to good academic standing after his semester on probation. He was still enrolled at the college at the time of the interview but in a nonmatriculated status, which is the outcome of failing to meet requirements after a probationary semester.

He left high school his junior year to attend the early college program but was unable to complete an Associate's degree at that college. His expressed desire to be more challenged, along with disliking the structure of college, contributed to his failing classes and being unable to complete his goal. He admitted that he was self-motivated to learn but only when the content met his notion of worthiness. In fact, he was so selective in what he considered worthwhile learning, that failure had become acceptable for him. "I tend to completely ignore those [courses] that I don't find interesting or relevant, and the prospect of failing a class is really – it doesn't trouble me, discourage me." However, he also attributed his lack of success to personal attributes such as laziness. "I've always been a very lazy person, so there's certainly that personal, personal habits or failure to cultivate virtues or something. So I can be lazy and I can definitely – I rarely work as hard as I could or should, but a self-motivated learner for the most part." The contradiction of identifying himself as a self-motivated learner and lazy within the same statement demonstrated a disconnectedness between what he desired and the effort he was willing to apply.

The collegiate context in which he must navigate to have a successful college experience was in direct conflict with his independent personality. He was unwilling to conform to the structure of college such as meeting deadlines and regularly attending classes. He found it difficult to remain in a classroom setting with people he believed to



have less interest in higher-order thinking. Therefore, his inability to meet the demands required of him influenced his college experience and ultimately his failure to complete what he had begun. Punitive actions, such as failing grades and warning notices, had little effect on his effort towards meeting these structural requirements.

*Student B textural and structural description.* Student B was a 58-year old, White female who returned to OCC after 40 years during which time she had a successful career in the business world. She was one of two participants who returned to good academic standing after being placed on probation. She experienced two life-changing events that provided the context in which she was able to attend college. She had been caring for her mother, and when she passed away, she was afforded the time and place for her to achieve her goal of earning an Associate's degree. Additionally, the placement onto academic probation led her to the resources that supported successful completion of mathematics.

After failing her courses the first time she attended OCC, her new commitment to achieving a degree became her sole focus and defined her college experience. She was motivated to complete her degree and came to value the learning process rather than just the grades. "It's not necessarily the grades, but actually absorbing the knowledge." She described her enjoyment of learning, which was very different than her previous academic experiences in high school, when she said learning was based more on fear of punishment than for the sake of learning. She also described her experiences with other students as positive and embraced the diversity that she said she may not have "embraced back in '69 or '70."

She had to overcome her “embarrassment” to seek help in mathematics, but her motivation to succeed overshadowed her feelings of embarrassment. The improved belief in her abilities provided the necessary confidence to attend college. This improved confidence had changed from the time she was 18 when she described herself as having no discipline and commitment to college. The passage of time changed her perspective on college, on her view of herself as a student, and consequently, on her ability to obtain a degree. Time spent away from the structure of a college environment had allowed her to understand its value, and she was now able to forge relationships with others that she appreciated.

*Student C textual and structural description.* Student C was a 21-year-old, White male who had limited participation in the probation intervention program. He was not successful in returning to good academic standing and like the other participants, lost his degree-seeking status. He remained enrolled in the college at the time of the interview trying to improve his grades. He came to OCC after an academically unsuccessful year at another local college. He had enjoyed his experience at the previous college when recounting it in association with wrestling, but struggled with connecting to his peers and found his course of study to be challenging. His identity as a wrestler was positive, but he had to give this up in order to continue in college at OCC.

He had begun to accept that wrestling was over and that school needed some focus so he can complete his goal of achieving at least an Associate’s degree, if not a Bachelor’s degree. However, his confidence was two-fold. He used words such as “if” but also “buckling down” and seemed intent on achieving a high credential but gave himself an out. “...my goal is to get a bachelor's degree, like that's what I really, really do

want, but for some reason if I can't, I'm just gonna have to buckle down just getting my Associates.”

He described himself as organized but resisted asking for help in college despite his documented learning disability. He admitted that he wanted to “grow up” and not have to seek extra assistance. However, the probationary status prompted him to meet with a college counselor. He described her as “a nice lady” but he did not really follow through on her advice and regretted this, stating:

After I got that letter, I should have went straight to the disability services and talked to them about that and see what they could do, but I didn't...she was a really nice lady. That was my screw up in the Fall.

Age had also defined his experience in college, and turning 21, coupled with the natural maturation that occurs after high school, assisted him to “buckle down” and help him to be more successful. His responsibility for working and eventually managing his father’s business required him to balance college requirements with work responsibilities.

*Student D textural and structural description.* Student D was a 22-year-old, African American female who was offered the probation intervention program but did not participate. She was not successful in meeting the academic requirements necessary to be removed from probation and, consequently, lost her degree-seeking status. She was no longer eligible for financial aid and, therefore, was enrolled in only one course at the time of the interview because that was all she could afford. She hoped to earn high enough grades in two courses for reinstatement into a degree program and, consequently, receive financial aid.

Her path to college was not easy. She had to spend an additional year in high school to complete her requirements due to the death of her father directly before final exams. She described her first semester at OCC as “easy” and second semester a bit more difficult. She was aware of her academic challenges and described her learning disability in reading and writing as something she addressed in high school (through resource room on a daily basis) but did not continue in a similar way in college. “But what they offered wasn’t – I mean, it wouldn’t have been a help for me, so I ended up not taking the services. And I usually go to the Study Skill Center and the math lab.”

She described herself as determined and filled with hope. “Because I think all the stuff I’ve been through, most people would just give up. They wouldn’t even keep going.” Her inner voice is influenced by her desire to please her mother, her late father, and her grandmother. She wanted to be successful, and she feared being a “nobody” if she did not stay in college. She was not afraid to ask for help when she needed it. When she lost her financial aid to attend college (due to her grades), she appealed to friends and family for support. They generously provided her with the money to continue her education.

She believed that she had to balance school, work, and other career objectives. The structured setting of high school had helped her be successful. She was accustomed to mandatory assistance, and she valued the relationships she had built with teachers from high school and even in college. She received no financial support from her family, and her role in the family was to be independent. She had a practical view of school as a vehicle to success and interacted with the college as a place to help her meet her goals (that extend beyond just earning a degree).

Her relationships with friends provided another form of support during her college experience. Her friends encouraged her to remain in college and they provided her with tutoring and extra help. She identified connectivity within her community as important in being able to attend and to stay in college.

*Student E textural and structural description.* Student E was a 20-year-old, African American male and single father who was not in the probation intervention program. He was one of only two participants who returned to good academic standing after a probationary semester. His first college experience was at a four-year college in the South where he performed well academically, but he left and returned home due to family and financial issues. With the encouragement of his aunt (his mother passed away when he was younger), he enrolled at OCC.

He described his high school experience as lackadaisical and that “teachers would really help you to get the grades that you needed to pass a class.” His view of college was that it requires more independence and a different approach to the setting. “...it was a really big change just because you’re going from living high school, it’s all about your friends and social life, and then you go to where you have-it’s about work, it’s about school, you’ve gotta get good grades to succeed. So it is a big change.” This student’s self-proclaimed challenge was to manage his tendencies to procrastinate. He received pressure in his personal life (he became a father), on his job (he worked two jobs), and in school. “I think that the pressures and the problems kind of turn into motivation, it kind of helps me to work harder. ...but things in life, that would be hindering me, it kind of motivates me to do better.”

He knew he was failing when he received his probation letter but used the probationary warning as an opportunity to reflect upon his goals. He described a positive experience in his English class whereby the professor encouraged him to reflect upon himself and gain understanding of who he was as a person. “I think that because DM helped me a lot, looking back on yourself, to reflect on what you're doing it kind of like snap, hey, you've gotta get this together because you're wasting time if you're not doing what you need to.”

He had to juggle time between family, job, and school responsibilities and learned more about time management through a college study skills course for which he “accidentally” registered. That experience helped him with more effective time management. His relationship with self had evolved and matured. His development from a shy student in high school to an open-minded college student provided him the support he needed to be a successful college student. He was open to new people and learning from everyone he met.

*Student F textural and structural description.* Student F was a 20-year-old, White female and single parent who came to OCC directly from high school. She was not a participant in the probation intervention program because her degree program was not one of the targeted areas; therefore, she was not offered the service. She was not able to earn high enough grades during her semester on probation to maintain her degree status. She was still enrolled at the college at the time of the interview but in a non-degree status.

She described a positive high school experience and her place in it as “her world.” She came to college to make a better life for herself and her daughter and emphasized the role her family played in not only the college she selected, but also supporting her while

she attended. Her father was an OCC graduate and her cousins influenced her choice of profession. She said she liked to learn new things, described herself as an independent person, and recognized the difference between high school and college when relating to the need to be independent. “You don’t get that much assistance everywhere like they do it in high school.”

She described uncertainty surrounding her desire to attend campus events or find various places on campus. However, after her first year and placement onto academic probation, she realized that this was serious, stating:

Yeah, because I was scared because this is the college that I wanted to go to, and it looked like a bad thing because I’ve had these goals for years. And then finding out that I’m slacking on it and then afraid that you’re gonna get expelled was like a big thing for me.

Her anxiety about not knowing “where things were” and uncertainty about how to get help led her to spend three semesters at the college and in danger of failing out.

She engaged more with the college after three semesters by recognizing the need to work with other students and took advantage of support services such as the writing tutorial system called Night Writer. She took some responsibility for managing her time and was able to talk about how it was a struggle to balance being a mother, student, employee, and young person.

Her home environment, friends, and family influenced her college experience. Her family had an impact on not only where she went to college, but the value of an education and their willingness to support her to do so. Her family influenced her ability to attend and to remain in college. The context of being in college while maintaining the

role of a single mother who has to work and attend school is complicated. Her commitment to staying in school is not only internalized by the context in which she lives (as a mother), but a sense of obligation to those she views as supporting her to do so. Disappointing them seemed unacceptable.

### *The College Experience Themes*

The individual and composite textural and structural descriptions are incorporated into the presentation of these themes. Identified themes provide the reader with an understanding of the essence of these experiences as well as a way in which to synthesize the data into meaningful and useful concepts for further development and research. Throughout the summarization of these results, the researcher will show links between the identified themes from the data analysis and those identified in the literature, particularly in relation to the theory of student departure from the work of Tinto (1987, 1993).

*Being academically engaged.* Despite the fact that the majority of the participants (more than 60%) required developmental coursework when attending college, an indication that they were under prepared for college, their connection to academic support services was minimal. The research on college student success points to the academic preparation of students as one of the most important predictors of college success (Adelman, 2006; Astin, 1977). The need for the college to provide support services to students who are under prepared for college level work is a best practice cited by many retention researchers (Seidman, 2005; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

The students' lack of engagement in their academic experience stemmed from their inability to connect their need for support and the available college resources. The



lack of engagement was fostered by low self-confidence, unrealistic expectations of self and others, as well as expressed counterproductive behaviors contributing to negative academic outcomes. The disconnectedness for participants between their expressed need to get extra help and unwillingness to access it at OCC was a consistent theme that emerged during the interviews.

A few of the interviewed students identified laziness and procrastination as the causes of their failure to be successful academically. “Because I’m dumb. I think it’s laziness. I tell myself I’m gonna study and I don’t” (student C). “So I can be lazy and I can definitely – I rarely work as hard as I could or should, but a self-motivated learner for the most part” (student A). Both of these students had internalized their failure, and student A’s conflicting statement of being lazy and self-motivated indicated an unrealistic sense of self. Student F expressed a positive outlook on school and learning. “I’m loving it here too. Which is kinda nice to learn more stuff. I liked learning.” However, her professed love of learning and being independent did not translate into real, concrete action to become a better student. She admitted that in high school the teachers helped her do well, “I always relied on certain teachers. They always was easy to rely on, and they helped you out a lot.” The reality of college is that professors will help when students take action to ask for it, but the participants’ misconstrued understanding of independence presented a barrier to accessing help.

Procrastination played a role for student E. “I think I perform better under pressure than I do with the time, timeline scheduled out. I like the pressure, it makes me perform better.” Given that this student had failed courses, his association of pressure with success is counterproductive. He believed that unless there was pressure he would

not do well. He liked having pressure on him and found it motivating. He was working two jobs, supporting a child, and trying to attend school full-time. This pressure, however, resulted in not meeting the college's academic standards, and yet, he believed his mode of operation in college was still adequate to be successful.

Some students were unable to connect their lack of academic success to the need to access support and instead held out unrealistic expectations that things would improve with no effort, except by suggesting a general statement of "studying more" or "buckling down" (student C). With the exception of one student, with a documented learning disability, who indicated she regularly visited the Study Skills Center, the other less-prepared students expressed an understanding that they should access these supports (and knew the college had them) but did not because of embarrassment and the desire to be independent. Even the student who had failed at another college and said that college was hard, did not access help when he arrived at OCC. The placement onto academic probation appeared to motivate two students to engage in some assistance.

*Dependence versus independence.* The participants experienced the transition to OCC in a number of different ways. Two participants came directly to OCC from high school, three from another college, and one from many years in the workforce. Regardless of the transition, participants spoke of the need to be mature, disciplined, and independent. The understanding that college was essentially a partnership between the college and the student was lost on these students, as they desired to experience college without the assistance of others. Themes of structure, new beginnings, embarrassment, and feeling scared emerged from participants' statements to support this theme.

In describing their college experiences, each participant defined college as the place where you must be independent. Some defined the learning environment in college as one that requires independent work and less dependency upon others (including college staff and faculty) to assist them to meet their goals. Student A expressed significant disdain for a college structure of any kind. Nonetheless, his independent thinking and desire to construct his own learning outside of any educational structure did not necessarily mean that he was independent. He was dependent upon his parents who he admitted were holding him hostage to complete a credential. “It’s economic coercion. Yeah, they support me. I don’t have an option here.” His transition went from being on his own and independent while he was away studying at another college to a role of dependency on his parents both for living and continued payment for his education at OCC.

The statements of independence such as “it’s an on your own thing” (student E), “when you get to college, technically, you’re supposed to be more independent (student D), and “you have to grow up” (student C) described participants’ notion that college is time to be on your own. They did not want to be dependent upon anyone to help them succeed and expressed embarrassment when discovering it may be necessary to obtain the help they needed. “I mean, it’s embarrassing to go to the math lab, you know, over and over and repeat, you know” (student B). The participants had interpreted college to mean you must do it on your own and asking for help was a sign of weakness and indicated you were probably not a real college student. “I felt a failure, and I don’t think I would’ve even approached the content tutoring” (student B). “It’s not high school anymore. You’re paying to go. This is your education” (student F).

Tinto's theory of student departure (1987, 1993) posits that students who engage in their learning both in and out of the classroom would be more successful and more likely to complete a degree. In addition, the ways in which the institution provides intentional interactions with students will influence a student's ability to stay enrolled and earn a degree. These students attempted to limit their interactions with the supports they needed to be successful and these expressed terms of independence contributed to this behavior. "Like I know there's tutors here, you can take advantage of it for free. I thought I could do it on my own" (student C). "I can't blame it on the school because they have programs, they have tutoring, they have things to help you" (student E). Participants verified that they knew the college had supports to help them, but they thought they could do this on their own.

Student F was fearful of connecting with her peers and engaging in activities. "When I first started I wanted to, but I was kinda scared because I wasn't sure exactly when they were, even though they had the date. I've always wanted to because I wasn't sure what the times they were so I always was afraid." Fear of new people, new surroundings, and taking action limited her ability to be independent. Her desire to be independent did not translate into actions that would help her achieve this status. She described herself as independent, yet limited herself in engaging new experiences.

*Memorable classroom experiences.* The semi-structured interview included questions about the classroom experiences, particularly those most memorable to students. The positive characteristics of faculty most often expressed included faculty who cared whether students were learning the material, who were organized and explicit about requirements, testing, etc., and who created a classroom experience where

engagement was encouraged with both professor and peers. Student F identified her most memorable experience as when the teacher told them what would be on a test and gave them study guides. She explained:

It was very easy. He was very friendly, explained everything step-by-step, and if you ever need help, he would always go over it and everything before a test and what the test will be on. He'd give you review sheets ahead of time and we'd just go over that.

This contradicted the type of environment student A preferred which was one where resources were provided and the learning was left to the student to construct. "Often I was failed to be presented with new material. So often, I wasn't challenged to think in any new ways." This speaks to the theme of independence as one environment that fosters a dependent type of learning (tell me what I should be learning and what I need to know) versus a movement towards independent learning which fosters an environment of self-direction. Student B found interactions with the professors helpful. "I enjoy the interaction between the professor."

Student D, with an expressed need for extra time and guidance, felt that professors needed to provide more step-by-step direction and should be there for students as a demonstration of caring. "And in order for me to learn stuff, it has to be taught more than once of the same subject. So a lot of professors won't bother with that." However, she was able to identify teachers who demonstrated a caring attitude by the time they spent with students to be sure they were learning. "He will sit there and he will go step by step, piece by piece, and bit by bit. He showed that he cared he was excited about helping

you to learn how to do it and that motivated not only me, but a lot of students and when you get teachers like that, that makes you feel that much motivated.”

Participants identified less desirable classroom settings where faculty only lectured and did not take the time to assess whether students were learning the materials. In addition, a distinction was made between assignments that were meant to reinforce learning versus those that appeared to be for the sake of assigning something or to pass a test. Student E valued the intelligence of the professor and ability to engage the class in self-reflective and, again, self-directed type of learning. He did not relate to classes where learning was associated with passing tests. “But most of the teachers I’ve had, they’re teaching you to get the assignments, to know the test, to pass the class.”

Most of the students experienced the classroom as a vehicle to engage with peers. One student joined a study group to help improve his learning. Another identified the value of working in groups with students from diverse backgrounds. The classroom became the way in which these students integrated into the academic and social environment. “So it’s kinda nice when you never really think you would talk to that group and then all of sudden you’re in classes and work, you’re talking a lot more so it’s kinda nice” (student F). The older adult student verbalized the value of working with different students. “A couple of projects I had worked with very diverse students from Cuba, from Afghanistan, so the enjoyment of that diversity.” These classroom-generated experiences with peers demonstrated some level of engagement.

Tinto (1987, 1993) described the engagement in the classroom as integral to a student’s ability to succeed in college. The critics of Tinto’s model, when referring to a community college setting, contended that commuter students have little opportunity to

socialize outside of class and, hence, the classroom experience becomes the vehicle for this integration (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton et al., 2004). These experiences support the assertion that for commuters, the classroom becomes the central point of a student's college experience. None of the students interviewed were involved with any type of college-sponsored social activity and, therefore, most of their interactions with peers and faculty were connected to class projects or to group work. The classes where students had engaged with others were memorable, but the interactions may not have been enough to help support individual success.

*Strong friends and family support.* Each participant identified some degree of influence from family and/or friends upon their college experience. Whether it was to attend college or to stay in college, each student identified at least one such influencer.

Student B: "My boyfriend. Yes, actually my family, too, my sisters and what have you."

Student E: "But I talked to my cousin...and he told me, he was like you have the ability, you have the talent to go through school and get good grades, it's just if you apply yourself."

Student F: "I have lots of family members that went here, and I thought it was an easy way. A lot people have graduated. My father graduated from here and other cousins graduated here. My father loved it here, and I'm loving it here too."

Student D: "But I guess because of my mom and the rest of my family they kind of pushed me to stay in school and a lot of friends. I do have a lot of positive people around me."

The participants who spoke the most about their family and friends were both African American students. The research findings on the effects of culture on student retention point out that connection to community is an important influence on retention for African American and Latino students (Guiffrida, 2006). One of the African American students (student D) spoke of the influence of her mother's expectations of independence for her: "I wish I could help you, but I just don't have money for you because all my money goes to my older sister. She's always said this, you're the independent one. That's why I don't give you nothing."

The second African American student's aunt put a great deal of pressure on him to stay in college, and as a result of this pressure, he surrounded himself with positive people. "The people that I hang out with are really, they're motivated and I think that helps me a lot." Both students described their connections with friends who motivate them to do well, in addition to the need to avoid negativity. "But they've [friends] always been that support. Oh, you'll be fine. You'll be okay. I am here. They won't verbally say it. They just more act on it than anything. So, our friendships are so close together, we're like sisters." The significant connection with community that these two students discussed did not emerge in the other four interviews. This is not to say that family was less important for the other four participants, but the African American students mentioned the role and importance of their family and friends more often.

*Success = college degree.* The researcher identified a common language of success whereby the college degree is the way to a better life. Consequently, participants used words such as being a nobody, or doing nothing, or having a harder life, if a college degree was not attained. "I just know in the back of my head I know I can't go through



life without college” (student C). “If you don't go where will you be? You'll be nothing. You'll be a nobody” (student D). Even student A, despite his expressed dislike for having to be contained in college, conceded that earning a degree affords him opportunities that cannot be had without one. “Certainly lacking credentials from an academic institution, I'd say there's no doubt that it definitely hinders your ability to go out and engage in the market and the real world.”

The desperation to complete a degree was demonstrated in this statement from student D:

Because it feels like if I'm not in school, if I'm not productive, if I'm not doing something that's going to progress my future into a positive future, it's gonna be scary. Without school, I have nothing. I feel lost.

Success in college meant making a better life for their children. Both single parents associated the achievement of a degree as way to improve the lives of their young children. Their motivation was beyond achieving the degree for themselves or family members, but now they must achieve it to be good parents. “I'm working to provide for my child” (student E). “So my goal was to also do well for myself because I know it's gonna benefit her and everything” (student F). The incongruence between what participants' desired and what actions they were taking to meet this goal seemed to support the concept of wanting to be independent, but they were not engaged in how to do it. Commitment to the institution and the goal of earning a degree is a variable Tinto (1987, 1993) indicated as influencing a student's decision to depart. In these cases, the students were hanging on to this goal, despite all other indicators that success in college

may not result in achieving this goal. The gap between desire to achieve and action to achieve it is prevalent in the analysis of these students' statements.

### *The Academic Probation Experience*

The placement onto academic probation is the second part of the research question and the data analysis resulted in two themes. This outcome of the students' college experience resulted in some motivation to act as well as perpetuated an avoidance of reality. The notification from the college regarding placement on academic probation surprised some students and not others. Only one student (out of four) engaged with the probation intervention program for an adequate length of time, which resulted in improvement in the student's grades and academic standing. When referring to her engagement with the probation program, student B reported "but then I wouldn't have had the information or the reinforcement of the information, that it's not a bad thing to go to content tutoring. There were so many positives that came out of it." The other experience with this event prompted some motivation to act with minimal results. Additionally, some of the students avoided reality by taking limited responsibility for their actions.

*Motivated to act.* Only one student indicated he had been closely monitoring his grades and was not surprised by the notification. It caused him to reflect on his goals and his future possibilities. Student E said:

So the letter, it wasn't a really big surprise, but it was just like a sit down and look, what's going on, what are you doing. And I think that because DM [English teacher] helped me a lot, the looking back on yourself, to reflect on what you're doing, and it kind of like snap, hey, you've gotta get this together because you're

wasting time if you're not doing what you need to do, it's a waste of your life, so don't waste your time doing something that you don't want to do. So, I think that really helped me get on the ball a little bit.

The returning adult student (student B) had achieved acceptable grades but was haunted by her college experience of 40 years earlier. Although being placed on probation left her bewildered, she benefited from the warning and accepted help from the college through the probation intervention program. "So, it was kind of alarming when they told me I was on probation. And my pride was set aside so I really embraced those areas."

Student D was very upset by the notification and saw it as potentially ruining her life. She stated:

Oh, my God, what am I gonna do? I'm in trouble, but serious, oh, my God, I'm scared. What am I gonna do? Because it feels like, if I'm not in school, if I'm not being productive, if I'm not doing something that's gonna progress my future into a positive future, it's gonna be scary. Because how me and my friends put it, without school, I'll go crazy. Without school, I have nothing. So it's like, I'll go crazy if I'm not in school.

She immediately called her mother to seek advice. "She like, stop crying, you'll be fine, you always crying when something's wrong with you. You'll be fine. Just talk to one of them people up there." The student accepted her mother's advice and contacted the college. She expressed relief when she was told she could keep her financial aid. This was critical for her to be able to remain in college and motivated her to continue to remain in college. Unfortunately, in her subsequent semester, her grandmother passed away which presented another barrier for her to overcome. If she had been connected

with a counselor during this time, she might have been advised to either withdraw from courses or pursue an incomplete to allow her time to grieve and to make up the work. This did not happen, causing her to lose her financial aid and degree-seeking status.

Although placement onto academic probation did not encourage student C to make changes in his approach to college, his motivation to act came when he had his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. He explained:

I turned 21 in January and it was like a wake-up call. My parents, my friends, everything. your parents and friends saying things to you or just –Yeah, saying things to me, like it’s time to grow up, you know. You gotta chill out on the partying. You gotta – you have to grow up. That’s the point.

Student B came to recognize the need to engage with the college to be more successful. After being placed on probation and connecting with college staff through the intervention program, she engaged with the math lab to improve her grades. She overcame her embarrassment and accessed support from the college “...but then I wouldn't have had the information or the reinforcement of the information, that it's not a bad thing to go to content tutoring.” If she had not been on probation and received an intentional outreach from the college, she may not have engaged in additional help. Her acceptance and engagement in improving her academic status indicated a heightened self-awareness and personal acceptance for her role in college.

*Avoidance.* Student C acknowledged his disappointment when he received the notification and scheduled a meeting with a counselor to develop a plan of action. He attempted to make some changes but failed to follow through to the extent necessary to improve his grades. “After I got that letter, I should have went straight to the disability

services and talked to them about that and see what they could do, but I didn't." He could verbalize what he should have done, but avoided the actions necessary to engage in improvement strategies.

Student F demonstrated an avoidance reaction. She associated her poor performance with taking too many classes and the probation notification arrived as a surprise because she did not know what the college expected her to achieve. "I wasn't too sure because no one really told me what level I needed." She did not seem conscious of the fact that passing classes was important to meeting college requirements. She said no one told her what grades she needed to pass. She expressed being scared of what could happen if she continued to fail, but she did little to change it. When she returned the following semester she was distracted by the availability of computers on campus and spent time on computers, rather than attending to her school work. "When I'm up here the next semester, it messed me up big time, because I saw the computers and was like in my world with computers." She communicated her intention to focus and to study more but took no specific actions to improve her standing at the college. She found herself with another semester of poor grades.

The best practices for college personnel who intervene with students in academic trouble is to focus on intrusive and, in many cases, mandatory interventions (Kelly, 1996; Mann et al., 2003; Scrivener et al., 2009). The program at OCC was not mandatory for any of the participating students. The participants were left on their own (another example of independence but this time the expectation of the college) to seek help and to develop an appropriate plan of action. It was easy for them to avoid taking responsibility

for their actions and their expressions of independence and maturity left them to do it on their own, which resulted in continued failure.

Hsieh et al. (2007) introduced the concept of performance avoidance and defined it as a goal orientation often demonstrated by students in academic trouble. They asserted that students with strong beliefs in self also avoided assistance to improve performance and avoided success. The language used by most of the students throughout the interview highlighted characteristics of this concept. Student F talked about loving learning, wanting to be a teacher, and liking college; yet, she spent three semesters at OCC with a GPA that indicated she was not making satisfactory progress. She described herself as independent and consistently identified the supports available at OCC. Her actions did not match her words She explained:

I was doing well in high school. I liked learning and I always did well. I would describe myself as someone who is very independent. But it's kinda good that when you do need help there's people here than can help with that, which I like a lot.

Student A also demonstrated a performance avoidance orientation. He described himself as a self-motivated learner who enjoyed reading the materials and learning new things. Yet, his grades did not reflect the words he used. "I mean, when I do work and learn I'm definitely a self-motivated learner. I haven't really changed any of my habits." Student A may have different reasons for his lack of success (his strong beliefs that the system of education itself is "flawed"), but his language would indicate that he believes he is quite intelligent. Nevertheless, he seems to have done little to try and meet the performance requirements of the colleges he has attended.

Student D believed that if she just keeps trying, she will get better grades. “Even when I don't do good in my classes, it doesn't stop me from keep trying and trying.” Her reliance on determination and hope as actions towards success “...because if you're not hopeful, then you won't get anywhere” provide promising talk but limited results. The sense of self as a motivated, hopeful person has blinded this student to the work necessary to performing at acceptable levels and the actions that need to be undertaken for a successful academic outcome.

### *Summary*

The mixed method design of this study, initiated to answer three research questions, provided a comprehensive assessment of the college experiences of students on academic probation. The quantitative results, specifically aimed to test the hypothesis that an intervention program would improve student success, was not supported by the data analysis. There were no statistically significant differences in semester grades amongst the three categories of participants in this study. Additionally, when analyzing variables such as race, gender, age, and academic probation, the study also found no statistically significant findings. A discussion of these findings will be presented in Chapter 5.

The results of the qualitative data analysis bring to life what the numbers cannot demonstrate. Students expressed an understanding of the value of support systems such as an intervention program, and yet they were not always able to act upon their knowledge. These students led busy lives, but they were persevering and still dreaming of earning a college degree. Some classroom experiences were memorable for the students and the overriding theme of navigating independence was central to each student's

experience. All of the students considered OCC to be the right place for them to achieve their goals. However, what the college provided to them to date or their ability and motivation to access it remained at odds and contributed to their lack of academic success.

The findings of this mixed method study indicated no statistically significant findings to support the hypothesis that participating in an intervention program will improve end-of-semester GPAs and academic standing. In fact, the mean semester GPA of probationary students who did not participate in the program was higher than the mean GPA of program participants. Students' lack of academic engagement stemmed from the tension between the need to be dependent on others and the desire to be an independent college student capable in their own right. The *academic doublespeak* that occurs when colleges' expressed expectations are that students should come to college prepared to take ownership and responsibility for their learning is juxtaposed against the language of supporting success through interventions, skill centers, and tutoring services. This contradictory world at a community college was confusing for students who were told in high school that being prepared for college means being independent. Their understanding of independence was different from the college faculty and staff's definition. All of the participants had internalized the concept that independence means working on your own. When presented with academic challenges, the students did not properly navigate the environment because of their fear of revealing that they might not be *college material*.

Students expressed commitment to the goal of attaining a degree supported the importance of this construct in Tinto's theory of student departure (1987, 1993), as all



participants remained enrolled even after failing to meet academic standards. However, the results of this study do not indicate that an institution's actions of providing support programs will necessarily motivate students to achieve success. The findings demonstrate the complexity of the "departure puzzle" (Braxton, 2000, p. 1), a puzzle that requires many pieces to fit together well in order to complete the picture. The students' lack of action, because of a false sense of what a college student must do to be successful, resulted in poor academic performance. Even the academic warning from the college and for some, a direct invitation to access support, did not create the action necessary to improve their performance. Further discussion of these findings and implications for practice are presented in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### *Introduction*

A significant problem at OCC continues to be low fall-to-fall retention rates, which contributes to an increased number of students unsuccessfully progressing towards a degree. The exploration of this problem, through the analysis of the academic outcomes for students on probation and the lived experiences of students, yielded results that need further interrogation. Several connections to the body of literature on this important subject and findings from this study will inform the practice of the researcher and ultimately the institution that was the context of the study.

The topics discussed in this chapter include (a) the meaning of the quantitative results, (b) the influence of demographic and academic characteristics on academic success, (c) the relationship of the literature review to the identified themes uncovered in the interviews, (d) the unanticipated results of the findings and their contribution to the study of college student retention, and (e) the value of a mixed methods study. Limitations of the study are shared as well as how this study helped develop the researcher's executive leadership skills as a doctoral candidate in St. John Fisher College's Executive Leadership Program.

### *Implications of Findings*

The theory of student departure posited by Tinto (1987, 1993) described the need for colleges to take the responsibility of providing a learning environment that supports the students it attracts. McClenney (2004) described colleges as having a moral

obligation to their students to help them succeed. The findings presented in Chapter 4 unravel some of these concepts by telling two stories of the dilemma facing OCC and many other community colleges across the nation when discussing the success of their students.

*Quantitative results.* The first story is an analysis of the academic outcomes for students on probation, which revealed little evidence that the intervention program at OCC had any significant impact on its participants. In fact, the non-treatment group, who had not been in the probation program group, earned a higher overall mean GPA in the fall semester of 1.51 compared to 1.44 for the treatment group. Although the difference was not statistically significant, it leaves many questions about the structure and delivery of the program and its ability to improve a student's academic performance. Presumably, one would think that if the college intervened with students in need of support, students would improve their performance when compared to students who were not part of the intervention. This was not the case in this study.

The lowest achieving group, according to this data analysis, was the group of students who voluntarily chose not to participate in the program (P2). An assumption could be made that this group chose not to participate because these students were able to identify ways to improve their academic outcomes without assistance. The findings do not support this assumption, which is similar to some studies presented in the literature review of this study. Scrivener et al. (2009) studied a population of students on probation who were offered an opportunity to receive additional help. When the program was voluntary, the academic results were minimal; however, when the college changed its

program to be mandatory, results improved significantly. This will be discussed further in the recommendations section of this chapter.

It was disappointing to the researcher that only a small number of students returned to good academic standing. Only one-third or less of each participant group returned to good academic standing. Again, the group of students who returned to good academic standing at the highest rate was the non-treatment group (33%); those students who were not offered a chance to participate in the intervention. By contrast, only 29% for each of the other two groups managed to return to good academic standing. More disturbing was the fact that over one-half of all probationary students lost their matriculated status, which means they did not improve their grades enough to remain in good standing with the college. These results indicate that an intervention, in and of itself, is not the sole answer to this complex problem. This conclusion becomes even clearer when reviewing the results of the qualitative analysis and provides support for the importance of looking beyond the numbers to uncover the many dimensions of this problem.

*Influence of academic and demographic characteristics.* Several researchers point to a student's academic background and, in some cases, demographic characteristics as important variables to understand when creating support programs and interventions. High school grades have been cited as the strongest predictor for academic success in college (Adelman, 2006; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1987). Additionally, students from underrepresented populations, particularly African American and Latino, have higher drop-out rates than those identified as White (Bailey et al., 2005). Students who delay entry to college are also at a higher risk of completing a degree than those who come

directly from high school (Adelman, 2006; Craig & Ward, 2007). Finally, the findings from studies related to gender differences in retention have been mixed. Mohammadi (1994) found that females had higher rates of drop out than males. However, research that is more recent revealed that females are outpacing males in degree completion (Adelman, 2006).

The quantitative data was disaggregated by age, gender, race/ethnicity, high school graduation status (graduated or not graduated), and need for developmental coursework. The examination of end-of-semester GPAs, average gains in GPAs between spring and fall, and academic good standing by demographic or academic characteristic yielded no statistically significant results to report. This was surprising given the literature review that identified significantly lower rates of academic achievement for some groups, particularly African American and Hispanic students (Price, 2004; Weissman et al.,1998) as well as those requiring developmental coursework (SAS, 2008).

The number of participants in the non-White category was small in each program category. The small sample size would not yield statistical power in this analysis and may also explain the lack of significant findings. Instead, a more thorough examination of multiple variables would provide a richer understanding of the relationship between students' characteristics and probability of academic success. The results of this study are inconclusive in relation to the effects of gender, race, and academic background on academic performance.

*Relationship to retention literature.* The themes of being academically engaged, dependence versus independent, memorable classroom experiences, strong friends and family support, and success = degree, had some relationships to the scholarly research

outlined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Similar to the major constructs identified by Tinto (1987, 1993) and supported by the work of Braxton et al. (2004) and Schmid and Abell (2003), academic integration played a positive role in each of the participant's college experience. The memorable classroom experiences identified by each participant included caring professors, active teaching styles that engaged them, feelings of support by the faculty, and opportunities to engage with faculty and peers. All of these opportunities to engage in the classroom are the fundamental basis for the academic integration that Tinto suggested were necessary to keep students in college. All six participants were still enrolled at the college, despite low grades and lack of completing significant credits. However, it is unclear as to the most significant influence on their persistence considering they did not exhibit positive engagement in their learning except when mandated. They identified positive classroom experiences, but they were disengaged in accessing necessary resources to improve their grades and consequently, their ability to persist to a degree. The commitment to the goal appeared to be a more powerful motivator to these students, than academic integration activities.

Another important finding in this study is the relationship of self-efficacy (the belief in one's ability) and performance. The concept of performance avoidance was introduced in the literature review by Hsieh et al. (2007) who studied motivation in relation to students on academic probation. The researchers concluded that there are students who believe they can achieve anything and yet, they do little to achieve the goals they say they have. Three of the participants demonstrated this performance-avoidance orientation. They described how they really wanted a degree, how they knew people and systems were available to support them, and yet continued to engage in nonproductive

behaviors. Therefore, they continued to achieve poor results. The participants were able to verbalize what should be done but were unable to act in ways to achieve their goals.

This is a very interesting concept because it involves the intersection of motivation theory and its relationship specifically to the probationary student. It is an important concept worthy of further exploration. The participants in this study were motivated enough to continue to persevere despite more than one semester of poor grades yet could not motivate themselves to do the things necessary to change. It was as if they were waiting for something to happen *to* them rather than for them to act. Most of the participants entered college in need of developmental work but had not connected with the notion that college may be harder, and therefore, they would need to engage in as much help as possible to be a successful college student.

The concept of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) seems to apply to some of these students. Seligman asserted that people who attribute a bad event to situations beyond their control tend to generalize that all events will be out of their control and, therefore, act helpless and unable to make positive changes. The internalizing of their failures (being lazy or dumb) as well as blaming teachers for not making learning interesting (external causes) were concepts some of the participants reported. Motivation appears to be an important factor to consider when studying students in academic trouble.

The outlier of the group of six participants was student A. Unlike his peers, he was academically engaged in learning but on his own terms. His motivation to earn a college degree was externally imposed upon him. He came from a privileged home where he was expected to earn a degree. He expressed no responsibility or control over what he did except by not handing in assignments, not attending classes, and consequently failing

courses. This passive-aggressive way of challenging the authority of his parents is a personality trait that is beyond the college's ability to control or change. He is a student who requires counseling to explore his feelings about himself and why he continued to behave in this manner. He alluded to feelings of loneliness during the interview and was eager to talk further had it been an appropriate venue.

*Academic disengagement.* When analyzing the meaning of each of these themes, the lack of academic engagement seemed to be supported by students' inability to recognize their roles as college students. They did not demonstrate engaging behaviors and, again, expected that hope and desire would produce better results. Regardless of each participant's preparation prior to the experience at OCC, there was the need to transition to meeting new people, finding where things were, and navigating a new system. Each participant expressed the idea that college is a place to "grow up," be more independent, and learn on your own. Some described high school as a place where you were told what to do, people were there to help you, and it was "easy." Even those students with learning disabilities who had help in high school decided to try college on their own and avoided dependence upon this service to help them succeed despite poor grades and threat of dismissal.

This finding is very puzzling and is counter to the literature that stresses the need for colleges to make supports available to students. All the participants knew the college had tutoring, study skills centers, and counselors to help. However, they seemed to misinterpret what being independent meant in relation to academic success. The disconnectedness between being on your own in life and the need for help when one is struggling was a recurring theme in this study. The college should consider how it



communicates expectations for a shared responsibility of both student and college for a successful learning experience.

One distinction regarding independence is that students appreciated it when professors offered help or provided explicit directions on how to do well in their classes. One conclusion is that participants associate support in the classroom as okay, but that they should not have to do anything beyond the classroom except to complete assignments. Given the fact that three of the participants identified themselves as “lazy” and one other as “undisciplined,” one could conclude that students associate failure with their own shortcomings and that by asking for help they are revealing their personal failure to others. This is supported by the mention of embarrassment as the reason some participants did not seek help even though they could verbalize that they knew they should get extra help.

*Academic doublespeak.* Upon exploring the disengagement of participants, the researcher created a concept called academic doublespeak. This term describes the conflict between the societal norm that college is a place to be independent (particularly for residential colleges) while, at the same time, attracting students who have not demonstrated an ability to be independent learners. College faculty and staff presume that students understand independence to mean taking responsibility of their own learning and seeking help when needed. Then, when those students fail, the college offers assistance with little response and administrators and faculty are puzzled as to why. The students in this study, who so desperately wanted to be good students, but had not demonstrated the ability to do so, attempted to balance their desire to be ideal college students with the college’s invitations for support. Their meaning of independence associated it with being

on your own, not needing help or being dependent upon anyone. If they succumbed to the invitation to receive assistance, they risked failing themselves. This could explain why some participants chose not to participate in the voluntary program created by the counseling department.

The messages relayed to prospective college students should be closely examined with this concept in mind. It is unreasonable to expect that students who demonstrated academic difficulty in high school will immediately change on the first day of college. In fact, collaboration between high school teachers and college faculty on the *academic doublespeak* concept may result in better ways to balance the need to develop success-oriented behaviors while in high school. Students need to accept that independence means responsibility to own their education and with that responsibility the obligation to ask for help when needed. Just as employees are not expected to do their jobs without assistance from others, this should hold true for college students.

*Goal commitment and retention.* Finally, the participants' defined success as needing to earn an Associate's degree, and without a degree, there would be little opportunity in life. This was the sentiment expressed by each participant and what may be motivating them to continue to stay in college despite continued failures to meet college-imposed requirements. The fact that these six participants did not drop out of college despite loss of financial aid, degree-seeking status, and failure to meet college expectations is somewhat surprising. All of the participants in this study expressed a firm commitment to the goal of degree completion despite these setbacks. The interactions a student has with the institution will either support or contradict a student's commitment to retain (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The commitment these students had to completing a degree

could explain why they did not depart even when their academic performance was not congruent with the college's expectations.

This result is interesting when reviewing the constructs of Tinto's theory of student departure. The theory posits that a student comes to college with specific goals and commitments to the goals and the institution. The interactions between the student and the college will influence the commitment to these goals and to the college and influence a student's decision to remain enrolled or not. The results of this study support this theory in that all of the interview participants indicated having positive interactions with the college, and they were adamantly committed to earning a degree. In addition, the students in this study connected the college as the place where they would meet this goal, and unless the college takes action to cease this relationship, the students will remain enrolled. For example, the college's policy allows students to continue to take classes even if they have failed their courses for more than one semester. The only true penalty is loss of financial aid provided by the government. For some students, that would be enough to depart, but for student D, it was not. Her motivation to stay in college was strong enough that she garnered the support of her friends to help her afford to stay in school. There is a larger ethical question for the college to consider in examining this theme and an issue for further research. Should the college continue to take tuition from students who struggle in classes and provide no mandatory intervention for this population?

### *Significance of Findings*

The mixed methods approach to this problem of academic success and retention is significant in a number of ways. First, it allowed the researcher to provide a more

comprehensive analysis of the students on probation to the college administration. Previous analyses simply tracked the lack of progress with little understanding of what the numbers meant. The data collected in this study from a small sample of students through the one-on-one interviews revealed that every student comes to college with a different set of circumstances. The college has little ability to change external factors such as being a single mother/father, and students' work obligations outside of college. Additionally, the mission of the community college is to serve all who meet minimum academic standards. Therefore, the college must consider these factors when attempting to create a learning environment for all students.

Second, if the study had only been quantitative in nature, testing a hypothesis through the analysis of academic outcomes, nothing would have been revealed about individual student's experiences. Based on the quantitative results, assumptions could be made that either the program did not work or that the students were unable to be served, and the college should reconsider whom they try to educate. Instead, the data collected from the students informed the researcher not only about program issues (voluntary versus mandatory) but how students approach the idea of accessing assistance. This newfound knowledge could assist college administrators when planning intervention strategies. The quantitative data assisted in selecting interview participants from a variety of backgrounds and academic experiences, which provided a more comprehensive understanding of the problem.

As a result of mixing methods, the researcher learned that some of the probationary students expressed a strong desire to earn a degree. This is contrary to some college faculty and administrators belief that students fail because they do not care. The

interviews allowed the researcher to investigate why students go to college, why they stay in college, and why they did not avail themselves of college resources to improve. The qualitative analysis helped to explain the quantitative results, by providing the *why* (the phenomenon of college) behind the *what* (the numerical outcomes of grades and resulting academic standing).

Third, the results of this study support some of the literature on student retention (academic integration as a key construct to support retention, motivational factors that impact student success). The supporting of academic integration as more important for community college students was another construct discovered in the literature review and was supported in this study. Additionally, the disconnectedness between independence and accessing needed supports was a concept discovered in this study but not something prevalent in this researcher's literature review. It is an important concept and worthy of further examination.

Finally, this study could add to the body of research regarding how community college students experience college, particularly those students on academic probation. The researcher will consider ways in which to share the results through professional conferences and journals. The methodology used to conduct this study provides readers with an expanded view of the story of students in academic trouble. Had this only been a quantitative study, the results would not have been further examined, which provided noteworthy themes for further analysis. Conversely, the quantitative measures of grades are what colleges use to determine student success and, therefore, must be examined to meet this need. The findings create an expanded picture of this phenomenon and provide

the researcher and others with data to inform practice in hopes of improving student success and, consequently, student retention and graduation.

### *Limitations*

The action research agenda created for this study is best described by the definition provided by Herr and Anderson (2005) who suggest that "...it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions" (p. 3). The intent of this study was to collect and to analyze relevant data in an attempt to assess whether or not the efforts being made by the college's counseling department were yielding the intended results of improving students' academic performance.

The first and most prominent limitation of this study was the fact that the content and delivery of the program was dependent upon individual counselor styles and delivery modes as well as varying degrees of student motivation. Therefore, the quantitative results were inconclusive as to the effects of the probation intervention program on student success. The lack of results for the participants could have been related to the quality of the program, its consistent delivery, or both. It should also be noted that the lack of results may be the product of some students' lack of motivation and insufficient skills to meet the challenges of higher education.

Second, the self-selection process imbedded in the probation program design threatens the internal validity of determining whether the intervention affected the outcome and therefore attempting to "draw correct inferences from the data about the population in an experiment" (Creswell, 2009, p. 162). Participation in the probation intervention program was voluntary, which implies participant willingness to improve his

or her grades. Random assignment to the program would have produced a more valid set of findings as the confounding variable of voluntary participation would have been removed. Therefore, the results should not be generalized to other populations and other institutions.

In addition, the researcher's position may have influenced the students' willingness to be forthcoming about their experiences. None of the participants in the study criticized the college for their predicament. Although this may have been an accurate estimation, the students may not have been willing to provide a more critical analysis of the college's role in supporting them because of the researcher's role. Although the interview participants expressed a strong inclination to be interviewed and many commented on the therapeutic benefits of the interview, this limitation is important to identify as the results are reviewed by others.

Finally, the researcher had hoped to engage the participants in evaluating the textural and structural descriptions written by the researcher as an added step to validate the researcher's interpretation. Only one participant reviewed her description and accepted it as an accurate depiction of her experiences. The researcher read and listened to the interviews several times in hopes of mitigating the lack of member checking (Creswell, 2007).

### *Recommendations*

The findings of this study reveal the complexity of the problem of retaining and graduating students for OCC and other community colleges. The quantitative analysis resulted in no significant findings to support the newly implemented probation intervention program. Interviews with students revealed that the institution had provided

a myriad of services with little participation on the part of the students. The dilemma remains as to what role the college can or should play in engaging students like those in this study whose ideals do *not* match their actions. All of the students indicated they wanted to earn a degree but expressed very little ability in being able to do so and demonstrated this through repeated semesters of failure and little action. With that said, the college must consider these findings when creating actions to meet their stated missions.

The examination of quantitative and qualitative data creates a more in-depth analysis of the problem of student retention at OCC. As the college's Chief Enrollment Officer, opportunities are available to share these results with the college's Provost and executive team. The findings in this study could provide the necessary evidence to insert recommended changes in academic policy, procedures, and enhanced program components to improve student success.

*Future studies.* Further examination of the relationship between high school academic preparation (grades, types of coursework, need for developmental courses) and first semester grades should be explored. This goal was not within the scope of this study but is often referred to in studies of student retention problems. Conducting a multi-year analysis of students on probation and identifying a predictive model could serve the institution in developing a program to intervene with students sooner if results helped to identify risk factors for the college to intervene earlier.

The motivational factors emerging from this study (performance avoidance and learned helplessness) should be more carefully considered when working with under-prepared students. The psychological factors that impact a student's ability to succeed



cannot be overlooked. Bean and Eaton (2000) suggested that student's locus of control (internal versus external) influences academic integration. Students who feel in control of their outcomes versus attributing failure to situations external to their control appear to be more successful in college. These and other factors should be considered in further studies of academically challenged students.

The probation intervention program needs a thorough examination to identify specific components that may be effective and those that may not. The program components were not examined in this study, and therefore, it is difficult to ascertain why students in the program fared no better than those who were not in the program. This evaluation could be done by interviewing students who participated in the intervention to ascertain their perceptions of which program elements were helpful and which were not. Additionally, the college could invite an outside consultant to conduct a formal program evaluation and to make recommendations based on findings and best practices.

Finally, interviewing more students on academic probation would provide the college with an expanded view of the phenomenon of academic probation in college. The interview questions could be formatted to expand upon some of the resulting themes identified in the findings of this study. The results could help identify specific actions to be taken by the college to support its students.

*College actions.* The college should address the transition issues identified in these findings. This can be done in several ways. First, all entering students should meet with a college counselor or advisor to discuss motivation, identify potential challenges, and develop an action plan to address any challenges prior to the start of classes. This would not only help the student identify potential roadblocks but also create a connection

with the college that may alleviate the fear of asking for help. The college should not assume that students come in with a set of success-oriented skills to navigate college. Second, the college should provide many opportunities during the first semester or first year for new students to connect with faculty both in and out of the classroom. The connection with faculty was a positive experience for all of the participants in this study and important to create, particularly given the limited time these students have to devote to college life. Third, students who have failed at another college should be classified and counseled prior to the start of classes to identify an action plan for improvement. Previous failure would seem to be a strong indicator that the student has not made a smooth transition from high school to college, regardless of the fact that there is a previous college experience.

The college should also reevaluate its academic policies in relation to academic progress. All of the six participants in this study had been at the college for at least three semesters and some were still failing to meet a minimum standard to graduate. The inequity lies in the fact that if a student can afford to attend without financial aid, he/she can continue to try to pass classes. If one cannot afford to attend, a student must either borrow from others or drop out. If the college wishes to maintain its liberal policy of never dismissing a student, then a mandatory intervention must be in place for students who have not met the minimum academic standards.

Mandatory intervention should be in place for students on probation. The quantitative and qualitative results of this study would indicate that students need intervention that is more direct. If the probation intervention program continues, students

placed on probation should be required to meet with a college counselor to identify strategies for improvement.

Finally, the college should consider more opportunities to embed additional help in developmental courses and other select classes that may have higher rates of failure. Students responded well to mandatory tutoring, particularly those in developmental classes. This would introduce students to the supports available on campus as well as lessen the stigma of requesting needed assistance.

### *Conclusion*

The problem of retaining students at OCC prompted the researcher to develop a research design that may provide some insight for the college's administration in solving this problem. Large numbers of students had been placed on academic probation at OCC and the trend was growing. No formal study had occurred, and at the advice of the Provost of the college, the researcher designed a study to help answer questions about a recently piloted intervention program for probationary students. This program was an attempt by the counseling department to provide an intervention with a select number of students on probation. The research questions were formulated to not only provide some measure of assessment about whether or not this new program had assisted students to improve their grades but also to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students at OCC. The mixed methods design assisted the researcher in best answering the proposed research questions.

A study of the student retention literature resulted in identifying a commonly cited theory, which served to provide a theoretical framework for constructing interview questions and testing the constructs of this theory at OCC. The theory of student

departure (Tinto, 1987, 1993) has been criticized for its application to a community college setting, most specifically in its construct of social integration as a key factor that would influence a student's decision to drop out of college. However, the construct that was most applicable to this study was that of academic integration. Therefore, the data collection methods for the qualitative portion of this study included questions to examine this construct with OCC research participants. In addition, the researcher reviewed many studies of probation intervention programs to identify the types of data collection and analysis procedures most commonly applied to evaluating the effectiveness of these types of programs. The two areas were improvement of grades after the intervention and the resultant academic standing.

A sequential, two-phased design was employed to examine the quantitative results of the probationary students first and then identify potential participants for the qualitative portion of the study in the form of semi-structured interviews. The desire to understand the college experiences of students on academic probation lent itself to apply a phenomenological methodology to complete the qualitative inquiry in this mixed methods study. Phenomenology is the study of a common experience through the voices of those who live it, and the most commonly used instrument in this methodology was semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Upon IRB approval from both OCC and St. John Fisher College, the researcher requested a report from the college's registrar of 207 students placed on academic probation at the end of the spring 2009 semester and returned to OCC for the fall 2009 semester. The report included demographic and academic variables to use in this study to answer the two research questions.

RQ1. Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester achieve a higher grade point average than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

RQ2. Do probationary students who participate in a probation intervention program for one semester return to academic good standing at a higher rate than probationary students who do not participate in the program?

The researcher reviewed the data for accuracy and completion and imported the data from Microsoft Excel© into SPSS, version 17.0 to conduct descriptive and statistical analyses. The probation students were divided into three categories to identify students who were in the intervention program and those who were not. The college's counseling department invited one third of all probationary students to participate due to limited resources available to accommodate all students. Therefore, based on a student's major, letters of invitation to join the probation intervention program were sent to a select group. This resulted in 56 students in the program, 68 students who were invited but chose not to participate, and 83 students who were not invited to participate.

The results of this analysis assisted in identifying a select group of students invited to partake in semi-structured interview sessions. The researcher selected an even number of students from each probation program category as well as an even distribution of students based on gender, age, race/ethnicity and academic outcomes from the fall semester. The goal was to meet with six students and this was accomplished by sending out 35 letters of invitation and additional phone calls made to secure a time and place to meet. The six interview participants consisted of three males and three females. Four of the participants were White and two were African American. One student was 58 years-

old and the remaining participants ranged between the ages of 19 and 22. Interviews took place on the college campus and lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and completed between March 5 and March 23, 2010. The audio files were sent to an outside transcription service and transcribed for the researcher to analyze. All files were received by April 2, 2010.

The results of the quantitative analysis did not support the hypothesis held by the researcher that students who participated in the intervention program would earn a higher semester GPA and return to good academic standing at a higher rate than those who did not participate. In fact, there was little evidence in this study to support that an intervention made any difference for this group. Even when controlling for age, race, gender, and academic preparation, results showed no significant difference in students when based on any of these demographic or academic characteristics. It should be noted that comparing the results when controlling for race resulted in a small sample size, which would threaten the validity of these results.

Upon this analysis, the researcher concluded that further research is necessary, particularly in relation to understanding the components of the program and whether they were implemented equally amongst all participants. Also, the program participation was voluntary which threatens the reliability of these results in generalizing to a larger population.

The step-by-step process of analysis recommended by Moustakas (1994) for a phenomenological study resulted in (a) identifying significant participant statements, (b) reducing these statements into themes or meaning units, (c) written descriptions for each

participant that describe the textural and structural experiences, (d) synthesis of these descriptions and meaning, and (e) a composite description for all participants.

*Composite textural and structural summary.* College is a place where all of the participants shared a common goal: to complete an Associate's degree. The expectations set forth by the college are to achieve good grades and to pass classes in order to graduate. Along this journey, students are expected to be more independent, but this destination is never simple or easy to reach. For many of the participants, a tension existed between the desire to work independently but get help when needed. The settings within college provide varying degrees of opportunity for students to assert their expected independence. Some professors created an environment where students could depend upon the professor to provide explicit instruction and guidance. Other professors appeared to demonstrate a lack of concern for whether learning took place or not and expected a higher level of independence.

Participants recognized the need to access support systems, and yet few availed themselves to them and mostly when in jeopardy of punitive actions such as removing needed financial aid and a positive academic status. The expressions of each of the participants were positive towards the institution's role in supporting them; however, they were disconnected with the institution in actually meeting these needs. In some cases, students turned inwardly to explore their motivation and self-worth as ways to motivate them towards improvement.

The students experienced college within various contexts. For some, college is a family expectation, and for others it is a family hope. Friends and family supported some students and were the center of their motivation to attend and to stay. Time is a challenge

for many of the students in college. The desire to complete college was a primary goal; yet, the time to devote to this experience was shared with raising children, with working one or two jobs, as well as with the time required to develop the skills necessary to achieve a higher level of education.

The college experience of being on probation meant that failure may be eminent and time is of the essence to meet the structural standards set by the college. The action taken by the college to warn students of their failing had different effects: motivation for some and reinforcement of a negative self-image for others. Failure had occurred more than once for most of the participants, and these experiences demonstrated that perseverance was more evident in this group than they were able to verbalize. These students were not taking their education lightly, even though they did not always act in ways to support their academic success. They were not giving up and kept searching for ways to meet their objective. College meant success, but some came to the realization and acceptance that failure was often a part of that process.

The analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in identifying five themes when summarizing the college experience of the participants. The themes representing the overall college experience of (a) being academically engaged, (b) dependence versus independence, (c), memorable classroom experiences, (d) strong family and friends support, and (e) success = college degree supported some of the work of research identified in the literature review. The notion of academic integration as an influence on student departure (Tinto, 1987, 1993) was supported by the researcher's interpretation of students' statements and textural and structural descriptions. Tinto asserted that if students were not integrated into the academic setting, they would drop out. This was not



the case for these participants. Evidence of academic integration (relationships with faculty, engagement in the learning and seeking help when needed) was scarce in the researcher's analysis. Yet, the students remained enrolled, possibly because their commitment to the goal of completion seemed to overpower the lack of engagement.

All of the participants demonstrated a desire to be independent learners but this desire was incongruent with their ability. The themes of academic engagement and dependence versus independence, in particular, demonstrated the students' conflict between desire and actions. They expressed interest in engaging with faculty and some wanted more of that, but they had limited interest in engaging unless it was mandatory or instigated by others.

Finally, the motivation to earn a college degree rose above all other barriers, and the college was seen as the place to do it, regardless of the fact that the college was also warning students that this goal might not be achievable if behaviors did not change. The commitment to this goal was strong and could explain why students did not drop out. This goal commitment is a primary construct in Tinto's theory of student departure (1987, 1993), and despite all of the lack of progress each student was making towards that goal, the commitment was intense enough to stay and persevere. The college's lack of a dismissal policy may also play a role in supporting these students to stay committed to this goal. This conflicting message from the college of telling students they are not being successful (placement on probation or removal of academic status) and yet allowing students to remain enrolled in classes without any mandatory intervention is an academic policy that should be addressed by the college.

The findings suggest that the classroom experience at a community college acts as the primary way in which students will integrate into the college environment. Students identified with the classroom environment that provided caring faculty and opportunities to interact with faculty and peers both in and out of the classroom. This supports the research on community college retention that suggests it is the academic context, rather than the social life (clubs, sports, co-curricular activities) that influences student departure.

In addition, the findings point to the need for further analysis of the probation program components to determine what works and does not work. Interviewing more students about their experiences, particularly those who were in the program, to identify promising practices will benefit the college by using its limited resources wisely.

The college should also consider a review of the academic policy of the institution that requires intervention strategies for any student who continues to fail to meet academic standards. An ethical dilemma exists as to whether it is appropriate to allow students to continue to enroll in courses after multiple semesters of failure without any required intervention. The researcher will discuss this leadership dilemma with appropriate senior leaders.

### *Becoming an Executive Leader*

The dissertation process in the Executive Leadership doctoral program at St. John Fisher College has assisted the researcher in developing a variety of necessary skills for effective leadership. Examples described in this section relate to (a) problem solving, (b) judgment, (c) conflict resolution, (d) written and oral communication, (e) analytical skills, and (g) persistence.

*Problem solving.* There are two examples that demonstrate development in this area. In one of the field experiences, I uncovered a technology problem that resulted in the lack of identification of students in need of academic support. A more analytical, research-based approach resulted in recommending a process that would help identify this student population and it was done through work with faculty. By learning through the various self-analysis opportunities in this program about my strong tendency to solve problems on my own, I have worked harder at patiently including others in helping to resolve important problems. This example resulted in the opportunity to collaborate with faculty, and the committee members appreciated solving this problem that was unknown to them.

Second, executive leaders need to be mindful of how their constituents are experiencing the organization. In this study and in the researcher's context, that means learning from the students. The experience of talking with students about their experiences and confronting the researcher's own biases about why students are not achieving will prove to be invaluable as the researcher advances in administration. Senior administrators have a tendency to make assumptions about why problems are occurring and rush to fix them. Gathering information from the students about their experiences challenged my assumptions and has provided new insight to the retention and graduation problem that exists at my institution.

*Judgment.* The diversity-centered curriculum of this program has fostered growth in myself to become less quick to judge others and continue to evolve as an open-minded leader. The program cohort diversity of race, age, occupation, and, consequently,

thoughts and experiences, provided a wider lens to view my workplace and the students we serve.

I have had a few employee challenges in which I needed to ask others to reserve their judgments and take multiple perspectives and diverse thinking into account. By taking the time to do this, I provided senior administrators with a new understanding of one employee's cultural background and, consequently, saved his job.

*Conflict resolution.* Developing my role as a leader involves the need to confront the unpleasant parts of working with people. In the past, I would passively resist uncomfortable situations, particularly when having to discuss performance issues with employees. I would talk around a problem and sometimes resolve the problem myself in order to avoid confrontation. Navigating in this ambiguity is not a healthy situation for employees and ultimately the organization.

I have become more competent in providing honest feedback to my employees. I have confronted issues as they arise so there are no further misunderstandings and, in doing so, have gained trust from those I supervise. When my direct report was struggling with how to remediate an employee who was not doing his job, I not only helped her strategize but also supported her when she had to document infractions. As a result, she has gained more support from her department staff because they recognized that issues were going to be confronted and resolved, which created a more trusting atmosphere for all.

*Written and oral communication.* The development of writing in a new format is another critical skill for executive leaders, particularly in academia. Through this process of doctoral level study, and the writing of the dissertation, the researcher has developed

the academic language of scholars, which is critical to being an accepted member of the academic community. In addition, each class in the program provided opportunities to enhance public speaking skills requiring delivery that requires being concise. I have been praised for my organizational and presentation skills both in the program and in my workplace.

*Analytical skills.* The ability to read and analyze material, reflect upon its meaning, and report the findings to others is an important skill for executive leaders, and it further developed during this process. Reading scholarly work with a critical eye is the most fundamental skill developed during this process and equips the researcher with the necessary background to contribute to research on student retention.

To meet the requirements of one of the field experiences, I read historical documents on community college policies and recommended new admission practices to improve the success rates of students. The Provost of the college reviewed the recommendations for potential implementation. A subcommittee of the college's Enrollment Council will be analyzing the feasibility of these recommendations. The literature review required to propose my study prepared me to produce the above-mentioned work as well as future projects since then.

*Persistence.* Seeing a project through to completion is a fundamental skill for successful leadership. Juggling multiple responsibilities as a doctoral candidate tested this ability every day. I entered this program as a relatively organized and focused individual who prided herself on keeping and delivering on what is promised. I leave this program with a greater appreciation of what can be accomplished with this skill set but with support. I have always struggled with asking for help and this program required me to do

so whether it was from the dissertation committee, fellow students, or my family.

Completion of a doctoral degree is an accomplishment and demonstration of persistence.

However, I have come to appreciate that to successfully complete any large project the work of others must be solicited and embraced. The ability to delegate in order to meet an objective has been forced upon me within this program because I could not have completed it without others' support. I have begun to delegate tasks at work to my assistant and others to be more productive and to help develop others' skills.

All of the skills mentioned connect the coursework and dissertation work required of the Ed.D. program in Executive Leadership. Through a self-reflective process and application of new skills, this executive leader is equipped to contribute in new ways to the higher education community.

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Appendix A

Registrar letter

(Date)

(First Name) (Last Name)

(Address Line 1)

(Address Line 2)

(City), (State) (Zip)

Dear (First Name),

Based on a review of your academic record at the end of the spring 2009 semester, you have been placed on academic probation which is determined by reviewing your grades and course credits attempted. Academic probation is an alert to us that you may be struggling with your academic endeavors, and we are here to help. **You are still eligible to return to Onondaga for the fall 2009 semester, however, we encourage you to talk with one of our counselors to put a success plan in place.**

Our counseling staff is committed to helping you succeed at Onondaga. We encourage you to participate in our *Retention Program*, designed to assist students like yourself who may benefit from additional support in order to reach their goals. If you participate, you will be assigned a counselor to meet with you to develop an academic achievement plan to help get you back on track. Your counselor will then be in regular contact with you throughout the semester, and will obtain feedback from your instructors which will be shared with you. **Call the Counseling office at [REDACTED] or email us at [singerk@sunyocc.edu](mailto:singerk@sunyocc.edu) to schedule an appointment to join our program so we can help you get ready for the fall semester.**

The College policy on academic standing is printed on the reverse side of this letter. Please read the policy carefully. The determination of academic probation and loss of matriculation are explained in the policy.

If you have any questions about the College's academic standing policy or this determination, please call my office at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]  
Registrar



Appendix B

Academic Performance Self Assessment Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Student ID# \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Program \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

In order to help identify factors that contributed to your academic performance, please answer yes to all that apply to your experience from the following list. Your responses will be kept confidential and used only by the Counselor with whom you will be meeting.

Question	Yes	No
I spent too much time studying for one very difficult course and fell behind in everything else		
I felt as if I were always behind the rest of the class.		
I didn't understand what the instructor/professor was talking about.		
I had difficulty doing well on exams, even though I thought I knew the material.		
I needed a tutor, but didn't know how to get one.		
I managed my time poorly; I procrastinated, and then I didn't have time to finish things.		
I have a hard time writing papers.		
I didn't keep up with the assigned readings.		
English is my second language and I had problems studying. I need to see an advisor for International Students.		
I have a difficult time with math.		
I took too many courses.		
I missed too many classes.		
I didn't take notes.		
The notes I took didn't help when I studied.		
I didn't really study.		
I was experiencing personal problems that interfered with my ability to concentrate and complete my work/or study effectively.		
I felt isolated, anxious, tired, depressed, and unable to focus on anything for sustained periods of time, or I had little or no motivation to complete assignments or even attend class.		
I had a crisis and/or death in the family (or someone I felt very close to).		
I went out a lot and partied a lot with my friends to the extent that I couldn't always focus on my schoolwork, or missed classes because I was sleeping off a late night.		
I wasn't motivated because I don't know why I am here, or what I will do with a college degree.		

I am undecided about my career goals.  
I should have dropped a class earlier, but I wasn't sure where to go.  
I was sick a lot during the semester and missed too much work.  
I had financial pressures and/or worked too many hours at a job.  
I had significant problems with my living situation.  
I have a difficult commute.  
I was given the run around.  
I had problems with an instructor.  
I saw my advisor on a regular basis.  
My specific situation was not addressed by this questionnaire.

Appendix C

Counseling Department Academic Achievement Plan

**This is your academic achievement plan for the Fall 2009 semester. This plan is designed to assist you in meeting and achieving your academic goals at OCC. As your assigned counselor, we will review what went wrong, how to improve and how to sustain your successes throughout the semester. By signing this plan, you agree to work collaboratively with me and the service area providers throughout the semester.**

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **PHONE#** \_\_\_\_\_

**STUDENT ID#** \_\_\_\_\_ **EMAIL:**  
**CURRENT GPA:** \_\_\_\_\_ **CURRICULUM:**

**CURRENT CLASS SCHEDULE:**

- |    |     |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 2.  |
| 3. | 4.  |
| 5  | 6._ |

**STUDENTS GOALS FOR THE SEMESTER:**

- 
- 
- .

**STEPS NEEDED TO ACHIEVE GOALS**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**SERVICE PROVIDERS:**

**a** \_\_\_\_\_  
**b** \_\_\_\_\_ **c.** \_\_\_\_\_  
**d.** \_\_\_\_\_ **e. (other)** \_\_\_\_\_





Appendix D

Retention Alert Faculty Feedback Form

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Student ID#: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class Section: \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Three Week Instructor Questions**

1. Is this student prepared for class?  Yes  No
2. Does this student participate in class?  Yes  No
3. Is the student attending class on a regular basis?  Yes  No
4. Do you recommend any additional support services outside of class for this student?  Yes  No
5. What grade is the student presently carrying in this course?
  - Credit – A
  - Credit – B
  - Credit – C
  - Credit – D
  - Credit – F
  - Non-credit – S
  - Non-credit – U

6. Additional comments and/or concerns are welcome:

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Thank you for your input!

## Appendix E

### Interview invitation letter

February 26, 2010

Dear ,

My name is Kris Duffy, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Executive Leadership program at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York. I am also an employee at Onondaga and will be conducting a study to learn more about the experiences of some students who were placed on academic probation in the fall, 2009 semester. I would like to invite you to participate in this study of Onondaga Community College students.

This is an important study for the college because we wish to understand your experience through your voice and hope to develop strategies and supports to assist future students in being successful. Your participation in this study will help me provide this type of information to those involved in supporting student success.

I would like to ask you to spend 1 hour with me at an off campus location most convenient for you to answer some questions and share your experiences. The session will be recorded and transcribed for me so that I can carefully listen to your responses and identify themes that may support my research study. I will be sharing my interpretations of our conversation with you before a written summary is submitted to my review committee so that you may confirm or correct its accuracy. Your name will not be included in my written description and I assure you that the results will be written in a

way that will protect your identity. The results of this study will be shared with the college's senior administrative leaders and could be published in professional journals. However, no personally identifiable information will be used in any results shared internally or externally.

You are not obligated to participate in this study and if you choose to participate, but during the interview session find yourself unable to continue, there will be no consequences bestowed upon you as a student at Onondaga Community College. This is strictly voluntary and for research purposes only.

In appreciation of your time and effort, I will be providing you with a \$10 honorarium to assist you in your travels. I will be following up this letter in one week with a phone call to hear your answer to this request. If you wish to call or email me directly my phone number is [REDACTED] or email at [duffy@sunyocc.edu](mailto:duffy@sunyocc.edu) I sincerely hope you will support this important work, and I look forward to talking with you further.

Sincerely,

Kristine Duffy



## Appendix F

### Interview Questions

1. Describe your academic experiences as a student prior to coming to college?
2. What words would you use to describe yourself as a student?
3. Tell me about the goals you have set for yourself? Have these goals changed since you arrived at Onondaga?
4. Tell me about your first semester at Onondaga? Describe a classroom experience that was most memorable?
5. Tell me your impressions of the college in supporting your success?
6. How did you feel when you received your letter about being placed on academic probation?
7. How would you describe your experience this past semester?
8. What were some of the things you did to try and improve your grades? How would describe the college's role in helping you?
9. What are your feelings about your future as a college student at Onondaga?
10. What else would you like to tell me about being a college student placed on academic probation?

Appendix G

Action timeline

<b>Date</b>	<b>Action</b>
<b>December, 2009</b>	<i>Request data from college registrar to include all variables described in data collection section. Report will be received directly after grades are verified and posted.</i>
<b>January, 2010</b>	<i>Data from report will be verified and checked for accuracy and imported from Microsoft Excel into SPSS, version 17.0. Data analysis methods will be applied and reports will be created to inform next steps in study.</i>
<b>February, 2010</b>	<i>Potential interview candidates will be identified and contacted. Interviews will be conducted through the first three weeks of February.</i>
<b>March, 2010</b>	<i>Interview transcripts will be transcribed by a transcriptionist. The researcher will code transcripts and identify emerging themes.</i>
<b>April-May, 2010</b>	<i>Results will be written in the final dissertation report.</i>

## Appendix H

### Participant Academic Preparation

<hr/> <u>Academic preparation</u> <hr/>			
	<u>High school graduate?</u>	<u>High school GPA</u>	<u>Required developmental?</u>
Student A (P1)	N	N/A	Y
Student B (P1)	Y	N/A	Y
Student C (P1)	Y	78.45	N
Student D (P2)	Y	67.91	Y
Student E (P3)	Y	83.7	N
Student F (P3)	Y	83.2	Y