EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR ONLINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ON

ACADEMIC PROBATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Michael Ellis Beck

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-year online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. Four research questions guided the study: (RQ1) How do first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation describe their academic experiences? (RQ2) What do participants identify as reasons for receiving poor grades and being placed on academic probation? (RQ3) How do participants on academic probation describe what they could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation?   (RQ4) What do participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress? The researcher used a phenomenological design to examine the gap in the existing research, specifically that there is insufficient understanding of the experiences of first-year community college students who take online courses and are placed on academic probation. This study focused on the experiences of students who attended a community college in central North Carolina. Data was collected through interviews, written documents, and a focus group and primarily analyzed through coding and establishing themes. Four themes emerged: Lack of Preparedness, Lack of Perseverance, Lack of Communication, and Optimism for the Future.

***Keywords*: academic probation, community college, online learning, retention**

Acknowledgments

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List of Abbreviations

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

General Educational Development (GED)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Triangle Community College (TCC)

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present a framework for this qualitative research study. Each year, new college students make the decision to pursue their post-secondary education by enrolling in various programs of study at their local community colleges. Today's community colleges provide advanced educational opportunities for these individuals by offering a variety of programs through traditional and online learning environments (Jurgens, 2010; Lundberg, 2014; McClenney, 2013). Although online education offers some advantages over traditional campuses, online programs do not necessarily lead to academic success (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). Many first-year college students attend college with high expectations, but find that they are unable to succeed at their expected levels, sometimes leading to placement on academic probation (Balduf, 2009; Renzulli, 2015). This study was designed to examine the experiences of first-year community college students who take online courses and are on academic probation—a topic that is insufficiently understood at the present time and therefore a gap in the existing research. The first chapter provides a background for the problem, which establishes the foundation for this study, the situation to self, the problem statement, and the purpose statement. This chapter also details the significance of the study, four research questions, definitions relevant to the study, and finally provides a chapter summary.

Background

Since the establishment of community colleges in the United States in the early 20th century, these schools have offered students open admission and an affordable way to obtain certificates, diplomas, associate degrees, and opportunities to transfer to a university. Historically, community colleges' open door admissions policy is unselective and non-competitive. The only requirement for admission at most community colleges is that students

must have earned a GED certificate or a high school diploma (McClenney, 2013). With an increase in technological advancements over the past two decades, many students have now taken advantage of the convenience and flexibility of community colleges by enrolling in online courses. Online education has become widely accepted and occurs at most colleges across the nation, making college more accessible to students than ever before (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Larreamendy-Joerns, 2006). Retention and academic failure among this population, however, have been and continue to be a concern (Tinto, 1999, 2006). According to Tinto's model of retention, students are not always ready to learn and excel academically (Tinto, 1999, 2006). Often, students do poorly in college because they fail academically, have difficulty managing a transitional period in their lives, and are unable to overcome barriers that prevent them from being successful (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Between 2000 and 2015, nearly half of all undergraduate students across the nation attended a community college and the number steadily continues to rise (Jurgens, 2010; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). However, student completion rates at the community college level are remarkably low (Jurgens, 2010; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Within six years of their initial enrollment, nearly half of community students have not earned a credential (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2015; O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009). Many students enter community college classrooms academically underprepared, without the support they need to help them meet their academic and professional goals, and with numerous other obligations (Crawford & Jervis, 2011). Community college students often have personal and academic challenges and require family support and academic support to further success, such as 24/7 online support, free tutoring, and college mentors (Crawford & Persaud, 2013). The problem of low student success has systematic contributing factors, such as the tendency of

many institutions to deemphasize student retention and instead focus on student recruitment. However, the problem is also at an individual level, as students must also take responsibility for their learning experiences (Knowles, 1980; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014; Stetsenko, 2010; Tinto, 1999; Tucker, 2012).

Many community colleges are now taking proactive steps to aid and retain students. The use of academic advising and first-year orientation are currently common practices, and students often gain through these a level of preparedness that can help them transition between semesters (Jones, 2013). Many colleges have implemented additional programs to support freshmen during their first-year transitions, such as service-learning programs, tutoring, developmental courses in the areas of math and English, freshman interest groups, learning communities, and mentoring programs (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Dadgar, Nodine, Bracco, & Venezia, 2014). However, proactive measures are not always enough to retain students during their first year in college (Ellis-O'Quinn, 2012). Students must not only be academically prepared, but also able to engage socially and find meaning in their online classes (Tucker, 2012).

Retention among community college students is an area that many researchers have explored (Cho, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Kim & Frick, 2011; Rovai, 2003; Russo-Gleicher, 2013). Administration and faculty at community colleges need to attend to and examine the experiences of underperforming students taking online classes. Predominately asynchronous courses can be challenging for students because they often lack face-to-face interactions that many students need, and they require students to be technologically proficient (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011; Williams, Matt, & O'Reilly, 2014). There is a relative dearth of literature that describes the experiences of first-year online community college students placed on academic probation. In this study, I addressed this gap in the literature by using qualitative methods to

study the phenomenological experiences of first-year community college students who took online courses and were on academic probation.

Situation to Self

When I was 18 years old and in my first year of college, I struggled both socially and academically in a community college environment. I was not a terrible student, but for various reasons, I struggled to succeed in college until I reached my early 20s. As I have gotten older, I have learned how to be successful in the classroom and actively participate in meaningful learning experiences. I currently work as Dean of Student Learning at a community college and I have a passion to help students and advisees meet their academic, social, and personal goals in life. As a teenager, I did not value the learning opportunities provided by my local community college. Now that I have years of experience working in higher education, I have learned to appreciate the individualized academic and student support programs that community colleges offer students.

Today's community colleges prepare students to become part of the 21st century workforce by furnishing opportunities to obtain an education in a cost-effective manner (Crawford & Persaud, 2013; Lundberg, 2014). It is my goal to help students understand the benefits of community colleges. My past experiences have motivated me to better understand the lived experiences of students and further the knowledge of how these students view their learning experiences. To aid in my understanding of participants' views during this study, I based this research on the frameworks of andragogy and the theory of student integration (Knowles, 1980; Tinto, 1975, 2012).

I relied on a particular ontological assumption in order to fulfil the purpose of the study, which is to convey the experiences of the participants. Ontological assumptions define the

nature of reality and its characteristics. A social constructivism paradigm guided this study, which means that the participants' unique views about the phenomenon were constructed through their lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, it was important to allow the participants to share the similarities and differences in their experiences and perceptions of reality (Creswell, 2013). My intent was to interpret the meanings the participants developed about the phenomenon.

Problem Statement

Currently, the number of students enrolled in at least one online class in the United States is over six million, and one-third of all higher education students take at least one course online (Williams et al., 2014). Enrollment rates for online college students are increasing at a faster pace than the overall higher education student population (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Williams et al., 2014). Over the past decade, the majority of colleges in the United States have reported that online education is a key component to their long-term success (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Reese, 2015). The problem is that those college students, and especially community college students who take online classes and struggle academically and socially, are at great risk of not completing their programs of study (Boling et al., 2012; Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011; Marken & Dickinson, 2013; Mgutshini, 2013; Russo-Gleicher, 2013).

Over the past decade, community colleges have reported significantly higher dropout rates and feelings of disassociation in students who were enrolled in online courses compared with students who took courses in a seated environment (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Reese, 2015). Despite the increased risk associated with online learning, there is relatively little research that focuses on experiences of first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation. In this study, I attempted to extend Tinto's student integration model and Knowles'

principles of andragogy by focusing on the relationships between students and their

postsecondary learning environments (Knowles, 1980; Tinto, 1975, 2012).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-year

community college students on academic probation who took the majority of their classes online

at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. Students who are on academic

probation are typically characterized as having a semester grade point average (GPA) of less than

2.0, difficulty adjusting to college life, deficient time management skills, and the tendency to

look externally for the rationale behind their academic difficulties (Balduf, 2009; Renzulli,

2015). For the purposes of this study, students on academic probation were defined as students

who had a GPA of less than 2.0 during their first year of college. Online courses were defined as

courses that have at least 80% of the content delivered in an online format. This format carries

with it a fundamentally different learning experience than traditional, web-facilitated, and hybrid

courses, supporting the rationale to consider the population of online learners unique and

deserving of its own study (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

This study was guided by Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980)

theory of adult learning- andragogy. Tinto's (1975) student integration model informed the

study by focusing on the importance of social and academic integration in the lives of college

students. Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy framed the study by detailing the

method and practice of teaching adults how to learn. These theories are further discussed in

Chapter Two.

Significance of the Study

In this study, I described the experiences of first-year online community college students at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina who were on academic probation. The sample in this study included 15 first-year community college students who took the majority of their courses in an online format during their first year of study. All participants were on academic probation during their first year of the study. From a theoretical position, I based this study upon Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy to examine the experiences of first-year online community college students who were on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina.

By examining the experiences of this specific group of students, I hoped that the study would contribute to the body of research regarding academic probation and student retention. According to Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, and Killion (2012), "By listening to student experiences, instructors can address both cognitive and affective aspects of learning, bringing richness to online learning beyond 'me and my computer'" (p. 105). More specifically, this study has the opportunity to provide new and valuable feedback, derived from student perspectives, about the challenges of being on academic probation. Future research can build upon the findings of this research study. From a practical standpoint, this study could establish important implications for the design and implementation of retention strategies for community college student success centers in order to increase student success and completion.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this qualitative phenomenological research study on the experiences of first-year online community college students who were on academic probation at

a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. The first question focused on the experiences that students underwent before and during their placement on academic probation. The second question was designed to obtain an understanding of the major life events or transitions that led to academic underperformance. The third question was centered on what events or plans, if any, the students could have avoided or changed to have prevented them from placement on academic probation. The fourth question was used to request feedback from the participants to formulate techniques, programs, and strategies that can facilitate the process of removal from academic probation. The research questions are as follows:

    RQ1: How do first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation describe their academic experiences? Researchers have identified numerous reasons behind student failure (Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1975, 1999). However, participants' individual experiences can offer new insight into this existing body of literature. This examination of the experiences of students will inform interventions designed to increase the academic success of students (Balduf, 2009).

    RQ2: What do participants identify as reasons for receiving poor grades and being placed on academic probation? Students provide the most valid reasons explaining why they are on academic probation (Balduf, 2009). I developed this question to guide the application of Tinto's (1975) student integration model in this population by providing insight into whether a lack of academic and social integration can have an impact on student success. Tinto (1975) suggested that it is important that students develop relationships with other students and their colleges, and this research question was designed to determine whether students experience this as a factor in their academic struggles (Tinto, 1975).

RQ3: How do participants describe what they could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation? Student feedback regarding potential areas for remediation will help identify common causes of probation and areas for intervention (Balduf, 2009). Successful students must be willing to establish goals and realize that they are in charge of their own outcomes (Tinto, 1988, 1997, 2012). Adult learners need to understand the necessity of learning and take responsibility for their educational and life choices (Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles, 1980).

RQ4: What do participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress? Students who are able to provide positive and negative feedback about their learning experiences can help colleges create learning environments that benefit all learners (Boling et al., 2012). This question was designed to inform strategies that would help students persist in college despite the challenges they face. Existing theory suggests that commitment and determination are required for students to complete college (Knowles, 1980; Tinto, 1975). Who the learner is and who he or she desires to become always shapes students' experiences with learning (Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles, 1980). To extend existing research and theory, I used this question to obtain information about the relative importance of students' commitment and readiness to learn.

Definitions

Key terms relating to the experiences of the population and phenomenon of interest were used throughout this study. I provide these definitions as follows for reader clarity.

1. *Academic probation* – Students who are on academic probation are typically
   characterized as having a GPA less than 2.0, having trouble adjusting to college life,

possessing deficient time management skills, and looking externally for the rationale behind their academic difficulties (Balduf, 2009; Renzulli, 2015).

2. *Asynchronous learning* – Asynchronous learning is student learning that takes place at different places and times (Reese, 2014).

3. *Community colleges* – Traditionally, community colleges are two-year post-secondary institutions of higher learning that offer noncredit courses and workforce and university transfer academic programs (Boggs, 2011).

4. *Nontraditional student* – The age of 25 or older is commonly considered to be the predictor of a nontraditional student (Choy, 2002; Hoyt, Howell, Toucjet, Young, & Wygant, 2010; Kantrowitz, 2010; Soares, 2013).

5. *Online courses* – Online learning includes courses that have at least 80% of the content delivered in an online format, which makes online courses different from traditional, web-facilitated, and hybrid courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

6. *Traditional students* – Traditional students are students who traditionally attend college or university shortly after completing high school and are between the ages of 18–24. Age is the most common predictor of a traditional student (Yoder, Mancha, & Smith, 2014).

7. *Synchronous learning* – Synchronous learning is student learning that takes place at a specific place and time (Reese, 2014).

Summary

Within this chapter, I provided a background for the defined problem by concisely reviewing the literature. An examination of the current literature shows that there is currently a gap in the research, specifically, that there is insufficient understanding of the experiences of

first-year community college students who take online courses and are on academic probation (Balduf, 2009; Boling et al., 2012; Jurgens, 2010; Renzulli, 2015). The problem that this study was designed to address was that community college students who take online classes and struggle both academically and socially are at greater risk than other college students of not completing their programs of study (Boling et al., 2012; Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011; Marken & Dickinson, 2013; Mgutshini, 2013; Russo-Gleicher, 2013). To understand this phenomenon, it was important to examine the academic experiences of these students and investigate the common causes of academic probation and potential remedies (Balduf, 2009). Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy were used as theoretical underpinnings to elucidate the experiences of the participants. I also explained the scope of the study and situation to self in this chapter. In this study, I aimed to describe, using a transcendental phenomenological study design, the experiences of first-year college students on academic probation who took the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. Research questions were designed to facilitate understanding of the experiences of the participants. Finally, this chapter contained definitions applicable to this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of struggling first-year, online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. Often, college students feel disconnected from other learners, faculty and staff, and their college environment (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011). Students need to be part of a vibrant learning community where they feel appreciated and important. They need to be in an environment where they are nurtured and engaged in the learning process because a lack of connection can have negative consequences for student retention and academic success (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011).

This chapter presents a review of the literature pertaining to the experiences of first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation. This section includes literature related to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided this study, specifically Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory- andragogy. According to Boling et al. (2012), "When students experience a sense of disconnect, they describe their learning experiences as being less enjoyable, less meaningful, less helpful, and more frustrating than those individuals who make more personal connections and interactions in their academic courses" (p. 121). I developed this literature review using a variety of resources, including The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. It entails a review of current literature on community colleges, community college students, online learning, and academic probation, and it briefly covers the topic of retention. The literature review of these topics provides the foundation for the rationale for the current research, namely, that there is a gap in the understanding of the experiences of community college students who are

on academic probation while completing classes online.

Theoretical Framework

Much of the research on student success and retention is grounded in the theoretical models of Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. These models were employed to help examine and interpret the experiences of first-year, online community college students who were on academic probation at a medium-sized, rural community college in central North Carolina. By examining the experiences of this specific group of students, this study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding academic probation and helps community college efforts to better retain students from their initial admission to their graduation.

Student Integration Model

Since the end of the 20th century, student attrition has grown in America's post-secondary institutions of higher learning (Tinto, 1997). The majority of students who leave college make the decision to leave voluntarily. Community college students in particular often face many challenges after admission that lead to departure from their schools, such as socioeconomic conditions, failure to complete developmental courses, the inability to succeed academically while working in a place of employment, the struggle to pay tuition and fees, and the stress of raising a family while taking classes (Everett, 2015; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). Early departure has personal, occupational, monetary, and social ramifications that not only impact the students, but also communities, states, and the nation (Tinto, 1997). Historically, the majority of students who depart early from college do so via student withdrawals or dropping out and without compulsion on the part of academic institutions (Tinto, 1993). Staff at institutions of higher learning and specifically community colleges need to consider various approaches and

specific strategies that can be implemented to help academically struggling students, particularly online students, remain enrolled from the time they are admitted to the time they graduate. This attrition phenomenon has been an ongoing dilemma that needs redress (Tinto, 1982).

Arguably, the best known theoretical approach that focuses on student attrition and retention is Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration model. Tinto (1975) developed his model out of the principles of Durkheim's theory of suicide (1897), arguing that student attrition is linked to a lack of social and academic interactions (Tinto, 1975). This model primarily focuses on the importance of social and academic integration in the lives of all college students, not just community college students. Academic integration is essential for students to be successful in higher education. This notion of academic integration incorporates academic development, personal growth, academic confidence, and values (Tinto, 1975, 2012). Social integration describes the building of relationships with other individuals within academic learning environments. Relationships between students and faculty and staff are crucial, as they create a network that students can utilize when they are confronted with challenges both within and without the classroom (Tinto, 1975). This model focuses on the relationship between students and their postsecondary learning environments. Students who fail to make meaningful social and academic connections with their instructors and peers while they are in college are at a greater risk of dropping out of college (Tinto, 1975, 2012). Once students decide to leave college, the chance of them completing an academic program of study diminishes greatly (Tinto, 1975, 2012).

In forming his theory, Tinto (1975) adapted Durkheim's (1897) observation that there are numerous reasons behind an individual committing suicide and giving up on life. The type of student suicide that is most prevalent is egotistical suicide—not the actual termination of life. In

this form of educational suicide, students simply forsake college when they are unable to integrate, fit in, or build relationships with individuals on their college campuses. Durkheim's (1897) model of egotistical suicide informed Tinto's (1975) argument that supportive social and intellectual structures on college campuses can influence students' willingness to stay at college. Thus, it behooves higher education institutions to have such structures in place to help students transition into college as seamlessly and successfully as possible (Tinto, 1993).

Every student is physically and emotionally unique, and each student's environment, external forces, and personal choices affects him or her differently. Two key elements, intention and commitment, stand as bases of academic departure (Tinto, 1993). Tinto, with his theory of student integration, attempted to explain why students decide to leave college at critical moments in their lives (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration established the principle that a student's commitment or determination to earn a degree and their commitment to their college or university determines whether or not they will complete college. Students who are able to establish personal commitments to other students, faculty, and staff tend to have a greater commitment and accountability to learning, which helps them flourish both socially and intellectually. Further, students then develop a strong commitment to their educational institutions and have the desire and will to continue their studies (Tinto, 1997). Furthermore, Tinto's theory of student integration established the principles that (a) students inherit traits that influence their commitment to the institution where they are enrolled and (b) that a student's commitment to earn a degree and commitment to their college or university determines whether they complete college.

Successful students must be willing to experience a "rite of passage" and establish goals (Tinto, 1988, 1997, 2012). Van Gennep's (1960) work pertaining to rites of passage indicated

that these rituals require individuals to go through a series of events that facilitate development

from children to responsible adults in society. At some point in their lives, all individuals ideally

transition through the phases of separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993). Students

need to be willing to separate themselves from their previous relationships and networks that

could potentially hinder future progress towards transition. This allows them to make

meaningful associations with new communities and become incorporated into the college

community environment (Tinto, 1988, 1997, 2012). Students who struggle to successfully make

it through these transitional phases often have difficulty adjusting to college. Tinto's (1975)

student integration model also focuses on the importance of goal commitment and external

factors such as time, student attitudes, and students' personal and academic backgrounds. Most

importantly, students must make meaningful academic and social connections to be academically

successful and persist through difficult times in their academic experiences. College campuses

and classrooms are the areas in which transition periods take place for students. In order to

ensure success, meaningful connections that take place on these campuses must bolster these

connections (Tinto, 1997, 2012).

Research has validated Tinto's student integration model and the relationship between

student integration and retention (O'Gara et al., 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). If college

students can avoid dropping out of school early in their education, they will eventually develop

the skills and experiences necessary to persist and graduate (Tinto, 2015). Reciprocally, these

skills will help them integrate into their colleges and develop meaningful relationships both

inside and outside the classroom, which increases the likelihood of persistence and retention

(Tinto, 1975). Tinto's (1975) model measured student success and integration by using GPAs

and the number of positive interactions that students had with their faculty and peers throughout

their college experiences. It is crucial for students to establish positive relationships with people who support the learning process and offer encouragement during challenging stages in life. Students who are unsuccessful in transitioning to college and fail to integrate into their new environments and social groups are more likely to drop out of college without completing their educational plans.

In particular, many community college students fail to make the successful transition from the admission process to graduation and the conferring of degrees (Tinto, 1999). Although Tinto's work is not specifically directed toward examining the lives of community college students and the challenges that are often experienced on community college campuses, it is clear that social integration has a strong impact on learning. Learning must take place among students, peers, faculty, and staff to promote student persistence (Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Tinto, 1999).

Many students enter community college classrooms academically underprepared and often enroll in developmental courses. Frequently, they lack the support that is needed to help them meet their academic and professional goals (Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Pruett & Absher, 2015). Although many institutions do not emphasize student retention as much as they do student recruitment, all involved parties ought to take responsibility for students' learning experiences and academic success (Tinto, 1999). College students, especially students who are academically underprepared, often need support programs in place to guide them into their academic careers:

To become academically and socially integrated into a school, students need certain attributes. They need to believe they are effective in their social environments. They need to believe that they are effective academically and believe they are in charge of their own

outcomes. They need to develop coping skills and to be motivated to approach academic

and social challenges. When they develop positive attitudes toward their institution, feel

they fit in, achieve good grades, and want to graduate from the school, they are more

likely to succeed and graduate. (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 85)

Student success often hinges upon well-developed and proactive efforts of colleges and

universities that extend beyond the admission process. This provides students with the support

and tools that they need to succeed in college (Tinto, 2008). Overall, the more that community

colleges students integrate themselves in social and academic arenas on and around their college

campus, the greater the chances that they will obtain their education goals and be academically

successful in their college classrooms and in life (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983).

Theory of Andragogy

Although past educational research has typically focused on the practice of teaching, the

landmark works of Piaget (1952) and Bruner (1966) motivated educational researchers and

practitioners to shift their attention to the importance of student learning. These turning points

have helped redefine the teaching and learning process in schools across the nation, allowing

teachers to depict students as self-directed people who seek lifelong learning experiences

(Knowles, 1980). Andragogy is defined as the method and practice of teaching adults how to

learn. There is some variation in the research regarding the definition (including age criterion) of

an adult learner. However, Knowles (1980) defines an adult as an individual who acts like an

adult, executes the roles of adults, and possesses an adult self-concept. Adult education is a very

broad field within the world of academia and encompasses several levels of adult learning. The

mission of andragogy has a three-pronged approach: meet the needs and goals of individual

students, institutions of higher education, and society (Conklin, 2012; Knowles, 1980).

The concept that children and adults learn differently did not gain popularity in America until Knowles introduced the adult learning theory of andragogy in the United States (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). However, the principles and practices of andragogy have existed since the teachings of Confucius in China; Jesus in Biblical times; and Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato in ancient Greece (Knowles, 1977; Knowles et al., 2012). All of these teachers taught adults through methods that were based on the needs of the adult learners. The theory of andragogy is founded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs and provides a framework to meet the needs of adults who have the desire for lifelong learning and self-actualization (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). Adult learners strive to obtain the skills required for self-directed learning and establishing self-identity by developing their personal skills and talents. Adult learners typically need to mature in life and in their academic progress (Knowles, 1980).

The term andragogy originated with Alexander Kapp's (1833) work, *Platon's Erziehungslehre*, and subsequently to the early establishment of adult education in America by Edward Thorndike, Herbert Sorenson, and Eduard Lindeman (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). Lindeman's work in the 1920s established the academic foundation for adult learning within the United States. He stressed the importance of education developing and evolving based on the needs and interests of learners, learning becoming life-centered and meaningful, and past experiences guiding education and instruction (Knowles et al., 2012).

The theory of andragogy focuses on the practices and methods of teaching adult learners. The premise of this theory is that adults need to understand why they need to learn. Adult learners must also realize why they need to take responsibility for their own educational choices and life decisions. Who the learner is and who he or she desires to become in the future always shapes student learning and experience (Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles, 1980). Adult

learners strive for a climate that is beneficial to learning and often resent classrooms that are aloof, sterile, and restrictive of imaginative and individualized learning (Knowles, 1977). Adults approach their educational journeys expecting to be able to immediately apply most of their learning. Adult learning is heavily influenced by current life situations and based upon a performance-centered approach (Knowles, 1980). Learners are expected to use their prior knowledge and expertise to create a productive learning environment that promotes intrinsic motivation to learn. Educators serve as facilitators who assist learners along their educational journeys. Andragogy is a system of ideas and a transactional model that guides adults in the learning process (Conklin, 2012; Knowles, 1980). Many community college students are considered nontraditional adult learners. Adult learners enter the classroom with various backgrounds, experiences, and worldviews. These differing experiences shape the adult learning environment and support the need for the fundamental principles of andragogy in community college classrooms across the nation.

Knowles' (1980, 2012) theory of andragogy rests upon six basic beliefs about adult learners: (a) the need to know, (b) the learner's self-concept, (c) the role of experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learn, and (f) motivation. Andragogy provides adult learners and teachers with a model that follows the tenants of student-centered learning. The principles of andragogy are based on the assumptions that adult learners desire to be situated in self-directed learning environments, to accumulate a growing pool of academic experiences, to become ready to learn and oriented in their social roles, and to witness the learning process shift from subject-based to performance-centeredness (Knowles, 1980).

Application to Study

Numerous studies support Tinto's (1975, 1993) theories and have furthered additional research pertaining to student success (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Fletcher, Gies, & Hodge, 2011; Tucker, 1999). Knowles' works (1980, 2012) are well-established in the academic community (Isenberg, 2007; Rachal, 2002) as guides to practices and theory pertaining to adult and postsecondary education. This study was designed to develop each of these theories by applying them to first-year, online community college students on academic probation. In this study, the concepts of student integration and adult learning principles were linked in the formation of research questions and interpretation of data derived from rich, personal experiences of the barriers that postsecondary students experience in obtaining a higher education, specifically in a community college environment.

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Related Literature

</div>

Community Colleges

By the mid-1800s, Henry Tappan, president of the University of Michigan; William Mitchell, a trustee at the University of Georgia; and William Folwell, president of the University of Minnesota, were arguing to create junior colleges that would be situated across the nation and would offer general education courses for young students who were transitioning from high school to college (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Jurgens, 2010). This arrangement would ameliorate the apparent burden on university professors to teach these general education courses to freshmen and sophomores (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Jurgens, 2010). Today, depending on their locations in the United States, these postsecondary institutions are recognized by many different names: community colleges, state colleges, trade schools, technical schools, and junior colleges. However, these institutions of higher learning are most commonly referred to as community

colleges. They are held to the same guidelines, academic standards and accreditation standards that apply to four-year colleges and universities (AACC, 2015; Boggs, 2011).

Community colleges have been a vital part of the American economy and educational system for over a century, and they continue to have a tremendous impact on their students' lives and the communities in which they are situated. During the past decade, nearly nine out of every 10 Americans lived within 25 miles of their local community college, making college more accessible than ever (National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008). Community colleges that serve as two-year institutions have shaped America's culture and society and they continue to provide opportunities for educational advancement to students:

> Throughout its 100-plus year history, the community college has proved to be resilient and creative when faced with social and economic challenges, surviving the struggle to gain a respected position in the panoply of higher education. Spurts of rapid growth, occasional declines in student numbers, the lack of resources, or the quixotic whims of legislators have dented, but not derailed, its continuing development. (O'Banion, 2006, p. 44)

The community college system has an important role in upholding the American ideal of social progress. Frequently, enrolling in community colleges is the first step for many students toward earning a postsecondary credential. Community colleges are open-door educational institutions that typically serve all students interested in attending their campuses. Compared to four-year colleges and universities, community colleges traditionally have a higher proportion of students who have minority backgrounds, enroll part-time, and come from low-income families (Fike & Fike, 2008; Handel, 2014; Levin, Harberler, Walker, & Jackson-Boothby, 2014; Smith-Morest, 2013). While community colleges are known for providing students access to higher education,

however, providing this access to a postsecondary education alone is often not enough, as this does not guarantee automatic success or a better future for students (Handel, 2014; Roman, 2007).

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the United States in the early 20th century, America needed institutions that could prepare students for a rapidly changing culture and workforce. The guidance and leadership of William Rainey Harper, President of the University of Chicago, guided the opening of Joliet Junior College in 1901 (AACC, 2013). Most of the early community colleges focused on providing students with a liberal arts education and assisting in the transition between high school and college (Drury, 2003). However, as community colleges began to expand, they also began to offer noncredit courses and academic programs that did not solely focus on transfer programs, but also on workforce programs that helped students obtain job skills to meet employer needs (Boggs, 2011).

After World War II, the Truman Commission Report of 1947 helped establish a network of community colleges that incorporated vocational and technical education with traditional junior college education that had focused on college transfer (Jurgens, 2010). The Truman Commission Report created a postsecondary model that offered students alternative pathways and choices in their learning experiences. These pathways ranged from basic skills education to university transfer programs (Quigley and Bailey, 2003). Despite the humble beginning, the number of community colleges has progressively grown in the United States since the 1960s. Today, there are 1,120 community colleges across the nation serving in total nearly 13 million students (AACC, 2015). The Truman Commission helped create the modern community college model that continues to exist today, shaping multipurpose higher learning institutions that are

expected to meet their students' postsecondary educational, personal, and occupational needs (Smith-Morest, 2013).

For over a century, community colleges across the nation have helped students meet their educational and personal goals while establishing an educated and well-trained workforce to support the nation's growing economy. Community colleges are accredited academic institutions that have the aim of helping students and communities meet their educational goals with limited hurdles to education (Mullin, 2014; Roman, 2007). Today, almost half of all undergraduate students in America attend a community college (AACC, 2015; Jurgens, 2010). The goal of most community colleges is to prepare their students for four-year colleges and universities and assist students with vocational training, high school credits, and basic skills (Roman, 2007).

Community colleges are widely respected for their open-door admissions policy, which offers educational opportunities and a variety of courses and programs to meet the needs of a diverse student body (Levin et al., 2014). Further, community colleges do not hold the same rigorous admission selection process as four-year colleges or universities (Boggs, 2011). The role of the community college is not only to help students be academically successful while on campus, but also to help students increase their educational expectations after entering college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Levin, Cox, Cerven, & Haberler, 2010). Community colleges that implement student-friendly policies and procedures help their students navigate through transitional periods in their lives (Hougaard, 2013). Therefore, community colleges offer students many academic and career pathways in a variety of educational settings that promote engagement and help them reach their personal goals.

Community colleges are beneficial to their communities in many ways. Community colleges are considerably less expensive than most private and public four-year colleges and universities. Therefore, students who attend community colleges incur less student debt on average than their peers who attended four-year schools (Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Mullin, 2014). Community colleges also offer their communities a variety of degree, certificate, and diploma programs that cater to the needs of a diverse population. Community colleges often operate many programs on a local or campus-level, which provides students with the flexibility to adapt to job market demands and build relationships with local employers, politicians, and community members (Crawford & Jervis, 2011).

Community colleges are best known for serving various communities and offering students transfer programs to four-year colleges and universities, vocational training, remedial education, and continuing education. However, low completion rates for community college students have marred the overall public image of the community college system over the past century (McIntosh & Rouse, 2009). Successful institutions of learning should be student-centered, place learning as a top priority, and provide learners with opportunities that will be useful for them in their personal lives and help them have a positive impact on their communities after graduation (Stetsenko, 2010). As educational and community needs continue to change over time, community colleges must also continue to change and adapt in ways that serve their communities and students (Vaughan, 2000; Wei-ni, 2013). Community colleges usually portray the image of being student-centered and learning-centered, but often focus more on admissions numbers than student retention (Roman, 2007; Tinto, 1993). Community college administrators must be concerned with more than enrollment numbers, recognizing the personal needs of their student populations. Educators must understand the unique reasons that students pursue an

education and allow students to become partners in the educational process (Nasir, 2009;

O'Banion, 1997). Today's students need more assistance than ever before to reach their

potential (Balduf, 2009; Dadgar et al., 2014).

If community colleges are to be successful, they will need to support students with a

variety of approaches and resources to help students aim for success (Balduf, 2009). These

approaches should target study skills coaching, time management techniques, and strategies on

handling environmental factors that could have a negative influence on student learning. Many

colleges are currently offering freshmen orientations where students are coached and advised on

adjusting to the transition to independent life (Balduf, 2009; Dadgar et al., 2014). Learning

institutions must find ways to get student support services and faculty to work together to

promote change that meets the needs of all learners (O'Banion, 1997). Staff at admission offices

must serve on the front line, not only to recruit, but to advise students (Roman 2007; Tinto

1993). Faculty must work beyond the role of transmitters of knowledge and shift their focus

beyond the classroom. Faculty should promote student use of student support services to curtail

student attrition instead of viewing students as solely responsible for their own education (Russo,

2013). Students should expect that once they are accepted into the college of their choice, these

colleges will provide them with the social and practical resources that will help them be

academically successful (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Today's community colleges take pride in developing partnerships and policies that

support student success. However, future policies need to be created to support underserved

students while preparing them to be productive members of society:

This difficult balancing act—preserving the access and inclusion that are cornerstones of

the community college mission while implementing informed practices that ensure

greater success for students—will test the strength and resolve of these institutions. But

the growing commitment of organizations, college leaders, and faculty, buttressed by

essential support from policy makers and major foundations, make the focus on

completion a pivotal turning point in the long and successful evolution of America's

community colleges. (Boggs, 2011, p. 10)

This can begin by ensuring that those involved in students' education prepare students for

college once they leave high school, provide students with sufficient educational opportunities

while in college, and give students affordable tuition rates (AACC, 2015; Dassance, 2011).

Since the first community colleges opened their doors over 100 years ago, they have

served millions of students and have been called democratic colleges. They continue to help

Americans gain the education and skills needed to obtain quality jobs, which can create new

standards of living for many families (Boggs, 2011). However, if community colleges are to

remain critical to American education, community college leadership must continue to find new

ways to improve student persistence and success rates. Retention is important because it is

critical to obtaining a degree, which allows students to reach their goals in life. From an

institutional and fiscal standpoint, student retention and completion provides colleges with the

necessary funding to maintain their current programs and develop new ones. The Higher

Education Act suggests that retention rates can also be used to measure a college's performance,

making retention rates a potential indicator of college success (Fike & Fike, 2008). The

inclusion of all students while simultaneously offering high quality educational programs is a

challenge that must be confronted in the near future (Boggs, 2011).

Community College Students

Community colleges serve a diverse group of students who have a broad assortment of personal needs (Lundberg, 2014). In many ways, community college students are very different than students who attend four-year colleges and universities. As an indication of this difference, a higher percentage of the student body of community colleges, as opposed to four-year colleges, register in developmental English and math courses (Karp & Bork, 2014; Townsend & Twombly, 2007). When freshmen enter college, they often do not have all of the skills needed to succeed, have difficulty adjusting to independent life, and lack the self-discipline and motivation to excel. Therefore, it is important that college students have academic and social support systems in place to help them achieve their academic goals (Balduf, 2009; Lundberg, 2014; Renzulli, 2015). Community college students often report that they are academically underprepared when entering college for the first time. This lack of academic and social preparation of many community college students can lead to numerous negative experiences such as academic underachievement and low self-expectations (Martin et al., 2014). Further, many community college students struggle to manage their academic course loads while attempting to balance multiple external burdens such as financial hardship and lack of support from family and friends (David et al., 2015).

More than 13 million students currently attend community colleges across the nation. Community college students account for 46% of the nation's undergraduate students, and 41% of all community college students are the first to ever attend college in their families (AACC, 2015). First-generation college students are defined as students whose parents have not obtained a college degree (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). First-generation college students often lack the guidance they need from others to succeed in their educational journeys. Their inability to

share academic and cultural experiences with their parents when they are facing difficult times in college puts them at a disadvantage (Everett, 2015). Despite the unique challenges faced by these students, the majority of research that focuses on issues in higher education concentrates on students attending four-year colleges and universities.

Community colleges are some of the nation's most valuable social establishments and their impact on student success cannot be ignored or underestimated (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). Community colleges operate on open-door admissions policies, which help students access higher education more easily than many of the larger colleges and universities that have selected admissions programs. Community colleges often serve students who come from families that have not had much exposure to postsecondary education. Over the past five years, nearly 40% of all community college students came from households in which their parents had earned either a high school diploma or did not complete high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Open-door policies allow community colleges to serve a student population that is diverse and nontraditional. Community colleges must ensure that their students have meaningful encounters throughout their learning experiences. Equally important, students must be connected to their institutions to ameliorate any feelings of isolation or lack of belonging (Hougaard, 2013; Lundberg, 2014). Students who are able to establish strong relationships with other students and faculty increase their sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-identity. This increased mastery helps them continue to foster new relationships with others who share similar goals and values, providing academic support and promoting social and academic integration (Lundberg, 2014; Roberts & Styron, 2010).

The nation's community colleges have changed the stereotype that the typical college student enrolls directly out of high school and is ready to start postsecondary work within weeks

of obtaining his or her high school diploma. Many community college students are considered to

be nontraditional students, which has facilitated the changing profile of the typical American

student over the past century. Although there is no consensual definition of a nontraditional

student, the definition must consider the student's age, financial dependence, work status, and

whether enrollment is delayed. The age of 25 years and older is considered to be the most

common predictor of a nontraditional student (Choy, 2002; Hoyt et al., 2010; Kantrowitz, 2010;

Soares, 2013). Fifty-one percent of community college students across the nation are White;

19% are Hispanic; 14% are Black; 6% are Asian; 1% are Native American; and 8% are other

racial or ethnic backgrounds. The average student age upon enrollment in a community college

is 28 years, and almost six out of every 10 students in community colleges are female (AACC,

2015). Over 60% of full-time students and 73% of part-time students maintain a job while

attending community college. Additionally, many students are raising children and have

numerous other obligations to fulfill while attending community college (AACC, 2015). As a

result of these combined responsibilities, many students who are enrolled at community colleges

are only able to attend college part-time. Part-time status prolongs the educational completion

process and often leads to attrition (Townsend & Twombly, 2007).

Community college students attend college for various reasons. Many students attend

two-year schools with the intention of transferring to a four-year institution; others are seeking

job training, or desire to learn a new skill or trade. Many nontraditional students have other

obligations in life that serve as barriers to their educational goals (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, &

Dupont, 2009; Kantrowitz, 2010). Successful students are active agents in the learning process

and make learning relevant and meaningful to guide them in determining where they want to be

and who they want to become (Stetsenko, 2010). Educational researchers and practitioners agree

that finding effective ways to improve success among community college students across the nation is a chief educational priority that must continue to be addressed at the local, state, and national level:

> In order to increase the likelihood of a student's retention, it may be necessary to shift the focus to college preparation during the high school years, which is beyond the scope of college administrators. This course of action falls to legislative policy makers who can influence high school curriculum. (DeNicco, Harrington, & Fogg, 2015, p. 9)

Community colleges cannot become static, but rather, faculty must continue to look for ways to promote student learning and remove student barriers (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

As the profile of today's community colleges continue to change, community colleges and educators must recognize the challenges that students face to help spearhead the movement of retention and college success. Administrators at community colleges must continue to look for ways to use data and collect evidence to develop strategies and programs to improve student retention rates on their campuses. Faculty, staff, and administration must hold themselves accountable for their part in student success and continue to consider innovative ways to curtail attrition (Castillo, 2013; Fike & Fike, 2008).

First-Year Students

First-year students are students who are considered freshmen and have not acquired enough credit hours to be classified as a sophomore (Tinto, 1993, 1999). For many students, college is the start of a transition that brings forth numerous life changes (Wilson, Devereux, & Tranter, 2015). Student attrition has always been a concern among colleges and universities, as nearly a half of all students in the 20th century who entered college left without completing their

program of study (Tinto, 1982). Student retention and academic completion are directly linked to student success during the first-year in college (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Wilson et al., 2015).

Students face numerous internal and external factors that impede their academic progress, and unfortunately, many of these students have not been able to transform their desire to succeed into action (Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Martin et al., 2014; Tinto, 2006). Many community college students do not meet college-level readiness in the areas of math and English, hampering their chances of success. Approximately 60% of first-year community colleges students require some remedial non-credit education courses, which can cost students time and tuition without the satisfaction of immediate course credits (Fike & Fike, 2008; Jaggars, Hodara, & Stacey, 2013). Nearly 40% of all first-year community college students are unfamiliar with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and fail to apply for financial aid through FAFSA during their first two semesters of enrollment (McKinney & Novak, 2012). Many students who do not apply for financial aid are eligible for Pell grants or work-study aid that does not need to be repaid. Students who do not file a FAFSA application reduce their ability to persist from their fall to spring semester during their first year of study (McKinney & Novak, 2012). Completing a FAFSA application could significantly reduce financial roadblocks impeding a student's academic success. However, financial issues are typically one of many factors that lead to early departure (Tinto, 1997).

First-year student success is often measured by students' GPA or retention statistics, but both internal and external factors influence academic performance. For example, when students become socially involved in their colleges, they develop academic and social connections. The more involved students become at their schools, the more involved they are in their own academic success (Tinto, 1997, 2012). Young students initially depend on their families and

educators to help them become academically successful. As students mature, they begin making decisions for themselves and depending on themselves for personal success (Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Knowles, 1980). However, many first-year students have difficulty balancing dependence and independence. Students struggle with moving forward from their histories and they have difficulty making the transition into higher education and meaningful associations with new communities (Tinto, 1988). Students who have difficulty being actively involved and engaged with their colleges typically have lower perceptions of social connectedness and levels of satisfaction with the instructors (Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Roberts & Styron, 2010).

To combat attrition, colleges and universities have started to partner with students during their first year of college, creating elaborate programs designed to help freshman persist (Hoops, Yu, Burridge, & Wolters, 2015; Noble, Flynn, Lee & Hilton, 2007). Freshman experience programs are now common among the nation's campuses and colleges have established support offices to help students reach their academic goals (Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Noble et al., 2007). These programs include freshman orientation, University 101 class, early alert software, and constant student-faculty communication (Tinto, 1993). The aim of freshman experience programs is to assist students during their first-year of postsecondary learning and help develop them into active learners. The overall goal is to increase student success both academically and socially in order to improve student persistence and curtail student attrition (Tinto, 1975).

Although the demands of traditional first-year college students are changing, administrators and educators must ensure that their students are the focus of their educational institutions (O'Banion, 1997). Perhaps the most important component of a student's academic journey is engagement with a personal advisor (Roberts & Styron, 2010). Advisors can be enormously helpful for first-year students who are unsure of their future academic plans:

Quality academic advising contributes to the success of undecided students in higher

education. For students who have not yet decided upon a major as they transition from

high school to college, academic advisors serve as the primary connections to the

institution. (Ellis, 2014, p. 42)

Colleges should promote student involvement on their campuses as important learning

opportunities (Cho, 2012; Hoyt et al., 2010; Roberts & Styron, 2010).

Students who are actively engaged with their advisor, peers, and instructors are more

likely to be successful in college (Kuh, Kinzie, & Schuh, 2005; Tukibayeva & Gonyea, 2014;

Whitt & Associates, 2005). Academic advisors must be willing to attempt to gain an

understanding of advisees' needs by establishing relationships with their advisees and addressing

their individual needs whenever possible (Ellis, 2014). This includes the use of academic

assistance programs such as learner-centered support services, tutoring, writing labs, first-year

experience programs and new student orientations (Kuh et al., 2005). Student success arguably

starts with the student-advisor relationships forged during a student's first semester, making this

connection a critical one for community colleges to foster.

Online Learning

Distance education has been an important element in education since the 1800s. The

earliest methods of distance learning transpired through the use of correspondence education that

the United States Postal Service delivered (Harting & Erthal, 2005). However, early forms of

distance learning did not establish learning environments that promoted social interaction for

students. Once distance education evolved into an electronic format during the technological

revolution of the 1990s, colleges gave students educational options that allowed them to learn at

a distance with increased flexibility and access to synchronous and asynchronous learning

environments (Amirault, 2012; Harting & Erthal, 2005). The development and expansion of new

educational technologies suggest that online learning will continue to be a vibrant part of

postsecondary education in the modern era (Cahill, 2014). Additionally, students from various

backgrounds are attracted to online education and the use of technology as a mode of learning

(Boling et al., 2012).   During the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st

century, new technological inventions and innovations shaped higher education. Not only has

technology changed the way that educators teach classes, but it has also changed the way that

students learn, acquire new information, and become socially and academically integrated within

their college experiences (Amirault, 2012; Cahill, 2014).

Traditionally, online learning is defined by enrollment in courses that have at least 80%

of the content delivered in an online format, which makes online courses quite different from

traditional, web-facilitated, and hybrid courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Many students decide

to enroll in online educational programs because these programs offer them more convenience

and flexibility in pursuing their learning goals than they may get from a traditional on-campus

program (Boling et al., 2012; Lee, 2013). During the 2007–2008 academic year, 22% of students

at public two-year colleges and 18% of all undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one

distance education course. Overall, over the past decade, over four million students were taking

at least one distance education course each year to further their education (National Center for

Educational Statistics, 2011). During this same period, participation in distance education

courses was most common among undergraduate students at community colleges, where 22%

were enrolled (Radford, 2011).

Today, online learning continues to have a positive impact on student education. With

faculty employment and student acceptance in online courses on the rise across the nation,

evidence suggests that the rate of online enrollment and the number of online courses will continue to rise in the near future (Aaron, 2015; Allen & Seaman, 2010). Over 25% of today's college students take online classes (Perry & Pilati, 2011; Williams, et al., 2014). Community colleges are currently the forefront in online education and have been the leaders in distance education for years (Crawford & Persaud, 2013). Most students taking online classes are enrolled in community colleges. As of 2011, online enrollment grew by 8.2%, while overall enrollment remained dormant. If community colleges continue to effectively implement and manage their online programs and remain willing to make changes as the technological market shifts, they have the opportunity to help millions of students reach the American dream of earning an academic credential (Crawford & Persaud, 2013).

Community colleges are serving a diverse student population and are required to make changes to ensure success. The 21st century ushered in the development of new technologies and a shift in the demographics of community college student populations (Castillo, 2013). Two-year colleges have the role of providing their students with access to modern education and technological advancements that will help them develop into 21st century learners who will have an impact on society and positively influence future generations (Castillo, 2013).

Online learning provides many students with an avenue to higher education that is often viewed as an alternative to traditional on-campus education. Online learning offers an education for students who might not have the time or resources to attend college on campus or who choose not to be in a traditional on-campus environment (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Hassan, Abiddin, & Yew, 2014). Online students need access to user-friendly platforms and online systems, but more importantly, they need access to high quality information and feedback from instructors and peers (Alshare, 2011; Casey & Kroth, 2013). However, not all students succeed

in online learning. Students who struggle with online courses often have personal problems,

scheduling conflicts, lack of motivation, and a general lack of time that can impede their

academic success. Course design and lack of communication between faculty and peers can lead

to lack of healthy collaboration in online courses (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Artino, 2010;

Fetzner, 2013; York & Richardson, 2012). Teachers of online courses should encourage open

communication in order to foster the social needs of students and to reduce student concerns

about the overall unfamiliarity inherent in distance learning (Berge, 2013).

Information quality is more important than system quality to contemporary learners

(Alshare, 2011; Casey & Kroth, 2013). Online students need the same interaction with faculty

and advisors as on-campus students (Aragon & Johnson 2008). Faculty who ensure a strong and

communicative online presence improve the online learning environment and increase student

satisfaction (Casey & Kroth, 2013). Most importantly, online students need to feel a sense of

community and meaning in their own online classes and require numerous opportunities to

experience these connections. Faculty should expose students to synchronous and asynchronous

activities that support peer-to-peer and faculty-to-peer interaction (Casey & Kroth, 2013; Glazer

& Wanstreet, 2011; Reilly et al., 2012). Students who are successful in distance education

courses early in their first academic year of study will likely continue to excel in future online

courses (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Many online community college students feel isolated and removed from their college

experience. Online learning environments and distance education classes are often considerably

different in their setup and delivery than classes that require seated components. Community

colleges can use early-alert software to identify potentially at-risk students in an online

environment (Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009). Once these students have been identified, colleges

must proceed with intensive intervention strategies to accommodate students' needs and address their at-risk status. Students need to believe that they are important and respected in online learning environments and have the opportunity to be part of an active learning community (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Community college students are often at a disadvantage prior to enrolling in online distance education courses.

Although online classes provide many students with flexibility, they also often create certain barriers that are not associated with the courses taking place in a seated classroom. Online students face additional pressures not to get behind in their studies. They must use good time management and organizational skills, know how to get technical help, and ask other students and professors for assistance when necessary (Fetzner, 2013). Traditionally, online students who are above the age of 25, register early for classes, and have a substantial number of prior higher education credits completed before taking an online class do better in online classes than peers who do not have these characteristics (Fetzner, 2013). One of the most effective ways that college students can experience social and academic integration in distance education is by having access to quality curriculum programs that expose them to real-world learning tasks and meaningful synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences. This allows students to integrate new concepts with what they have already learned in their own lives (Kim & Frick, 2011).

Academic Probation

Student success is constituted by student persistence, resilience, and retention in colleges. Many students, regardless of whether they were overachievers or underachievers in high school, initially lack the skills needed to succeed in higher education. Common problems with time management, self-discipline, and motivation can lead to placement on academic probation

(Balduf, 2009; Renzulli, 2015). Academic probation serves as an initial warning for students whose academic work fails to meet an institution's conditions for satisfactory academic status (Moss & Yeaton, 2015). Students who are on academic probation are typically characterized as having a semester GPA of less than 2.0, having trouble adjusting to college life, possessing deficient time management skills, and looking externally for the rationale behind their academic difficulties (Balduf, 2009; Renzulli, 2015). One goal of community colleges is to help students overcome any disadvantages that might hinder academic completion. Since community colleges use an open-door policy, they face the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse student population with a broad range of goals and academic expectations (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). During the first decade of the 21st century, only 29% of students at community colleges completed first-time degree and certificates within three years (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015).

During the course of their studies, nearly 25% of all undergraduate students will be placed on academic probation. Community colleges often have a higher percentage of students on academic probation than four-year colleges and universities (Moss & Yeaton, 2015; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Students who place on academic probation are not necessarily incapable of doing well in school, but they often share similar characteristics that can affect their academic success, such as having a lack of motivation, being academically underprepared, having problems with time management, and being first generation college students (Balduf, 2009; Tovar & Simon, 2006). There are numerous external and internal factors that can have a positive or negative influence on student success. Students need to feel a connection to their school, other students, and their instructors (Balduf, 2009; Renzulli, 2015). Community colleges and students must work together to create substantive change for individual learners, make learners full partners in their education, offer numerous options for learning, and document improved and expanded

learning practices (Klatt & Ray, 2014). Students must be the core of the teaching and learning process (O'Banion, 1997). Student success requires colleges to work to establish meaningful relationships with all students. When students lack these connections, they describe their learning experiences as frustrating and less enjoyable (Boling et al., 2012). As the needs of students change, colleges must seek to restructure the way they go about offering educational options (Tinto, 2006, 2012).

Students on probation represent an at-risk population that face many challenges outside of school. Many colleges try to address this issue without fully understanding the needs of this population:

> Students on academic probation represent a population at risk for academic failure and disqualification. In order to retain these students, many colleges and universities focus on providing interventions that tackle this problem without clearly understanding the population they are addressing. (Trombley, 2000, p. 239)

Administration and faculty from colleges must acknowledge that students on probation are more likely to work full-time, have children, and experience social problems than their peers who are in academic good standing (Dadgar et al., 2014; Trombley, 2000). Students on academic probation often feel pressured to quit college and pursue different goals in life. However, students on academic probation who have been provided with a support system and a success coach who checks in throughout each semester tend to view their probationary status more positively and feel more hopeful about their academic future (Arcand & LeBlac, 2012). Support systems should surround students on academic probation to help them progress during their probationary period. Importantly, students who have access to a personal counselor and support systems are more likely to graduate with their degree and meet their academic goals

(Balduf, 2009; Dadgar et al., 2014; Nance, 2007; Trombley, 2000). If they are to be successful, then students and staff and faculty at their colleges must work together to foster cohesion, trust, and interdependence among learners and faculty, thus supporting the learning process (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011).

Summary

Within this chapter, the key components of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided this study were detailed. In the literature review, a gap in the research was identified, specifically, that there is an insufficient understanding of the personal experiences of first-year community college students who are taking online classes and are placed on academic probation. In other words, the existing literature fails to fully explain the rich personal experiences that students have in relation to the conditions of being on academic probation in the first year of online learning at a community college. Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy were presented as theoretical foundations to understand this research, as much of the research on student success and retention is grounded in these two theories. Additionally, presented in this review of literature was research about five topics that relate to the phenomenon: (a) community colleges, (b) community college students, (c) first-year students, (d) online learning, and (e) academic probation.

Community colleges have been vital to the success of the United States since the 19th century and have helped millions of students acquire an accredited education and a higher quality of life (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Jurgens, 2010; O'Banion, 2006). However, many community colleges have low retention rates for students who are seeking certificates, diplomas, and degrees (O'Gara et al., 2009). The population of community college students is extremely diverse and students often face numerous academic barriers that prevent success (AACC, 2015; Balduf,

2009; Lundberg, 2014; Townsend & Twombly; Renzulli, 2015). Additionally, first-year students in particular frequently face many challenges once they are enrolled in college, and student retention and completion are interconnected with student success during the first-year in college (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Wilson et al., 2015). Online learning in particular has evolved greatly over the past few decades, and it now provides students with flexible options in pursuing their academic goals and increased access to higher education. Many students who complete their programs of study through online educational programs often lack the support systems and resources to which their peers in seated classes have access (Amirault, 2012; Cahill, 2014; Harting & Erthal, 2005).

Many internal and external factors can influence the success of students. Historically, an overwhelming number of students who lack academic and social support at the community college level drop out or are placed on academic probation, resulting in feelings of failure (Balduf, 2009; Renzulli, 2015). This study was designed to improve understanding of the experiences of these participants toward the aim of filling the gap in the research and addressing the problems associated with academic difficulty.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-year online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. This study used the conceptual framework of Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. To examine this phenomenon, I conducted a qualitative study with a transcendental phenomenological design in order to understand the personal experiences of students. This chapter describes the design, participants, setting, procedures, and data analysis that was used for this study.

Design

This study entailed the use of a transcendental phenomenological design to examine the essence of the participants' experiences. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the common meaning for the participants in their lived experiences and determine the meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) defined phenomenology as that which appears in consciousness and serves as the basis for all knowledge. I have defined the phenomenon of interest as the experiences of first-year college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina; therefore, a qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study (Creswell, 2013).

As the researcher, I sought to discover themes in exploring these experiences in order to produce new knowledge founded on the similarities of the participants' lived experiences. There are two distinct forms of phenomenology: transcendental and hermeneutical (Creswell, 2013).

Unlike transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology involves the researcher making an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences though his or her own lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Adopting the assumptions inherent in a transcendental phenomenological design allowed me to examine the phenomenon of interest in a way that is least biased by my personal experiences, and rather, determined by the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology allowed me to describe the phenomenon while bracketing my own experiences, as much as possible, which enabled me to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing in this transcendental phenomenological study was a process of setting aside my predispositions, biases, and preconceived ideas that could have affected the data collections and research interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

RQ1: How do first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation describe their academic experiences?

RQ2: What do participants identify as reasons for receiving poor grades and being placed on academic probation?

RQ3: How do participants on academic probation describe what they could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation?

RQ4: What do participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress?

Setting

The setting for this study was a small, rural community college in North Carolina. To ensure confidentiality, the college is referred to as *Triangle Community College* (TCC)

throughout this dissertation. TCC has three main campuses across three counties: Adam campus, Butler campus, and Charles campus. The Adam campus is the largest and Charles campus is the smallest of the three. TCC was selected for this study because it currently offers multiple online associate degrees and has a high student population that is enrolled in online courses. During the 2014–2015 academic year, TCC had over 3,500 students enrolled in a two-year degree, and over half of these students were enrolled in at least one online course. Out of the 3,500 students currently enrolled in an associate degree program, approximately 350 were on academic probation, and 400 were completing the majority of their classes through online learning. Approximately one-third of these students classified as online learners were also on academic probation.

At TCC, these students are defined to be at-risk or level red students; the college does not have additional staff who are trained to work specifically with online students on academic probation. Administrators at the college attempt to offer online students the same academic support that they do for students on its campuses, but many of these services, such as face-to-face tutoring and the Writing and Reading Center, are not physically available to online students on a day-to-day basis given the lack of proximity inherent in distance learning. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of these students live within the same geographical region as of one of the college's campuses, which allowed me to conduct interviews and a focus group through face-to-face interactions rather than at a distance.

TCC offers numerous certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees, and has students enrolled in curriculum, continuing education, and high school programs. TCC has a strong online student presence in the School of Health and Science, University Transfer, and the School of Vocational Technology. Each of these schools has a dean who oversees the daily operations

of his or her respective area and reports to the Vice President of Instruction. Faculty, staff, and executive leaders are under the leadership of the college president.

Participants

For this study, 163 potential participants were identified and recruited to participate in the study through instructor referrals, classroom visits, a report from TCC's Office of Institutional Effectiveness, which listed students who were on academic probation at the time of the study, and a recruitment email. For this study, 15 participants who attended TCC and were between the ages of 18–25 participated. The students' eligibility was verified through the report provided by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and self-reporting. During the recruitment stage of this study, one student who volunteered had to cancel due to work-related issues that prevented this individual from participating, and three students expressed an initial interest, but decided not to participate. Two additional students who volunteered after the first 15 were placed on a waiting list; therefore, the next student in sequence who volunteered and met the criteria for the study was able to participate. I assigned all 15 participants and their respective school pseudonyms. Table 1 lists various descriptors for each participant. The fifth column indicates how each student was successfully recruited for the study. Instructors recruited eleven participants and four participants responded to the recruitment email. No students volunteered for the study as a result of the classroom visits. The sixth column indicates which main campus is closest to each participant. Six participants identified with the Adam campus; six participants identified with the Butler campus; and three participants identified with the Charles campus.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Method of Recruitment

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Method of Recruitment	Closest Main Campus to Participant
Bee	22	Female	Black	Instructor Referral	Charles Campus
Amy	24	Female	Black	Instructor Referral	Adam Campus
Margot	22	Female	Black	Instructor Referral	Adam Campus
Chip	22	Male	Hispanic	Instructor Referral	Charles Campus
Sally	21	Female	Black	Instructor Referral	Butler Campus
Michelle	21	Female	Hispanic	Instructor Referral	Butler Campus
Blair	19	Female	White	Instructor Referral	Butler Campus
Susie	20	Female	White	Instructor Referral	Butler Campus
Rose	21	Female	Black	Instructor Referral	Butler Campus
Amanda	21	Female	White	Email	Butler Campus
Scarlett	23	Female	White	Email	Adam Campus
Jordan	20	Female	White	Email	Adam Campus
Lizzy	19	Female	White	Instructor Referral	Adam Campus
Tony	20	Male	White	Email	Charles Campus
Jason	20	Male	Hispanic	Instructor Referral	Adam Campus

Note. Names listed are pseudonyms.

I used purposeful homogeneous sampling, as it allowed information-rich cases to be

selected (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). While there are more than 15 first-year online

community college students on academic probation at TCC each semester, homogeneous

sampling allowed me to arrive at a particular subgroup of participants who were identified as

first-year, online students enrolled in two-year curriculum degree plans. Additionally, they were

on academic probation during their first year of study. As stated previously, students who are on

academic probation are typically characterized as having a GPA of less than 2.0, have trouble

adjusting to college life, are deficient in time management skills, and look externally for the

rationale behind their academic difficulties (Balduf, 2009). This type of sampling allowed for

the establishment of a group of participants who shared similar backgrounds and experiences that

relate to the phenomenon examined (Patton, 2002).

Procedures

The initial step in this study was to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Once I received IRB approval for the study from Liberty University and TCC, volunteers were

sought from a sample of students who met the requirements listed in the previous section. The

selection process for participants consisted of a multistage-staged process. Stage one entailed

asking staff at TCC's Office of Institutional Effectiveness to create a list of instructors who

taught zero-level academic success courses (see Appendix A). All students who are on academic

probation at TCC must enroll in a zero-level academic success course. Therefore, I categorized

the list of instructors alphabetically and asked each instructor for referrals (see Appendix B). I

also visited six zero-level academic success classrooms and retrieved a report from TCC's Office

of Institutional Effectiveness that listed students who were on academic probation at the time of

the study to help me recruit participants via email (see Appendices C and D). This multi-staged

process helped reduce personal bias during the selection process, which increased the validity of

the study (Patton, 2002). After I identified potential participants, I sent an email and consent

form (see Appendix E) to each person individually inviting him or her to participate in the study. The first 15 students who volunteered for the study were selected.

After identification of potential participants' names, email addresses, and telephone numbers, I sent an email and consent form (see Appendix E) to all potential participants individually asking them if they meet the criteria for the study and if they were interested in participating in the study. The consent form indicated that participants could voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. I sent all participants subsequent emails with instructions on how to complete a one-on-one interview within the first two weeks of the semester and submit written documents for the study (see Appendices F, G, and H). All 15 participants were sent an additional email during the last three weeks of the semester asking them to attend an on-campus focus group, which allowed them to share their experiences in a comfortable setting (see Appendices I and J). I recorded the interviews and the focus group session using an audio recorder and a hired transcriptionist transcribed them for further analysis.

Participants were asked to provide personal written documentation, such as private memos and journal writings, which were recorded throughout the semester on a weekly basis. I asked participants to label each document with the date, time, and location of each comment and email their personal documentation to me biweekly throughout the semester using their college email accounts. I requested participants to provide any documents that might illustrate how they reflected upon their experiences during the study. I used the interview and focus group recordings and reviewed participant documentation to reveal common themes or trends and used memoing and journaling to take notes as a complete observer. The findings are discussed in Chapter Four.

The Researcher's Role

As a researcher, it was important to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of the participants of this study. At the time of this study, I was employed as Dean of Student Learning at TCC and had worked with students on academic probation in the past in various academic settings. Given that I worked on TCC's Adam campus, and all participants for this study have had some previous interactions on at least one of TCC's main campuses, I paid close attention to the names of willing participants who expressed interest in the study to ensure that I did not recognize their names or know them personally before requesting their consent forms. Three students were removed from the list because of my familiarity with them. Prior to conducting the interviews, I ensured that I did not have past relationships with any of the participants. To minimize bias, I did not base the interpretation of my research on past experiences with students on academic probation, and I bracketed my personal biases in the process of gathering and interpreting participant responses. All researchers should use bracketing throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013). Prior to reviewing the literature relating to the phenomenon being examined, I had already started to bracket my personal assumptions and experiences related to the research through the process of memoing and examining my conscious thoughts. I continued to bracket my experiences throughout the data collection and analysis stages of the study through the use of a reflexive journal and memoing (see Appendices K and L). These activities allowed me to identify preconceptions throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994).

As a student who attended community college shortly after completing high school, I often struggled academically. While in college, I was not on academic probation, but could have easily acquired probationary status if I did not use course withdraws to avoid a significant reduction in my GPA. During my first year of college, I also attempted to take many courses

online and realized that I lacked the motivation and academic support that I needed to be successful. In my role as a dean at the time of this study, I spoke with students each semester who shared their academic and social struggles associated with being enrolled in a community college. Many of these students also shared experience of their lack of success with online courses. Unfortunately, each semester, I also heard the concerns of students who were on academic probation. I enjoy working with people and have a passion to help students succeed. Therefore, I chose phenomenological research to better understand participants' personal experiences. I hoped that the results of this study would inform improvements in academic practices.

Data Collection

Traditional data collection for a phenomenological study includes interviews, written documents, and a focus group (Creswell, 2013). I incorporated all of these methods of data collection, including a face-to-face focus group, to gather rich feedback from multiple sources. I used a transcendental phenomenology design to gather data about the experience of each participant while obtaining various perspectives of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). Data triangulation involves the use of multiple data collection methods, and it enhances the validity and trustworthiness of the study by cross verifying data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2013). I ensured the trustworthiness of the research study by collecting data from interviews, written documents, and one focus group. I approached each source of data with an unbiased perspective during the search for themes emerging from the data. I critically compared and synthesized data from each of the sources and considered themes observed through more than one collection method to be the most stable.

The following subheadings detail the procedure involved in each collection method: interview, written documents, and focus group. The sections pertaining to interviews and participant documents focus on the experiences of the individual participants, while the section on the focus group details the collection of data obtained from the interaction among the participants, which produced the most robust themes when interviewees shared similar experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews

Interviewing is an effective way to gather data from participants in qualitative research. Interviews require an exchange of words and provide researchers with a natural way of gathering participant perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Griffee, 2005). The interviews provided an opportunity to gather verbal feedback through direct interaction with the participants. Interviews are often the primary method of gathering data for phenomenological research because they allow participants to provide their own depictions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I gathered data using semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, which allowed for the acquisition of rich information about how the participants struggled academically and socially while enrolled in college and how they believed that they could become academically successful in the future (see Appendix G). Participants were able to choose which main campus to attend for face-to-face interviews. The interviews provided an opportunity to gather verbal feedback through direct interaction with the participants. Semi-structured interviews also offered the flexibility to obtain the fullest possible responses (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010).

Moustakas (1994) explained that researchers may elect to follow cues of the participants during interviews to gather a thorough description of the experience. During the study, all research questions were predetermined, but I followed cues of the participants to deepen the

collection of data about experiences that would otherwise not be captured by the predetermined set of interview questions. I recorded the interviews using an audio recorder and a hired transcriptionist to transcribe the audio recordings. The interviews consisted of nine questions that were created to develop a comprehensive description of the phenomenon being examined. Interview questions were designed to gather information to address all four research questions.

Table 2

Open-Ended Interview Questions

Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself: your family, your job, and your personal interests. (RQ1)

2. Describe your personal experiences being a first-year, online, community college student who is on academic probation. (RQ1)

3. Describe your experience as a student prior to this academic year. (RQ2)

4. Which component of learning have you found the most challenging to manage? (NOTE: Components include being first-year, taking online courses, and being enrolled at community college) (RQ2)

5. What are the primary reasons that led you to be placed on academic probation? (RQ2) Prompts include:

   - Internal factors

   - External factors

   - Specific events

6. Is there anything that you could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation? (RQ3)

7. Describe the greatest challenge of completing an online class in an asynchronous format. (RQ3)

Prompts

- Personal support

- Academic support

8. What are the most important actions that you believe you can take to be more successful as a student? (RQ4)

9. Describe what you believe you need to help you become a successful student and meet your academic goals. (RQ4)

The first interview question displayed in Table 2 allowed the participants an opportunity to provide background information. The second interview question helped gather information from participants about their experiences as students on academic probation (RQ1). Research shows that there are many reasons why students fail, and often their negative experiences in college contribute to their departure and feelings of failure (Balduf, 2009; Crawford & Jervis, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Renzulli, 2015; Tinto, 1975, 1999). This question was designed to build upon current literature by developing an understanding of their experiences on academic probation. Participants' shared experiences also may have been used to conceive new interventions to promote student success (Balduf, 2009).

Interview questions three through five listed in Table 2 gathered participant feedback pertaining to reasons for being placed on academic probation (RQ2). Tinto (1975) suggested that in order for students to be successful in college, they must be able to thrive both socially and academically. There are many reasons why students struggle and often decide to leave college at

key moments in their lives (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975). These questions

provided insight into why students struggle, as students themselves often provide the most valid

reasons for being on academic probation (Balduf, 2009).

Interview questions five through seven listed in Table 2 were used to collect feedback

pertaining to actions that participants could have taken to avoid being placed on academic

probation (RQ3). Students need to establish obtainable goals and take ownership of their own

outcomes (Tinto, 1988, 1997, 2012). Successful students will realize the importance of learning

and take responsibility for their actions in college (Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles,

1980). I formulated these questions based on the assumption that participant feedback regarding

potential pitfalls would help identify common causes of probation and areas for intervention

(Balduf, 2009).

The final two interview questions listed in Table 2 gathered information about what the

participants needed to do in the future to become successful students and return to satisfactory

academic progress (RQ4). Students who are able to provide feedback about their learning

experiences can help colleges create learning environments that benefit future learners (Boling et

al., 2012). Students must have determination and a vision if they are going to complete college

(Knowles, 1980; Tinto, 1975). These questions helped provide information about the relative

importance of students' commitment and readiness to learn.

Participants' Written Documents

Document analysis is a fundamental tool for gathering data in qualitative research.

Document analysis should be based on the research purpose statement and questions (Creswell,

2013). For this study, document analysis entailed asking participants to create personal

documentation and records each week throughout the study, such as private memos and journal

writings. Fourteen of the 15 participants submitted their documents for the study. The writings addressed the participants' experiences as community college students. I encouraged them to share their personal and academic challenges and successes during each week of the study. Specifically, they addressed their personal experiences that related to the topics of academic probation, community college, first-year experience, and online learning.

I asked participants to label each document with the date, time, and location of each comment and email their personal documentation to me on a biweekly basis throughout the semester using their college email accounts (see Appendix H). Written documents covered a four-week period during the semester that was examined. I did not provide specific prompts for the written documents, as I wanted to gather the authentic and unguided experiences of the participants during the study. Document analysis of these personal records occurred once during the last week of the semester under investigation. These documents only consisted of information that related directly to the phenomenon examined.

This kind of documents can provide researchers with information about many things that cannot be observed (Patton, 2002). The strength of document analysis is that it does not disturb the participants in their natural setting (Patton, 2002). I reviewed all memos and journal writings, observed them for emerging themes, and organized the themes and corresponding data according to one or more of the four research questions to which they most directly applied. I analyzed these documents and reviewed them to elucidate how the participants reflected upon their experiences on being on academic probation (RQ1), considered the reasons for placement on academic probation (RQ2), believed they could have done differently to avoid placement on academic probation (RQ3), and planned to return to satisfactory academic progress (RQ4). I assumed the role of observer and, consistent with bracketing, remained as independent as

possible from the written data that were studied. The goal of this analysis was to gather data to provide theoretical saturation.

Focus Group

Focus group interviews typically include a small group of participants who share similar backgrounds (Patton, 2002). Focus groups generally last between one to two hours and provide a variety of perspectives from participants that can be used to establish patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). For this study, I conducted one face-to-face focus group, to which all previously interviewed participants were invited, near the end of the semester (see Appendix J). This session was held in the Student Learning Center located on the Adam campus of TCC. In the event that not all participants were able attend, there was a requirement of a minimum of six participants to attend in order to conduct the focus group interview (Patton, 2002). However, 13 participants were present for the focus group session. A focus group interview allowed participants to collaborate without the interviewer serving in an instructor role (Gall et al., 2010). The focus group consisted of the presentation of 11 questions that were designed to allow me to gain an in-depth description of the phenomenon. I used focus group questions to gather information to address all four research questions.

Table 3

Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

Questions

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1. Please introduce yourselves to the group and share your academic backgrounds. (RQ1)

2. Why did each of you decide to enroll in online courses? (RQ1)

3. What is the greatest struggle that each of you face while attending college? (RQ1)

4. Do each of you know the primary reason for your being placed on academic probation? If so, please explain. (RQ1)

5. What is your greatest pleasure that each of you have from being in school? (RQ3)

6. Is there anything that each of you could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation? (Life choices, class scheduling, or any other significant events) (RQ4)

7. When struggling academically, where do each of you go to receive academic support? (RQ4)

8. Are courses that are offered primarily in an online format better or worse than being in a seated classroom? (Technology, lack of live support, or any other major concerns) (RQ3 and RQ4)

9. What are the most important actions that each of you can take to be more successful as a student? (RQ4)

10. What is required to help each of you become a successful student who will meet your academic goals? (RQ4)

11. Does each of you believe that you will be able to meet your personal academic goals? Please elaborate. (RQ4)

The first two focus group questions listed in Table 3 allowed the participants to provide background information and share their general experiences with online learning. Questions three and four displayed in Table 3 gathered responses that were directly related to academic struggles and academic probation (RQ1). Many students struggle at times throughout their

academic careers. Often, academic probation serves as a forewarning for students who fail to meet their college's expectations for them as students (Moss & Yeaton, 2015). These focus group questions provided crucial information, as the participants' experiences have the potential to guide the development of new interventions and programs to promote student success (Balduf, 2009). Question five in Table 3 provided the participants an opportunity to offer positive feedback about their academic experiences. Questions six through eleven in Table 3 were designed to gather participant feedback pertaining to reasons for being placed on academic probation (RQ2), actions participants could have taken to avoid being placed on academic probation (RQ3), and the participants' plans for the future to return to satisfactory academic progress (RQ4).

When students are officially admitted into college, this does not simply mean that they are prepared for college. Many first-year students are not ready or prepared to learn or excel academically (Tinto, 1999, 2006). Student often fail to develop meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, and peers on campus (Tinto, 1975). Many students who experience academic difficulties wish they could have a fresh start to their college experiences (Tinto, 1975). College students must be accountable for their learning experiences and set goals while in school (Knowles, 1980). Successful college students must be determined to be successful and utilize all resources available. Students' college experiences are always formed by who they are as a student and who they desire to be in the future (Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles, 1980). The final series of questions were based on the assumption that students provide the most valid reasoning and illustrative anecdotes for explaining their academic struggles, confronting challenging in college, and finding ways to persist in college successfully (Balduf, 2009).

Therefore, participants' voices should be invited and documented to facilitate change (Patton, 2002).

A focus group interview also allowed me to gather a variety of perspectives, increasing confidence in the patterns that emerged based on similarities across participants (Patton, 2002). I encouraged participants to be open and reassured that I would hold all shared information confidentially. Once the participants arrived at the Student Learning Center, I assigned them a pseudonym to help safeguard confidentiality. However, I explained to each participant that they are not held to the same ethical standards as I am, and although I strongly encouraged that participants keep this information confidential, I could not guarantee confidentiality (Patton, 2002). I recorded the dialogue during the focus group using an audio recorder and hired a transcriptionist to professionally transcribe it. The data gathered from the focus group addressed all four research questions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study involved organizing and analyzing data pertaining to what the participants in the study experienced. These experiences were then described, and used to form written textual and structural descriptions of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). I listed the data collected from the interviews, written documents, and focus group by themes to facilitate interpretation of the essence of the data (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, I used the Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology to analyze the data. Analysis of the data involved examining significant statements and themes that reflected distilled commonalities among the lived experiences of participants in a simplified way (Moustakas, 1994).

Interviews, Participants' Written Documents, and Focus Group

Data analysis for this study began by examining the recorded and transcribed data from interviews, participants' written documents, and focus group to consolidate rich information about participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Once I conducted the interviews and focus group and received the written documents, I used horizonalization (epoche) to analyze the data (Moustakas, 1994). Horizonalization entails highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how participants experienced the phenomenon. It requires that researchers initially treat every statement as having equal value and set aside all prejudice and predispositions (Moustakas, 1994). I used *Atlas.ti* to track these significant statements (see Appendix M) and assist in this analysis of the research (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, 36 categories of information that supported meaningful statements were established. I read and re-read the transcribed data from the interviews, written documents, and focus group. Once the significant themes were distilled from the interviews, written documents, and focus group, I clustered them into common themes (Moustakas, 1994).

Following the development of themes, I re-read all written transcripts once again, and narrowed themes by combining themes and/or pulling out subthemes that described the textures of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I deleted statements that were irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Once I eliminated these statements, I clustered the invariant constituents of the experiences into thematic labels or themes (Moustakas, 1994). I bracketed myself throughout the data analysis stage of the study by using a reflexive journal and memoing (see Appendices K and L) so as to limit the examination solely to the experiences of the participants as they related to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Using *Atlas.ti,* I clustered the data into four distinctive themes. The clustered themes and emerging meanings became

textural and structural descriptions of the how and what of the experiences and provided a composite description or narrative that represents the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013: Moustakas, 1994).

Concurrent Analysis

While examining the recorded and transcribed data from interviews and focus group to consolidate rich information about participants' experiences, I also analyzed personal documentation and records from the participants using *Atlas.ti.* I compared the findings of the document analysis with the data that I gathered and coded from the interviews and focus group. By examining personal documentation, I examined the larger context to uncover information about experiences that could not be observed or accessed another way (Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed the personal documentation at the same time that I received the interviews and focus group. The use of personal documentation can increase the trustworthiness of the research study through triangulation.

<div align="center">

Trustworthiness

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Ensuring validity is a vital step in connecting research to practice in education. Studies that move the field of education forward will be useful, accessible, and trustworthy (Carnine, 1995). Guba (1981) proposed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as the four criteria for establishing trustworthiness. Researchers must take steps necessary to ensure that their research is worthy of trust (Guba, 1981). For this study, I ensured trustworthiness by making all of the research transparent to other educators and researchers.

Credibility

Credibility is defined by the extent to which the research findings accurately describe the participants' values and meanings (Creswell, 2013). This study involved triangulation of three

sources of data about the phenomenon being studied (Gall et al., 2010). Participants took part in interviews and a focus group and provided personal documentation. I used bracketing to minimize any personal experiences or biases that could have affected the research interpretation (Creswell, 2013). To ensure that I bracketed myself throughout the duration of the study, I practiced reflexivity, which involved me examining my role as the researcher and my relationship with the research. This helped strengthen the trustworthiness of the study (Guba, 1981). This involved the use of a reflexive journal and memoing (see Appendices K and L) throughout the data collections and analysis so only the experiences of the participants were included, and I was able to monitor (and thus minimize the influence of) my own preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994). I used reflexive journaling early in the research process while developing the literature review for this study. The process continued until the study was complete. I journaled at least once a week to reflect upon my writings and research to maximize the possibility that I was conscious of any biases or experiences that could have impacted the study. This is important because being reflexive required that I examined on an ongoing basis what I knew and how I knew it (Patton, 2002). I also memoed at least once a week and recorded the memos in *Atlas.ti* to notate new insights gathered from coding. Reviewing these notes provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon the data (Creswell, 2013).

Throughout the study, I did not establish personal relationships with the participants outside of the research and attempted to suspend all biases and assumptions that have been developed over the past decade of working with students on academic probation. I used reflexive journaling before and during the research to facilitate the suspension of biases and consciously acknowledge my values. Member checking also increased validity in research by allowing participants to review statements and procedures for accuracy and meaning (Gall et al.,

2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts

from the one-on-one interviews and a compiled list of preliminary themes. Participants reviewed

their interview transcripts and a list of preliminary themes that developed out of their interviews,

written documents, and a focus group, and I asked them to check for accuracy and email back

their responses and thoughts (see Appendices N and O). I also gave prospective participants the

opportunity to refuse to participate in the study to ensure that only willing participants provided

their experiences freely (Shenton, 2004). To this aim, all participants had the opportunity to

examine notes from the interview, document analysis, and focus group before the study was

complete. Throughout this study, I established credibility through triangulation of data using

interviews, written documents, and a focus group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

Transferability is defined as whether the results from the study can be transferred and

applied to other research settings and similar environments (Creswell, 2013). Thick and rich

descriptions about the studied environment and implemented frameworks maximize

transferability (Creswell, 2013; Shenton 2004). When ensuring transferability in a

phenomenological research design, the research focus must be on studying human experiences

and obtaining knowledge purely by perceiving the data as they are, rather than through the lens

of more complex interpretation or meaning making (Moustakas, 1994). This study was designed

to increase understanding of particular experiences that are currently neglected in the empirical

literature. I specified in the final manuscript the number of participants and organizations

involved in the study, data collection methods, and the period of time over which the data were

collected (Shenton, 2004). Throughout this study, I gathered thick descriptive data about the

phenomenon being examined, which will help other researchers compare this study with others

that are similar (Guba, 1981). Similar studies could be conducted at community colleges across the country to contribute to the understanding of the problem examined in this study.

Dependability

Meeting the dependability criterion, which refers to the stability of the data (Guba, 1981), is often difficult in qualitative research. I attempted to provide a strong rationale for repetition of the study in the future (Shenton, 2004). Further, I used multiple methods, such as the interviews, written documents, and a focus group, in order to strengthen the fidelity of the study (Guba, 1981). I established a documentation audit trail (see Appendix P), which involves providing an in-depth methodological description in order to allow the study to be repeated (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability

Confirmability required that I take the appropriate steps to demonstrate that the research findings emerge from the data rather than from my predispositions (Shenton, 2004). When establishing confirmability in a qualitative research study, it is important to use triangulation to collect data about the phenomenon being studied, as this reduces the impact of any personal bias (Shenton, 2004). I also practiced reflexivity to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study through bracketing (Guba, 1981). I have acknowledged and reflected upon any predispositions or assumptions through reflective commentary via memoing and journaling (Shenton, 2004).

<div align="center">

Ethical Considerations

</div>

It is important for all researchers to consider what ethical issues are relevant to their research study so as to establish plans to address any potential problems that might arise (Creswell, 2013). I currently work in a community college and inevitably have assumptions about students on academic probation. I have attempted to bracket these pre-existing notions, as

previously discussed (Creswell, 2013). IRB approval obtained prior to enacting the study helped me anticipate and have procedures in place to minimize potential risks and ensure that I keep the research confidential. I used pseudonyms for the names of all participants and the community college that provided the setting for the research study in order to uphold the confidentiality of the participants (Creswell, 2013). To meet the standards of confidentiality in psychological research, up-to-date security software and password protection safeguarded computer files containing transcripts and any other documentation. At the time of writing this dissertation, I plan to delete all documentation and data for this study three years after the completion of my doctoral program. Lastly, all participants were required to sign a consent form that clearly stated that they could withdraw from the study voluntarily at any time during the process by contacting me and informing me of their decision.

Summary

This chapter described the methodological foundations for a transcendental phenomenological study that was designed to elucidate the experiences of first-year students on academic probation in a community college in a small, rural community in central North Carolina. A triangulated approach involving multiple sources of data was used to maximize trustworthiness. Once I collected data from multiple sources, including interviews, written documents, and a focus group, I examined the participants' written documents and the transcripts from the interviews and focus group to synthesize rich information about participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I used horizonalization, or highlighting of important comments or quotes, to assist in analyzing the data. Once I analyzed the data, the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups were clustered together in common themes (Moustakas, 1994). I bracketed myself during this process of analyzing the data to ensure that the emerging

themes and meanings provided a description that represented the substance of the phenomenon, rather than my own formulations or biases (Creswell, 2013). I used *Atlas.ti* to track significant statements and assist in the analysis of the data (Moustakas, 1994). Out of these statements, a composite description was written to present the essence of the phenomenon. I took all necessary steps to minimize any ethical risks and ensure that the confidentiality of research participants' information was maintained.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-year online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. The problem that formed the basis for this research study was that college students, and especially community college students, who take online classes and struggle academically and socially are at great risk of not completing their programs of study (Boling et al., 2012; Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011; Marken & Dickinson, 2013; Mgutshini, 2013; Russo-Gleicher, 2013). I used a transcendental phenomenological design in this study to examine the essence of the participants' experiences. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the common meaning for participants in their lived experiences and determine the meaning of the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). While collecting and analyzing data, I used bracketing, memoing, and journaling (see Appendices K and L) to help me set aside my predispositions, biases, and preconceived ideas that could have had an effect on the study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). I used interviews, participants' written documents, and a focus group to collect date for this study.

The theoretical underpinning for this study was Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. Tinto's (1975) student integration model informed the study through its focus on the importance of social and academic integration in the lives of college students. Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy framed the study by detailing the method and practice of teaching adults how to learn.

Four research questions guided this phenomenological research study:

RQ1: How do first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation describe their academic experiences?

RQ2: What do participants identify as reasons for receiving poor grades and being placed on academic probation?

RQ3: How do participants on academic probation describe what they could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation?

RQ4: What do participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress?

This chapter presents the results of analysis of data acquired from the interviews, participants' written documents, and focus group. These findings were derived from the experiences of 15 first-year online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. This chapter initially provides a brief, qualitative description of each participant. Four themes that emerged from the data analysis are then discussed, including: (a) Lack of Preparedness, (b) Lack of Perseverance, (c) Lack of Communication, and (d) Optimism for the Future. Following presentation of themes, each research question is then answered narratively using the data collected, including the stated themes. Finally, a summary is provided to conclude the chapter.

Participants

As shown in Table 1 (from Chapter 3), 15 community college students who were attending a small, rural community college in central North Carolina participated in this study. Each participant was a first-year student who was on academic probation and taking the majority of his or her classes online. After collecting and reviewing consent forms (see Appendix E) from all participants, I set up an interview with each participant at one of TCC's three main campuses.

All participants were allowed to select a pseudonym that was used to refer to that participant throughout the duration of the study.

Bee

Bee is a Black female who is 22 years old and majoring in business administration. She is originally from New York, but moved to North Carolina when she was a child. She is passionate about music and thoroughly enjoys listening to gospel. Bee is a single mom who works full-time and often worries about not being able to finish college. She stated, "Last semester my family issues kind of got in the way of my school work and I slacked off a little bit." However, she enjoys learning and taking new classes.

Amy

Amy is a Black female who is 23 years old and majoring in business administration. She enjoys spending time with her child and hopes to be promoted at the health center where she currently works full-time, describing, "At my job, in order to move up, I have to have a degree." She comes from a family of educators who often stress the importance of a college degree and success in life. Amy values education and enjoys learning, but at times finds herself overwhelmed with the demands of life.

Margot

Margot is a Black female who is 22 years old and majoring in dental assisting. She is the mother of twin daughters and works part-time at a local bookstore. Margot enjoyed her learning experience in high school, but often finds college to be challenging. She shared, "It's kind of hard to be back at school. I'm trying to get the hang of all these classes and time management and passing." Although college can present challenges for her, she is still excited about being enrolled in classes and furthering her education.

Chip

Chip is a Hispanic male who is 22 years old and enrolled in a college transfer program. He is the son of immigrant workers from Mexico and has lived in North Carolina since he was a child. He currently works full-time to help pay for his college. Recently, he has suffered from depression and experienced setbacks in life, but believes that he is ready to move forward in life. Chip was valedictorian in high school and has an interest in majoring in a science field at a university. He expressed excitement about being a participant in this study because he hopes to conduct his own research in the future. He asserted, "I was looking forward to it, and I am actually observing you too because I plan on conducting my own research when I graduate." Although Chip's parents do not see the value of a college education, he is determined that it is required for him to reach his future goals.

Sally

Sally is a Black female who is 21 years old and enrolled in a college transfer program. She comes from a large family and is the youngest child. Sally is married and will soon give birth to her first child. She is excited about life and ready to welcome her new child into the world. She enjoys learning and attending community college because she plans to earn a degree and start a career after graduation. She shared, "I'm still planning on my next dream." Sally also has family members who are attending community college, and she consults them for guidance.

Michelle

Michelle is a Hispanic female who is 21 years old and enrolled in a college transfer program. While attending middle school and high school, she and her family moved numerous times while her parents were looking for work. She attended three high schools in four years and

struggled to be successful. Michelle enjoys spending time alone, preferring to locate to a quiet

place to study within the comfort of her home. She noted, "It's a lot more comfortable to work

on everything at home, at least for me." While attending college, Michelle also works full-time

and finds it difficult to manage day-to-day life events.

Blair

Blair is a White female who is 19 years old and enrolled in a college transfer program.

Blair enjoys taking classes at TCC and loves the small size of her classes. She expressed, "I

really enjoyed choosing community college first over a university." Once she graduates from

TCC, she hopes to transfer to a four-year college and eventually become a social worker. Blair

does not consider herself to be the best student, but she understands the importance of exerting

the most possible effort in her academic work.

Susie

Susie is a White female who is 20 years old and majoring in nursing. Susie has always

had a passion for helping others and feels that she can make a difference as a nurse. She

currently works as a certified nursing assistant and is eager to become a registered nurse.

Between work and school, Susie does not have a lot of free time to participate in extracurricular

activities. She shared, "I like community college, but for the most part, I work and go to

school—that's it." Susie has dreamed about being a nurse since she was in 10th grade and wants

to ensure that school is her main priority.

Rose

Rose is a Black female who is 21 years old and majoring in business administration. The

youngest of three children, she comes from a family in which she experienced pressure to pursue

an education. Rose is a perfectionist who strives to obtain As in all of her classes and enjoys

being successful. She stated, "I want to be her first child to graduate." She is a first-generation

college student who wants to make her mom proud.

Amanda

Amanda is a White female who is 21 years old and enrolled in a college transfer program.

She wants to transfer to a four-year institution to become a music major. She loves music and

plays the clarinet and saxophone. Amanda wanted to attend TCC to save money before enrolling

in a larger institution, noting, "I know that community college does not get a lot of credit, but I

think it is a pretty good way to start out." She views community college as a place that can help

her prepare for the demands of a larger university. Amanda described herself as a good student

but confessed that she needs to study more than she has in the past if she wants to meet her goals.

Scarlett

Scarlett is a White female who is 23 years old and enrolled in a college transfer program.

She is a native of North Carolina and has lived in a small community her entire life. Scarlett

works full-time at a fast food restaurant, which enables her to pay the majority of her college

tuition each semester. She enjoys college but finds that employment can demand a significant

amount of time while taking classes. She remarked, "I was going strong and everything, and

then I got caught up in work and everything like that, so I ended up dropping classes." As she

looks toward the future, she wants college to be her main focus.

Jordan

Jordan is a White female who is 20 years old and majoring in cosmetology. Currently,

she is a student who works part-time as a habilitation technician working with individuals who

have special needs. When Jordan first applied to college, she had a difficult time choosing a

degree program that she considered interesting, stating, "I looked into other options for majors

and I came into the cosmetology program. I've enjoyed it so far." Now, Jordan finds joy in helping others and one day hopes to work full-time as a beautician and help others feel beautiful. Despite being on academic probation, she believes that attending community college has been a good experience.

Lizzy

Lizzy is a White female who is 19 years old and majoring in an animal science degree. She was raised in a foster home and at times life for her was difficult. While attending school, Lizzy has worked in a part-time job and volunteered at the college's animal shelter when time permitted. Lizzy loves animals and has always wanted to earn a degree that would allow her study in a field that allowed her to help animals. She shared, "The reason why I was attending this college is the animal science program that they got going on across campus. It is the best thing in my life." Despite her passion for helping animals, she feels that she is plagued with many problems and hopes that other individuals on academic probation will benefit from her participation in this study.

Tony

Tony is a White male who is 20 years old and majoring in a laser and optics degree program. While in high school, he was always near the top of his class and enjoyed his experiences as a student. He noted, "When I came to college, it is like, none of that ever mattered." Although Tony is proud of his past achievements, he believes that there is so much more that he needs to do to be successful in college. Tony now works a part-time job at a nearby supermarket, but often works over 30 hours a week and late at night. He often struggles to find free time, but Tony enjoys working on cars when he has time available. Tony escapes the demands of work and studying by repairing and restoring older cars.

Jason

Jason is a Hispanic male who is 20 years old and enrolled in a college transfer program. Within the past year, he moved to North Carolina from a town near New York City. He loves music and plans to transfer to a university and major in music education. When asked if he played any instruments, he was quick to respond, stating, "Yeah, I play the piano, drums, guitar." For Jason, music provides an outlet from the stress of school and discomfort of living in a new place without having many friends. Jason considers himself to be an average student and prefers to learn alone.

Results

After receiving IRB approval from Liberty University, I completed the IRB application at TCC and submitted it to the college's Chief Academic Officer and IRB Committee for approval. Once approval was obtained from both institutions, I began to contact zero-level success course instructors through email. I provided the instructors with a summary of the study and a copy of IRB approval and asked if they would help recruit students that meet the criteria for the study from their upcoming second eight-week classes. Eight instructors volunteered to help by posting an announcement in their Blackboard courses which included a copy the consent form (see Appendix E) and student recruitment email (see Appendix D). TCC's Office of Institutional Effectiveness provided me with a list of students who were on academic probation during the time of the study. I emailed these students and provided a copy of the consent form and student recruitment email. I also visited six zero-level academic classes to recruit participants of the study. Instructors referred 11 of the 15 participants and verified that they meet the criteria for the study. The remaining four participants responded and volunteered by responding to my email. The report provided by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and self-reporting were methods

used to verify the students' eligibility. Once the participant signed and submitted all consent forms, I collected data for the research study through the use of interviews, participant documents, and a focus group.

Participants were able to choose which main campus to attend for face-to-face interviews. As stated in Table 4, all 15 interviews took place in a secure classroom or conference room on a TCC campus within the first two weeks of the beginning of the second eight-week Fall semester. I asked each participant the same nine interview questions (see Appendix G), with additional questions included if clarification from participants was needed. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Once the interviews were completed, I emailed each participant instructions for how to complete the written documents for the study (see Appendix H). I asked participants to write about their experiences during weeks three through six throughout the semester. As acknowledged in Table 4, 14 out of the 15 participants submitted written documents for the study by email. During the next to last week in the semester, I asked participants to attend a focus group on TCC's Adam campus (see Appendix I). As stated in Table 4, 13 out of the 15 participants participated in the focus group. I asked participants 11 questions (see Appendix J) and encouraged them to share their experiences as they related to the phenomenon with the other members of the focus group.

Each interview and the focus group was recorded with an audio recorder and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Once transcribed, I reviewed them for accuracy. Using member-checking, the interview transcripts and list of preliminary themes were shared with participants (see Appendices N and O) to check for accuracy. Once I collected the data, they were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology.

Table 4

Participants' Participation in Data Collection Methods

Pseudonyms	Interview	Written Documents	Focus Group
Bee	x	x	x
Amy	x	x	x
Margot	x	x	x
Chip	x	x	x
Sally	x	x	x
Michelle	x	x	x
Blair	x	x	x
Susie	x	x	x
Rose	x	x	x
Amanda	x	x	x
Scarlett	x	x	x
Jordan	x	x	x
Lizzy	x	x	
Tony	x	x	x
Jason	x		

Using *Atlas.ti* software, the collected data from interviews, written, documents, and a focus group, I immersed myself in data, looking for significant statements (Creswell, 2013). I continued to use *Atlas.ti,* to form clusters of meaning out of the data and establish themes (Creswell, 2013). I used these statements and themes to write textural and structural descriptions of the participants to better understand the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). From these descriptions, I developed a composite description that represents the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013).

Theme Development

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-year online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. Data analysis was theoretically grounded in Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. Through a

continuous immersion in the data and data coding, four themes emerged: (a) Lack of

Preparedness, (b) Lack of Perseverance, (c) Lack of Communication, and (d) Optimism for the

Future. Within all of the themes, subthemes emerged based upon the participants' responses in

the interviews, written documents, and focus group. Table 5 shows the specific themes

occurring for each participant.

Table 5

Participant Responses by Themes

Pseudonyms	Lack of Preparedness	Lack of Perseverance	Lack of Communication	Optimism for the Future
Bee	x	x	x	x
Amy	x	x	x	x
Margot	x	x	x	x
Chip	x	x	x	x
Sally	x		x	x
Michelle			x	x
Blair	x		x	x
Susie	x	x	x	x
Rose	x	x	x	x
Amanda	x		x	x
Scarlett	x	x	x	x
Jordan	x	x	x	x
Lizzy	x	x	x	
Tony	x	x	x	
Jason	x	x	x	

Theme 1: Lack of preparedness. Students realize that earning a college degree today is

more important than ever before. Many careers now require some form of college education

(AACC, 2015). However, many students who attend college quickly realize that they are not

prepared to be successful in a collegiate environment. Many students do not enter college with

the skills or knowledge needed to be successful. During the data analysis, the first theme to

emerge was that participants struggled academically because they were not prepared for success

in college. Participants shared that not being prepared for college contributed to their struggles and academic probationary status. This theme addressed the first and second research questions. Two subthemes emerged from the data: (a) Transition to College and (b) Time Management.

   Transition to college. All participants began their college career with excitement and an eagerness to learn. However, they did not realize that the transition can be difficult, failing to anticipate or recognize that the successful transition from high school or career to college requires a tremendous amount of time and effort. Twelve participants assumed that college would be similar to their high school experiences, but they were surprised to find out that the challenges were rigorous. Tony for example considered himself to be a good student in high school who never received a grade below a B in any his classes. When he entered college, he quickly found himself overwhelmed with the amount of work that he had to complete on a regular basis. He indicated:

   It was a very big change from high school. In high school, you show up, and you do

   well, and everything's covered in class. I wasn't prepared for going home and spending

   four or five hours in the material, just to understand the basic concepts.

Similarly, Lizzy had difficulty adjusting to college during her first semester at TCC, stating, "Getting into college… everything before college was a lot simpler than I initially took it to be. Like when I got into college, you definitely get shell-shocked if you don't take school seriously." Reflecting upon her high school experience helped her understand the differences between secondary and post-secondary learning environments:

   All of the things you learn in high school, all the core classes, they're just basic. When

   you get into something that's not core anymore, it's just really definitely something to

   step up and learn as fast as you can or else you're really going to fall behind.

Lizzy now finds herself struggling to maintain a full-time course load while addressing additional personal obligations.

Susie, during her first year of study, also realized that taking college courses required more effort, work, and discipline then the high school courses that she previously completed. She shared that she was on academic probation because she tried to take too many difficult classes simultaneously:

Say you have three hard classes like Micro, Anatomy, and English, all in one semester, it's a downfall, because you don't know how to study for each one, and it's hard to manage each individual one, that takes a lot of focus.

Along similar lines, Bee shared that the rigor of the classes in college far exceeds the demands of high school. Bee expected that when she enrolled in college, it would be a simple process. She lamented, "I thought that I could just read the textbooks and examples and go on Google and figure out how to work all the way through." Bee admitted that she was wrong and often worries about not having what it takes to be a successful college student.

Jason started at TCC during the summer and decided to take all of his courses online, as this would provide more flexibility and allow him free time to do other things. He remarked:

Then when I came over here, I took like three or four online classes and it was the first time I ever took online classes. That was during the summer too so it was a summer program. Then that kind of messed me up. I failed at two classes. No… one class and I got a D in another one.

Jason shared that trying to complete so many online courses during a short semester was a mistake.

Blair and Margot indicated that their transition to college was difficult simply because they did not think that they would have to take college seriously. Blair shared that she did not take high school seriously, and when she decided to enroll in college-level courses after a break from school, she approached college the same way:

> I wasn't really the best student. In high school, I didn't really try super hard. I just really wanted to get out of high school, so I did what I needed to do to get decent grades. I wasn't the worst student in high school. I did okay, but I could have done better. That definitely carried over into a first-year student at TCC. I never really tried as hard as I could, but now I definitely realize that I need to.

Now she feels that she has put herself in a bad position, given her placement on academic probation, and is anxious about improving her situation. Margot shared that she previously lacked dedication to school: "School's not really my favorite but high school… I liked high school, but I didn't really take it seriously." Now that she is in college, applying this same degree of effort has led to significant difficulties.

Jordan, Rose, Sally, Chip, and Amanda quickly discovered the importance of taking college seriously and ensuring that they were dedicated early in their academic careers. Jordan did not have an easy time making this transition. She shared that she struggled with self-discipline in high school and thought that she would be able to manage in college: "I don't have… I'm not very good at disciplining myself to focus on my work." She has struggled to meet deadlines and complete assignments. Correspondingly, Rose shared that she has always struggled with completing assignments, both in high school and college. She believes that she has what it takes to get off academic probation, but confessed that completing work is still a problem. When asked if she could explain why she has always struggled with this issue, she

gave a quick response: "Not really, besides me being lazy and just putting it off." Sally also shared that she was lazy in high school but acquired good grades. In college, using the same methods that allowed her to complete high school successfully has not helped her succeed early in her college career. When asked why she was placed on academic probation, she attributed her placement to her inability to change. "I blame it on myself for being lazy with my education." Many students who are capable and high achieving can perform poorly in college for multiple reasons. For example, Chip excelled in high school as a student, but since he started college, he often wonders if he "has what it takes" to graduate. During the focus group, he was asked what he considered to be his greatest struggle in college. He shared that college was more difficult than he expected, stating, "I think that's the greatest struggle, wondering if I still have what it takes to finish the work." Amanda questioned whether she has the talent to make it through college. Amanda shared that she was used to others reminding her of assignment deadlines and the importance of being academically prepared: "For me it was really hard to keep up with when things were due for certain classes without having somebody to remind me." In college, she has to take responsibility for her actions which she has found to be overwhelming. These participants struggled with early transitional phases in college and had difficulty adjusting to the demands of a post-secondary learning environment.

 Time management. It is important for college students to learn to manage their time effectively, and indeed to make time management skills a top priority. Thirteen participants shared they have had trouble managing their time while attending college. Lizzy often felt confused about how to become a successful student. She did not realize how much of an impact effective time management skills could have on her academic performance until she found herself on academic probation, remarking, "I learned with the academic probation class that I got

put in this semester that I didn't manage time as well as I should have." Margot similarly shared that she is trying to address this issue. Admitting that she still has more work to do to improve her skills, she stated, "I have a lot more learning to do, such as time management and studying really hard for these classes." Jordan shared that in the past, she has tended to manage her time poorly, although she knew how important it was to set aside time to focus on school. Jordan stated, "I should have set aside time every week to work and focus on nothing but school, but I let my thoughts wander and it was hard to keep track of where I needed to be." Chip has not focused on school as much as he thought he should have to be academically successful. He believes that in order to be successful in the future, he needs to learn to manage his time:

> Even if I'm disinterested in the coursework or have taken something so many times, college is work, and having been away from school for so long, it's hard to adjust, put the hours in, and treat it as the full-time job it needs to be.

> Amy and Sally's responses were similar to Chip's experiences. Amy shared, "I believe that time management actually gives you all the tools you need to succeed. It's just [that] I believe, in my personal experience, it's just internal that I need to motivate myself to do better as a student." In the past, Sally did not always prioritize school above other commitments in her life and knows that she must approach education differently in the future: "I need to spend more time on my work. Taking more time out of my personal life to bring it to my education. It might be a struggle, but it will be worth it." Additionally, some participants noted the difficulty of learning the skill of effective time management, particularly for online classes. For Rose, time management for online classes was the most challenging component of these classes:

> For online classes, the most challenging item would be time management and not slacking off because you have a whole week to do it so you'll wait that last day before

and then you'll get it in there. I try to just go ahead and stay on top of my work now

versus what I did back then.

Moving forward, Rose expects to find better ways to manage her time.

Scarlett shared that in the past it was easy for her to put off making time for her studies: "Up until this semester, I'd just wait until the last minute to do everything and then I'd just get overwhelmed and be like, oh well I'm going to fail out anyway." After placement on academic probation, she realized that managing her time was not a top priority.

Procrastination. Many students find reasons to delay or postpone completing their classwork. Online education allows students to work at their own pace, which carries the risk of students with poor time management skills waiting until the last minute to begin working or complete their work. Eleven participants shared that procrastination is something that they struggle with on a daily basis. Sally named procrastination as one of the greatest problems that led her to struggle during her first year of college because she thought she would always find time in the future to finish her assignments. She described that she struggled with "waiting until the last minute to do work. Not studying enough for tests. Going into my work, don't know what I'm about to get into." She would delay beginning her work until close to the deadline even though she was not aware of the amount of work that she would need to complete her assignments.

Similarly, in the past, Bee often waited until just before the deadline to complete her assignments, thinking she would have more time to work. She admitted, "I don't know why it is so hard not to procrastinate. I have a week or two to complete work and I won't start on it. I wish I knew why I can't get motivated." Tony has experienced the same problem. He had time to complete his work early, but for almost all of the assignments, he waited until close to the

deadline to start working because it was easier to continue to postpone working than to convince himself to complete it early:

> I could have structured out my assignment dates better—instead of waiting until a few hours before they were due—to sit down and realize that what I thought was going to take an hour actually took three or four.

Scarlett and Chip would intentionally delay completing their assignments without worrying about the potential consequences until it was too late to dedicate sufficient time to complete the assignment. Scarlett shared, "I wait until the last minute… and be like, 'Oh that's due at midnight!" and I haven't even started on it.'" Chip claimed that he often waited to complete his class assignments and exams until just before the deadline, even though he knew it was a bad idea to procrastinate: "I'll usually just postpone it until it's due, and that's really bad." Rose shared that it is easy for her to get behind in her studies at TCC:

> In the past I really would procrastinate. When you come to college, you're basically on your own. Your teachers don't care if your work is late or not, you'll just get marked for a zero, versus when you're in high school they'll walk around and make sure you have your homework and they'll check it off. It's not like that now.

Once participants were placed on academic probation, they started to realize the importance of completing assignments early, instead of waiting until the last minute.

Amy, Amanda, and Jason described feeling frustrated by their tendency to procrastinate. Amy has experienced aggravation with herself after waiting until close to the deadline to complete her coursework:

> When working on my online assignments, I did not do so well because by the time I got to them it was so late at night. I actually made a 65 on a test. This test was for Intro to

Business. I was so upset. The moral to the story for my week is do not wait to the last

minute to do certain assignments.

Amanda also shared frustration as well as anxiety at the realization that waiting until the last

moment to complete assignments can jeopardize the outcome of her final grades:

I procrastinate a lot, and I have a tendency to underestimate the work. I'm like, "I can

procrastinate. It's no big deal because this one's not going to be that much. It's not

going to be that demanding anyways, so it's not a big deal and I can just do it in an hour

before it's due," and then you actually look at the assignment and you're like, "Oh my

God, this is a three-day project."

Jason was placed on academic probation because he took too many online courses at the same

time and failed to allot enough time each week to manage his course load. He often struggled to

complete his work by the due dates. When asked about his greatest challenge with

procrastination, he shared, "The most challenging [thing] would be the online classes because

you tend to do more work than going to [an] … on campus class." He shared that in the future,

he would not take as many online classes at the same time.

Balancing academics and social lives. College can be difficult regardless of a student's

level of intelligence, partially due to the distraction from academics posed by students' numerous

social obligations. Six participants shared that they have difficulty balancing their academics

and social lives. Susie shared that aspects of her life have presented many obstacles to learning:

"You have other obstacles, like, say if you live on your own or have an apartment, you have to

also manage your school work, manage work to pay bills, and to keep a house maintained. It's

definitely challenging." She wants to finish school to become a nurse but shared "I know it can

be hard not to slack off because you have other things you want to do such as a social life or

hobbies you like to do." Bee also struggles to balance school with her social obligations and many times school is the least prioritized aspect of her life. She asserted:

> The most challenging part is learning how to manage with just being a student is my social life and my school time because I have a boyfriend and I have family and they want my time, he wants my time. My school work deserves my time, so sometimes they don't understand and it can create a lot of animosity. I'm working on that.

Bee stressed that she needs more hours in the day.

Other participants discussed similar experiences of difficulty balancing their multiple identities and responsibilities. Blair shared her experience of trying to balance academics and her social life before being placed on academic probation. She claimed, "I really wasn't good with time management, and separating my social life from my school life gave me a lot of trouble." Compounding this dilemma, she discussed tending to put family and friends before her own needs. Additionally, Scarlett made straight As in high school and remembered during the interview how easy it was for her to focus on school in the past. Now that she is older, supports herself, and has additional responsibilities, her focus on school has shifted:

> I moved out, and just kind of got a little sidetracked with trying to manage time with family and friends and school and work and everything. Trying to work enough to pay rent, which... that was a little bit more than I expected.

Jason shared that he needs to "try to balance out his school and personal life." He described trying to continuously improve this balance, but his habit of putting his hobby of playing music before school compromises this effort.

Along similar lines, Lizzy shared how her home life demanded a great deal of her time:

The work from my classes isn't hard, I'm just having trouble finding the time to do it all.

Usually I'm pretty good at staying on task and getting my work done, but right now I

can't juggle all my school work with what I need to do at home.

Susie shared that she wanted to make money and pay off debt, but this came at the expense of

performing poorly in her classes:

I was working seven days a week then and going to school full time—which I'm still

currently going to school full time—but not working as much has taken a lot off of me

because I was… I guess more concerned about the money and trying to get everything

paid off… than more focused on my school work, which caused me to stress, which

ended.

Susie eventually reduced her hours at work so that she could focus on her academics.

Although the participants had distinctive experiences while attending college, it was clear

that most of them experienced difficulty within their first year of study. Student participants had

difficulties transitioning into college and managing their time once they were enrolled.

Participants were overwhelmed by the demands and requirements of being students.

Theme 2: Lack of perseverance. When students make the transition to college for the

first time, they often face new problems, anxieties, and expectations that test their persistence as

students. As discussed previously, many students experience setbacks from which they find it

difficult to recover. If college students want to be successful from enrollment to graduation, they

must be resilient and find ways to endure unpleasant experiences to meet their overall goals.

During data analysis, the second theme to emerge was that participants had difficult experiences

that led them to give up at various stages within their academic careers. This theme addressed

the first and second research questions. Participants shared how they experienced challenges

when facing trying situations as students. Ten participants shared how lack of perseverance was a major cause of placement on academic probation. Looking back on their experiences, many now see that they should have persisted with their studies and tried more vigorously to be successful. Three subthemes emerged from the data: (a) Lack of Motivation, (b) Unrealistic Expectations, and (c) Challenging Life Events.

Lack of motivation. Many college students are motivated intrinsically and strive to do well solely for the pleasure of success in meeting their personal goals (Knowles, 1980). However, many students realize they lack this intrinsic motivation that is needed to persist in college and make satisfactory academic progress. Eight participants shared they have lacked motivation while attending college. For example, Amy, who values the importance of education, shared that staying fully committed to her education was not always easy to do. When asked during the focus group why she was on academic probation, she stated,

> I can say even though I did have a child, it was lack of motivation to keep pushing. A child doesn't necessarily mean that you have to drop out of school. I just didn't have the motivation to be pregnant and continue to go to school at the same time.

She went on to say, "I stopped completing the work, so I failed by my own fault."

Margot and Rose have also lacked motivation in their classes because they believed that there were always more important aspects in life to which they could devote their efforts. Margot shared that in the past, her interest was always on something outside of school. She stated, "I never went to class or made good grades, so that kind put me on probation." When asked during her interview why she lacked motivation to complete her coursework, Rose shared, "Just straight up didn't do it. I just didn't do it. Didn't have a reason that I didn't do it. I just didn't want to do it."

Susie shared that in the past, she always started the semester off strong, but inevitably found herself tired and unmotivated to get through her classes. During her interview, she shared how she struggled with lack of motivation during her previous semester:

> Sometimes I didn't complete my assignments. Towards the end of the semester, that's when I started slacking off. Then I had to help other people do things and didn't focus. I just started getting some zeros from not even turning in assignments, which really affected my grade.

In the future, Susie hopes to find the motivation that is needed to successfully persist in college.

The lack of perseverance some participants exhibited conflicted with their explicit goals at times. Chip often found himself bored in his classes, and although he desires to be the first person in his family to graduate college, he has found it difficult to do the work required to earn passing grades. He stated:

> Maybe because if course material comes easily to you, the moment you take out the hard work patterns, you start to build really lazy habits, and so I think I got pretty lazy when it came to the coursework. I really wasn't doing any of my reading. I was missing a lot of classes, and I was only showing up on test days.

Chip shared that he continues to have a lack of motivation to work in his classes and that he is always looking for ways to accomplish the bare minimum necessary to pass his courses. He believed that this was a typical way of managing many things in his life:

> Through the majority of the years, and the reason that I got on academic probation in college was actually because I actually stopped going to my classes. I lost interest in my classes, and that was following a pattern. I did the same thing in high school.

Other participants also noted flagging interest in academics. As stated in her personal written documents, Bee found herself disengaged with many of her classes and lost interest easily:

> Most assignments are remedial and just a waste of time. I'm on academic probation because of missing due dates and receiving a lot of zero's. I'm not on probation because I'm a slow learner or remedial, but the assignments that are given are very remedial.

Bee mentioned that she is bored with college and needs more of a challenge.

One participant, Tony, discussed a lack of enjoyment in certain classes. Tony shared that he has not enjoyed learning in many of his elective classes that are outside of the core requirements for his degree plan. He shared that during registration, "My classes were kind of given to me." Many of the classes that he wanted were full or not being offered. Tony asserted that he would like to engage in more hands-on learning instead of taking so many classes online that require a large amount of reading and self-learning. During his interview, he claimed that the amount of weekly reading that he had to complete was inconceivable:

> I don't like to sit down and read large portions of text, and then try to comprehend it; so, when you're given a chapter to read, it's just like busywork for me because I can't sit down and read a textbook.

Tony feels that when he has to focus so much on reading, he becomes bored and often falls behind with his other assignments because he cannot keep up with the requests of his instructors.

Unrealistic expectations. Many college students come to college with high expectations, such as making good grades and graduating within a set amount of time. Setting goals while in college is essential for college students to be successful. However, many students set unrealistic expectations and make a feeling of chronic stress the new norm for themselves. For four participants, there was no middle ground, but rather an "all or nothing" mentality. For example,

in the past, Scarlett would drop her classes within the first few weeks of the semester, even though she could have persisted and raised her grades. She stated:

> My problem is I will get right past the drop date and I would realize that my grade is not what I want it to be. There's no way I'm going to get my grade up to where I want it to be. So, I would just drop it and I had too many dropped classes to not be on academic probation.

Jordan loves being enrolled in the cosmetology program and is passionate about helping others, but has found herself struggling to meet the high expectations that she has established for herself. She shared that rather than complete her courses, she dropped many classes after it became clear that it was possible that she would fail. She indicated, "I dropped several classes because I was not doing very well in them."

Amy also struggles with setting expectations that are often too high for her to meet. When reflecting upon her most recent semester, she shared, "So as of now my grades are steady high Bs which I am quite proud of; however, I would love to make them all As." Students often set personal goals that are too lofty and, at times, irrelevant to their long-term goals. Susie also strives to make the best grades possible in her classes: "I can't be average for the rest of my life and trying to just wing it through school and make a low Cs. I need, like, As and Bs. That's what I want, anyway." Susie considers herself a perfectionist who often sets unrealistic academic goals.

Challenging life events. It is normal for students to experience a certain amount of stress and uncertainty while taking college classes. However, stressful events and circumstances outside of the classroom can make attending college extremely difficult. Students benefit from adapting to stressful life circumstances when an extreme amount of pressure and distraction

hinders students from progressing and meeting their academic goals. Four participants shared that they find it difficult to excel in college when they are facing difficult life events. When asked to share her greatest challenge in college, Scarlett shared, "Stress, mainly. Stressing out and dropping classes. It was a way of trying to cope with it and it really didn't help anything." She proceeded to say, "Well, it was kind of tough because whenever I first started college, I was going strong and everything, and then I got caught up in work and everything like that, so I ended up dropping classes." Margot discussed her experience at TCC over the past year and mentioned that it was not easy for her to be a college student. "I was going through a lot at home, so it was kind of harder for me." Additionally, Lizzy shared in her written notes that the past semester was extremely difficult for her:

> This first week is a little rough. My family is going through a hard time right now because of my grandmother's ill health. I'm not sure I'll be able to finish this semester with so much with my life going awry right now.

Lizzy was the only participant who reported that she did not finish the semester. Student participants had difficulties finding motivation, setting unrealistic goals, and managing challenging life events.

Theme 3: Lack of Communication. Faculty and student relationships play a vital role in students' academic careers. However, this relationship can either have a positive or negative impact on students' overall academic success. During data analysis, the next theme to emerge was that all participants believed that communication between them and their instructors was inadequate and at times absent. Participants stated that if they had communicated more effectively with their faculty and their faculty had communicated more clearly, then they could have avoided academic probation. After reflecting upon their experiences on academic

probation, all participants believed that effective communication will be critical as they focus on the upcoming semesters. This theme addressed the second, third and fourth research questions. All participants stated that meaningful and effective communication with faculty can impact them in different ways. Two subthemes emerged from the data: (a) Lack of Student Initiative to Contact Instructors and (b) Lack of Faculty Interaction with Students.

Lack of student initiative to contact instructors. Like any relationship, those between faculty and students require a mutual desire to interact and communicate with each other. Eight participants conveyed a lack of initiative in contacting instructors in the past. Susie, who had never obtained a grade lower than a C before college, did not initially believe that she needed to interact with her instructors to be successful in college. She declared,

> Some actions that I can take to be more successful as a student can be communication
> with my instructor. That is one of the biggest things I have figured out. I was not like
> that my first full semester of college. I did not want anything to do with my instructor. I
> did not hardly message them or ask them questions.

Now, Susie believes that her instructors are there to help her and she intends to continue to reach out for help in future semesters.

Tony loves to learn and thoroughly enjoys being a student in the Laser and Optics program. He is a manager at his place of employment and understands the importance of communicating effectively. However, he openly admitted that he does not like asking his instructors questions. Historically, he has tried to approach any academic issue without first seeking guidance from others. When considering why he was placed on academic probation, he said, "I think one of the biggest failures on my part was going at it alone." Tony was referring to the process of enrolling at college and completing his academic coursework. Tony believes that

if he would have communicated with his instructors when he had problems that he could not address on his own, then he would have performed better in his previous courses.

Scarlett moved out of her parent's house when she finished high school and considers herself to be independent. While taking her first classes in college, Scarlett would often become stressed by taking too many difficult courses at the same time, yet she would not seek help from instructors. She acknowledged, "The thing about me whenever I'm struggling is I just kind of keep it to myself and just let it build up. I've learned that asking the teacher really does help. It's helped me out a lot this semester." Scarlett shared her belief that in the future, communicating with her instructors is necessary for her to successfully graduate.

Chip attested that he has also struggled with reaching out to instructors when he needed help. Chip was valedictorian of his high school class and has often viewed asking for help as a weakness. He also suffers from depression, which makes it even more challenging to reach out to his instructors when he could use assistance. When asked what he could have done differently to avoid academic probation, Chip talked about the importance of attending class and asking for help. He shared,

> All right, I need to go to class, but rather than emailing my teachers and going to any of the resources on campus, I just stayed to myself. I didn't talk about any of it to my parents or anybody. I kind of just suffered through it alone.

Chip shared that he was often not interested in his classes, leading to lack of attendance and failure to complete his assignments. Although he believes that he will return to satisfactory academic progress, he mentioned that he has not been attending his classes regularly, nor does he feel that he has the right to ask for help or guidance.

Amanda takes personal responsibility for her learning experience. She does not mind asking for help as long as she does not feel that she is a burden to others. In her interview, she said, "I want to find help that's readily available, that I don't feel bad about asking for, because I'm not always the best about asking for help." Amanda, like many of the other participants, has carried the burden of learning alone, but plans to change her willingness to reach out for help in the future.

Online communication. Students who take online courses often have more communication barriers than their peers who primarily take seated courses. Communication difficulties in online courses can lead to students becoming confused and discouraged. Many online courses lack live interaction and only allow for asynchronous conversations. Bee takes online classes so that she can work and provide for her child alongside school. She often becomes discouraged when trying to communicate with others and has wanted to quit college because she considers herself to be an introvert and struggles to engage with others who she does not know well. During her interview, she shared one of her greatest challenges of being a student:

> The greatest challenge for me is that I cannot… well, I can ask questions, but I don't really ask questions. I feel like with the online component, I am supposed to be smart enough, intelligent enough to just read the instructions and do it.

Bee blames herself for not seeking assistance from her instructors, but also believes that learning at a distance creates communication barriers. She hopes to improve her communication skills in the future, but for now, she said, "I don't really go to anybody."

Lizzy considers herself to be outgoing and enjoys meet new people, yet she also believes that communicating in an online class can be challenging. She shared,

Now that I'm in online classes, it's even more difficult for me to approach an instructor

because I don't have a face to put with the name. It's just like this person could be a

million times worse than I'm imagining and I'm already imagining them to be pretty not

fair. Being in an online class has really, really screwed me over a lot more than I like.

In the future, Lizzy hopes to call or visit her instructors during their office hours to ensure that

she gets the help that she needs.

Lack of faculty interaction with students. Eleven participants shared they were

discouraged and isolated when their instructors did not provide feedback within a timely manner.

Lizzy, Blair, Sally, Margot, Jordan, and Amy all shared similar accounts of why they have not

made it a priority to reach out to their online instructors. Lizzy shared her frustration with

previous communication with her online instructors:

It's a little… I don't want to say inconvenient, but it feels super inconvenient because all

of the instructor—all of the online instructors—on their pages it will say, "May take two

to three days to respond."

When Lizzy was struggling with schoolwork, she felt that she needed immediate help. She said

she often felt like crying out, "I need you. I need your help." Similarly, Blair also became

frustrated with waiting for feedback from instructors:

If I have immediate questions, I have to wait for an email back. Usually, I need the

answer more immediately, so I have to go and look a little bit harder for an answer than I

would if I were sitting in a classroom setting.

Blair mentioned that she does not believe that her instructors care about her future success.

Participants expressed desiring faster or more voluminous communication with their

instructors. When asked what she needed to successfully return to satisfactory academic

progress, Sally mentioned that she needed more communication with her instructors, which online learning did not provide: "I need more one on one time with my teacher at the time." She then proceeded to say that the culmination of her previous experiences learning online has led to her readiness to start taking seated classes. "I like the learning, teacher interacting with the board in front of us. I'm able to be in class, ask questions." Similarly, Margot is employed and has two small children and also expressed concern about not receiving prompt feedback from her instructors when she needed help, citing a lack of spare time as the need for an immediate response. She said, "If you have a question, you can't just walk up to them and ask them. There are different ways where they will respond to you and that takes obviously time and I want an answer like right then." Margot explained that her lifestyle is too busy to wait around for feedback from instructors.

Other participants have compared online classes with the process of teaching themselves the material. Jordan has struggled with online classes and believes that communication from her instructors is non-existent. She feels as if she is teaching herself from her home without any support. When asked which component of online learning was the most challenging, she responded: "I would say not being able to ask questions and getting answers right away." Jordan struggles with impatience in the slow response rate of professors, but does not feel comfortable submitting assignments without feedback. Additionally, Amy comes from a family of educators and does not understand how instructors can take so long to return their students' messages. She stated that it can take days to get a response to a question: "I can email my instructor, but I don't get it right then. I can get it maybe 48 hours later." Amy believes that instructors need to be held to higher standards.

Amy struggles with the expectations that online instructors have for their students. She believes that the guidelines for learning are not clear. She asserted:

An online class, they just tell you, "Hey, you have a test." When you get to the test, it's just, boom, it's a test. You don't really get a lot of insight on what's going on in the class. They just give you the material, and you just learn. Also the deadlines. There's really nothing that you can... There's really no negotiating it. They say that 11:59 p.m. on October 20th it's closing. If you try to log in, it's over.

In contrast, Jason considers himself to be extremely shy and has experienced that communicating online can be just as difficult as face-to-face interactions for him:

There's less communication with the instructor as well. You can't really talk much with the instructor. I mean you can, but it's more difficult. They might answer a day later. Probably being on top of everything. In an online class you have to look up everything. You have to study by yourself. You have to... If you don't understand it, you have to find a way to understand it. There's nobody to explain it to you personally, face to face.

Michelle has experienced technical issues with her internet and often has trouble finding a quiet place to learn. When she has questions for her online instructors, she would like to receive feedback within a reasonable time frame to ensure that she can continue with her assignments. She no longer asks her online instructors for assistance, but she seeks help from individuals that she has reached out to for aid in the past. She admitted, "I don't just go to any teacher; I go to the instructors that I know I'm comfortable talking to, and, that's helped me." Michelle often drives to campus to seek immediate help instead of waiting from an email response from her instructors.

Bee not only wants feedback from her instructors within a reasonable time frame, but meaningful feedback that can help her improve as a student. She claimed, "I like to know what's going on and sometimes I don't get that feedback and I don't have the teacher to directly tell me what was wrong with [the assignment]." During her interview, Rose similarly expressed her wish for her instructors to display a desire to help her learn: "Even teachers, like whenever the teacher shows that they care about their students, that'll make me feel a little bit more comfortable." Tony stated that instructors should be willing to show that they care by taking time out of their schedules to help their students:

> If you're going to have the online classes, you should at least have some form of physical interaction. Whether it be, just like, once the entire semester, or some kind of face-to-face thing with your teacher, where you sit down, even just a lab or something.

Participants experienced difficulties communicating effectively with their instructors. Participants were also frustrated and felt isolated when their instructors did not provide feedback within a timely manner.

Theme 4: Optimism for the future. When students begin their academic journey, they are often full of hope and excitement to learn. However, it is important that students continue to maintain optimism throughout both good and difficult times as students. This theme addressed the third and fourth research questions. Despite the fact that participants were on academic probation, twelve of them shared a sense of optimism and hope for the future. They shared that they believe that regardless of their past shortcomings, they will be able to meet their academic goals. Three sub-themes emerged from the data: (a) Being an Example to Others, (b) Self-motivation, and (c) Support.

Being an example to others. Students generally attend college to earn a degree or reach a milestone in their lives. Four participants identified striving to be successful so that they can be a good example for those around them. Despite being on academic probation, Rose wants to be an example for her parents and make them proud:

> Being on academic probation this semester has helped me in different ways. I feel like it has made me strive to become a better student, as well as a better daughter to my parents. The last thing I wanted to do was upset them because I was failing my courses.

Margot loves her children and when she starts to doubt herself, she always thinks of them. She stated, "My daughters are my inspiration. So, just reminding myself that I'm doing this for them helps me get through it." Along similar lines, Sally is determined to be successful moving forward because she is also motived by her family: "I think I will achieve my goals because, now, I'm having a daughter soon." Sally wants to ensure that she can provide for her child and support her family.

Self-motivation. All of the participants acknowledged that in the past, they lacked the motivation to be successful in school. However, five participants shared that they believe that they will be successful in the future because of their internal drive to succeed. Susie said that she has learned her lesson from previous failures and it is now time for change, stating, "I make it a competition within myself because I don't like getting low grades." Chip has despised his experience on academic probation and is confident that he will progress in his studies. He claimed, "I will meet my academic goals. I'm hungrier than I've ever been for success and I'm really tired of the life I've been living for a while. So, I'd like to pave my own."

Amy also identified a strong motivation to succeed, sharing in her written documents that she has what it takes to graduate:

I have nothing but positive things to say this week. I have been staying on top of my

school work and completing tasks on time. I have also brought my grades up

tremendously. I am going to keep my fingers crossed.

Jordan also detested being on academic probation. "I don't want to be on academic probation,

again. That's part of my motivation." Jordan shared that she is motivated to do well in school

and is willing to do what it takes to become a successful student:

As I continue working toward my educational goals I see greatness within. I see what

potential I have and never tapped into. I understand what must and must not be done to

become successful in anything I do. I learn little tricks and seek tips to quickly get work

done and not become discouraged in my educational pursuits. I am aware of how I need

to work with people and seek help before I feel it is necessary because when I wait I force

myself to need more help once I have asked for it.

Jordan expressed that she believes she now has the internal drive to succeed.

Support. Looking toward the future, five participants shared that they need support to be

successful in their future academic experiences. For example, Bee shared that she likes to be

acknowledged and supported when she does a good job:

To be more successful as a student, I believe that I need to be praised when I get a good

grade. I like to tell somebody and I like them to say, "Oh that's good." I like people to

continually ask me how I'm doing in school. I push myself, but sometimes I just need

that extra encouragement and sometimes I feel like I don't get it.

Scarlett and Blair also discussed the need for support from other when times are tough. Scarlett

shared, "Support is one of the good things, from friends and everybody." Blair mentioned, "I

think that I definitely need a support system. If it was just myself, I don't think I would ever really get anything done if I didn't have people saying, 'You can do it, you can do it.'"

Amanda and Amy have decided to utilize resources at the college to support them in the future. Amanda shared:

I think I need... Oh, man. Support. It's good because TCC does really well with support. Now that I am paying more attention to the school itself and what they offer, they offer a lot of means of support, support from your success coach… there's support from your teachers or support from tutoring services.

Amy also believes that utilizing college resources to support her education can help her earn a degree:

I would like to actually utilize some of the programs here and being more involved in the atmosphere of college because in that class, they do tell you that the more you're involved in the college, the better you'll do.

Amy is also optimistic that she will be off academic probation and back on satisfactory academic progress. Although the participants experienced many struggles, it was clear that most of them are optimistic about their future.

Research Question Responses

Research question one. Research question one was: How do first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation describe their academic experiences? Participants' responses related to this line of inquiry comprised the main themes: Lack of Preparedness and Lack of Perseverance. All of the participants shared that their college trajectory had not gone as planned. All of the participants used the words stressful, difficult, overwhelming, and challenging to describe their experiences while enrolled at TCC.

Participants candidly shared that they have struggled in college because they were not prepared for the rigor and demands of a post-secondary institution. Chip claimed in his written documents that the transition into college was challenging: "This experience is way more stressful now, in college, than in high school." Thirteen participants indicated that their college experience was difficult because time management was a concern. Participants often cited that procrastination was one of the main reasons for their poor grades and placement on academic probation. Margot shared that between her work schedule and home life, she barely has enough time to focus on school. She asserted, "It's kind of hard, to be back at school. I'm trying to get a hang of all these classes and time management and passing." Six participants also expressed that trying to focus on college while balancing a social life is extremely challenging. Bee shared that the demands of school and life are overwhelming and difficult to manage:

> The most challenging part is learning how to manage with just being a student is my social life and my school time because I have a boyfriend and I have family and they want my time, he wants my time. My school work deserves my time, so sometimes they don't understand and it can create a lot of animosity. I'm working on that."

It was clear that most of the participants were not prepared for their first semester of college.

Participants also described experiencing difficulty with their academic work because of a lack of perseverance. Participants shared that due to their lack of motivation, they were not able to fully engage in their academic work. When asked to describe her experiences as a college student, Lizzy shared that she did not know if she was motivated enough to get through the semester: "I thought the first week was rough. I've had to drop my English class this week because I'm struggling too much with deadlines and moving. I don't have time to sit with my laptop and do my school work." Other participants explained how having unrealistic

expectations as students made them feel overwhelmed and stressed. When comparing himself to the student that he once was in high school, Chip often felt discouraged:

>I had perfect attendance through 11th grade and yet I found myself coming in 20 minutes late into my history class. The experience was more stressful now, in college, than in high school. The teacher relies on me to obtain missed notes and assignments, which can be a negative experience for many but a necessary one to prepare students for their future in academics.

Participants also shared that they experienced painful feelings when attempting to be successful students while managing other aspects of their lives. Susie discussed trying to adjust to college while suffering a physical injury:

>After getting my grade back from that exam it seems as if everything started falling apart. I sprained my ankle, which caused me to have a lot of pain; therefore, I did not want to do anything after failing my exam and spraining my ankle and also not feeling well. When you are hurt or do not feel good, it seems like you do not want to do anything, which have caused my grades to drop.

The essence of the participants' experiences provided a comprehensive understanding of the pressure and stress that first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation experience throughout their academic careers.

Research question two. Research question two was: What do participants identify as reasons for receiving poor grades and being placed on academic probation? Three themes emerged to explain these reasons: Lack of Preparedness, Lack of Perseverance, and Lack of Communication. When adult learners make the decision to take responsibility for their learning experiences, they become more successful academically (Knowles, 1980). Participants shared

that many of their academic struggles were based in a lack of perseverance. Specifically, participants described that they experienced academic difficulties because of struggling to transition into college, lacking effective time management skills, lacking motivation for learning, setting unrealistic goals, and experiencing challenging life events. Participants were stressed and overwhelmed regularly in school, and due to the demands of college, participants lost their desire to give their full attention to their academics.

All participants anticipated that high school and their experiences prior to college had to some extent prepared them for their future in higher education. However, the participants generally conveyed that they were not prepared for the level of academic rigor that they encountered at TCC. Participants were not expecting to have to devote so much effort to keeping their academic record in good standing. Participants expressed that they were not ready for college when they enrolled in their first classes, leading to failure and placement on academic probation due to their lack of preparedness. When Margot was asked why she was on academic probation, she shared that a lack of preparation in the transition to college was a main reason: "I needed to take it more seriously, go to class, and do the work and do stuff to have a degree and have a career. But now I'm worrying." Participants also conveyed difficulties with time management, which caused academic problems. Over half of the participants provided that it is inherently difficult for them to set aside time to manage their education.

A common experience among participants was finding out too late that they needed more time to complete their work. Some shared that they struggled with procrastination, and for others, social obligations were distractions. When Lizzy was asked how she was placed on academic probation, she stated that procrastination was a big problem for her, which led to low grades and placement on academic probation. She admitted, "I needed to slim down my

procrastination tendencies by a lot." Rose shared that she has tended to lack persistence in the past and continues to struggle. She now looks to others for help, such as her family. When asked how she would like for her family to support her, she shared, "Just like don't give up, which they do that now. Just to keep going, and if I ever do feel like giving up, just remember ... don't. Just keep going." Blair mentioned that she has been sidetracked in the past by social interactions, which took her focus away from school: "I really wasn't good with time management, and separating my social life from my school life gave me a lot of trouble." Each participant had individual experiences while attending college, yet, it was clear they were not ready for the rigor that they encountered at TCC.

Participants shared that they struggled with a lack of perseverance in college, which led to low grades and academic probation. Bee shared that midway through her most recent semester, she was losing interest in her classes: "I'm starting to lose my enthusiasm." At times, participants expressed that they were either bored with college or more interested in other things. Participants indicated that they set unrealistic goals, which led them to give up many times. Scarlett has a history of dropping classes when she felt overwhelmed or found herself getting behind: "I was always a perfectionist, and once I got behind, I'm just like, 'Well what's the point?'" Participants also shared that they had difficulty balancing school and life events, and also struggled academically when facing challenging life events. For example, Lizzy described being in the process of moving, which added additional stress in her life. She stated, "I'm in the middle of packing all of my things up to move. Things are pretty hectic." Unfortunately, she did not finish the semester at TCC. She shared,

I had to drop my remaining classes because I couldn't keep up with the assignments. I was behind from the start of the semester and I just couldn't catch up. I'll probably try again when my life isn't so hectic.

Despite their lack of perseverance, most participants realized the importance of developing fortitude and endurance while attending college.

When formulating the answer to research question two, the reasons for poor grades and placement on academic probation, participants did not as frequently refer to the theme of Lack of Communication in comparison to Lack of Preparedness or Perseverance. However, participants experienced a lack of faculty interactions with students, which contributed to academic nonsuccess. Students who did not receive timely and relevant feedback from their instructor often felt stressed and anxious. Lizzy shared her frustration when discussing how she never receives a quick answer from her instructors: "It's a little… I don't want to say inconvenient, but it feels super inconvenient because all of the instructors, all of the online instructors, on their pages it will say, 'May take two to three days to respond.'" Thus, participants attributed both their own shortcomings as well as lack of faculty support as the primary reasons for receiving poor grades and being placed on academic probation.

Research question three. Research question three was: How do participants describe what they could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation? Two of the themes, Lack of Communication and Optimism for the Future, were relevant addressing this question. Participants shared the importance of communicating with others, particularly faculty, in ensuring future success. In the past, the majority of the participants chose not to seek advice and help from their instructors. Susie shared that she did not always seek the help of her instructors, but now she is ready to make a change. Susie stated, "They want to help you. If you

don't understand, email them, go to their office during office hours. They're here to help you. I now find that important to make a student successful." Participants also stressed that in the past, they often lacked the optimism or hope that they could succeed academically. For example, when discussing his experience as a student, Chip reflected, "I think that's the greatest struggle, wondering if I still have what it takes to finish the work." However, participants expressed the importance of communicating effectively and having a positive outlook on life in moving forward.

All participants shared that in the past, they were not concerned with their studies and did not worry about the impact that their actions would have on others. They were often motivated extrinsically, wanting to achieve good grades so they could show others that they were disciplined and successful. The participants discussed how they now want to set an example for their family members or be the first person in their family to graduate from college. When I asked Amy what motivated her to be successful, she shared that she wanted to be a better student because she cared about making her family happy, naming "making my family proud and also achieving career goals" as primary sources of motivation. Twelve participants indicated that in the past, they were not optimistic about the future, but now believe that they have what it takes to make it through college. Chip declared, "It takes a shift in mindset to excel in the future." Participants also believed they had initially not had support systems in place, but now are convinced they need support if they are going to make it to graduation. When I asked Blair what she needed to be successful, she discussed the importance of a support team: "My first ideas or my first thoughts are my family and then having teachers who actually care about the success of their students." Participants believed that having a negative outlook on their college experiences

was beneficial for their college careers. Rather, they shared that communicating effectively and turning a negative outlook to a positive one could have helped them avoid academic probation.

Research question four. Research question four was: What do participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress? The themes Lack of Communication and Optimism for the Future were relevant to answering this question. Students expressed the importance of communication as well as optimism, with a focus on being an example for others, being self-motivated, and obtaining support. When I asked Rose what she would do in the future to be successful, she stated, "I will start to communicate with my instructors." Participants described their experiences of lacking effective communication skills as well as their newfound determination to reach out to their instructors and others for help. When I asked Rose what motivated her to continue her studies, she shared that she wants to set an example for her parents and make them proud. She noted, "Being on academic probation this semester has helped me in different ways. I feel like it has made me strive to become better student as well as a better daughter to my parents." Some participants considered themselves to be their biggest supporter and plan to use their intrinsic motivation to drive themselves academically. Others shared the importance of being actively supported by people in their lives. During the focus group, Michelle reflected on her ambition, stating, "I will succeed in my educational goals, and I am my biggest cheerleader." Blair shared, "I need support from my friends and the college." Overall, participants named support, enhanced communication, and hope for the future as critical to return to satisfactory academic progress

Summary

This chapter provided the results derived from data acquired by the 15 participants who shared their experiences as first-year community college students on academic probation who

took the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North

Carolina. I provided participant descriptions for all 15 individuals who contributed to the study,

and this was followed by a description of the four themes and multiple subthemes that emerged

from the data. The themes that emerged included: (a) Lack of Preparedness, (b) Lack of

Perseverance, (c) Lack of Communication, and (d) Optimism for the Future. The participants'

experiences were shared through textural and structural descriptions, which allowed for

presentation of the stories of the individuals, while also providing a composite description of the

participants and the phenomenon that was examined. After detailed descriptions of the themes, I

provided narrative answers to each research question using these themes and participant

quotations to support the responses to the research questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-year

online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in

central North Carolina. This chapter provides a summary of the research findings, as well as a

discussion of the findings as they relate to the literature review presented in Chapter Two.

Implications of the study are discussed, followed by delimitations and limitations of the study.

The chapter is concluded with recommendations for future research and a final summary.

Summary of Findings

This study was designed to address the following research questions:

RQ1:   How do first-year, online community college students who are on academic

probation describe their academic experiences?

RQ2:   What do participants identify as reasons for receiving poor grades and being

placed on academic probation?

RQ3:   How do participants on academic probation describe what they could have done

differently to avoid being placed on academic probation?

RQ4:   What do participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to

satisfactory academic progress?

In order to examine these research questions, 15 first-year, online, community college

students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina

participated in this study. I gathered data through three methods of data collection, including

one-on-one interviews, written documentation, and a focus group. Data were analyzed using

Moustakas' (1994) methods of data analysis. Using an analysis software, *Atlas.ti*, I organized

significant statements into themes to facilitate interpretation of the essence of the data and the understanding of what participants experienced as well as how they experienced it (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). After analyzing the data, four themes emerged that addressed all of the research questions. The themes included: (a) Lack of Preparedness; (b) Lack of Perseverance; (c) Lack of Communication and (d) Motivation for Future Success.

Research Question One

The first research question was about how first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation describe their academic experiences. All participants in this study had a variety of negative experiences in their academic careers. Most experiences were described as being stressful, difficult, overwhelming, and challenging. Fourteen out of the 15 participants experienced challenges related to a lack of preparedness for college. Participants who failed to have an easy transition into college and could not manage their time effectively struggled to name positive experiences about their first year of college. Ten out of the 15 participants struggled academically because they lacked perseverance. Participants who lacked the motivation to learn, set unrealistic expectations for themselves, and faced challenging life events while in school, all described their experiences as difficult.

Research Question Two

Research question two was about the reasons why participants believed they received poor grades and were placed on academic probation. Similar to the findings for research question one, participants shared that they received poor grades and were placed on academic probation because they were not prepared for college when they enrolled and they lacked the ability to persevere. In addition to these, under the theme pertaining to lack of communication, subthemes relating to lack of student initiative to contact instructors and lack of faculty

interactions with students contributed to the answer for RQ2. Participants who had instructors who did not communicate with them quickly or regularly often experienced stress and frustration. Many times, participants identified feeling as if they had to complete their coursework on their own without support or help throughout their studies. Therefore, participants shared that their own shortcomings were the primary reasons for receiving poor grades and placement on academic probation.

Research Question Three

Research question three was about how participants on academic probation describe what they could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation. Participants asserted that after reflecting upon their academic experiences, they should have communicated more with their instructors and been more optimistic about the future. In the past, the majority of the participants chose not to seek advice and help from their instructors. All 15 participants believed that if there would have been consistent communication between them and their instructors, then they might not have been placed on academic probation. They shared that in the past, they were not concerned with their studies and did not worry about the impact that their actions would have on others. Additionally, participants conveyed that they had not initially approached their college experiences with optimism. College was experienced as more of a barrier to their life goals. Participants primarily stated that lack of communication and a negative outlook on their college experiences were not beneficial for their college careers. They shared that communicating effectively and turning their negative outlook to a positive one could have helped them avoid academic probation.

Research Question Four

Research question four was about what participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress. Similar to the findings for research question three, participants shared that in order for them to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress, they must find ways to communicate more effectively with their instructors and approach the future with optimism and beliefs about the possibility of their success despite their future academic standing. Participants expressed the importance of communication as well as optimism in the future, with a focus on being an example for others, self-motivation, and obtaining support. Participants shared that they want to do well in college because they strive to be an example for loved ones. Five participants also planned to encourage themselves moving forward and use techniques to inspire themselves to succeed in their academics. Participants also stressed the importance of having a support team in the future. They shared that they need a network of individuals who care about them and their success as students. I examined the participants' experiences to achieve understanding of what they believed they need to do to get off academic probation and be successful as students.

Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of first-year online community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. I used a transcendental phenomenological design in this study to examine the essence of the participants' experiences. This study relied on a particular ontological assumption in order to fulfil the purpose of the study, which was to convey the experiences of the participants. The problem guiding this study was that college students, and especially community college students who take online classes and struggle academically and

socially, are at great risk of not completing their programs of study (Boling et al., 2012; Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011; Marken & Dickinson, 2013; Mgutshini, 2013; Russo-Gleicher, 2013).

The purpose of this section is to present the results of this study in relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The literature for this study consists of two broad categories: empirical and theoretical literature. Chapter Two detailed the empirical literature on community colleges, community college students, first-year students, online learning, and academic probation. Chapter Two also presented the theoretical underpinnings for this study. From a theoretical position, Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy formed the basis of the framework with which to examine the experiences of first-year online community college students who were on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. This discussion section is organized so that the findings are first compared with the empirical literature, and following this, the theoretical literature.

Empirical Literature

All participants were first-year community college students on academic probation who took the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. Community colleges are widely respected for their open-door admissions policy, which offers many educational opportunities and a variety of courses and programs to meet the needs of a diverse student body (Levin et al., 2014). Researchers state that community colleges help students meet their educational and life goals, regardless of students' status or position in life (Fike & Fike, 2008; Handel, 2014; Levin et al., 2014; Smith-Morest, 2013). Based on the participants' experiences, the study findings confirm this position. All of the participants shared that despite their academic status on academic probation, they have enjoyed many of their

experiences at a community college. Discussing his views toward community college, Chip claimed, "I enjoy the community college setting. I'm actually pretty impressed with the rigor and quality programs." Research suggests that community colleges typically implement policies and procedures that help their students transition from high school or career into a college environment (Hougaard, 2013). With the exception of lack of effective communication on the part of faculty, most of the participants blamed themselves for their academic shortcomings, rather than the community college they attended.

Lack of preparedness. The initial theme that emerged from the study was that participants lacked preparedness when they began college. Crawford and Jervis (2011) examined the current state of the nation's community colleges and what must be done to ensure students who are less academically prepared can be successful. Fourteen out of the 15 participants shared that when they started at community college, they were not prepared and struggled to transition to college. This included lack of effective time-management skills, which aligned with the research of Pruett and Absher (2015). When first-year students lack the skills needed to be successful, such as self-discipline and motivation to learn, they struggle academically (Boling et al., 2012). Specific examples from the current study included the experiences of Lizzy, who shared that she was shocked by demands of college and quickly realized that when she was not taking college seriously, she was setting herself up to struggle academically. She approached college in a casual manner, and once enrolled, she also struggled to manage her time wisely and often had difficulty balancing the demands of employment with college. This was consistent with the observations of Dadar et al (2014) and Trombley (2000), who discussed that students who are on academic probation are more likely to have

responsibilities outside of school that demand their time. They argued that these students face

more social problems and distractions than their peers who are in good academic standing.

Lack of perseverance. The second theme to emerge from the study was Lack of

Perseverance. The participants shared that during their academic experiences, they withdrew

from classes, failed to submit assignments, or considered withdrawing from college for various

reasons. Participants often experienced a lack of motivation when enrolled in college, set

unrealistic expectations, and underwent challenging life events. Susie shared that she tried to

approach college seriously when she first started, but she easily became overwhelmed and

unmotivated. Many times she would lose motivation because she could not keep up with her

goal of making all As in her classes. Other times, she would become distracted with life events

and struggled to manage the demands of school and life. Ten out of the 15 participants

experienced some form of lack of perseverance. This finding is consistent with the research of

Balduf (2009), who argued that students who are on academic probation are not incapable of

doing well in college, but have several characteristics in common: lack of motivation and self-

discipline and external factors that impede learning. Lundberg (2014) and Renzulli (2015) found

that students on academic probation lack motivation and face external events that can have a

negative impact on learning. Overall, the experiences of the participants supported the existing

literature regarding lack of perseverance.

Lack of communication. The third theme that emerged from the study was Lack of

Communication. Hougaard (2013) and Lundberg (2014) discussed how important it is for

students to communicate and connect with their colleges to mitigate feelings of isolation or lack

of belonging. All 15 participants shared that ineffective communication contributed to them

struggling academically, which aligned with the existing research. Participants conveyed that

their lack of initiative to talk with their instructors and the absence of faculty reaching out to students to communicate were both problems that contributed to academic difficulty. Rose shared that in the past, she has not reached out to her instructors when she needed help. She considers herself independent and prefers to find answers on her own. However, she plans in the future to seek help from instructors by asking questions. Rose also believed it would be helpful for instructors to respond to her emails in a timely manner and show they care about her as a student; this was a common experience among the participants.

Along similar lines, Berge (2013) found that faculty who encourage open communication in online and seated classes reduce student concerns. Casey and Kroth (2013), Glazer and Wanstreet (2011), and Reilly et al. (2012) shared that students who communicate effectively with their peers and faculty have better experiences and outcomes as students. Specific to this theme, participants located the contribution for their academic difficulties in both themselves and their faculty, given the perceived mutual absence of effective communication.

Optimism for the future. The final theme that emerged from the study was Optimism for the Future. Participants from this study stated that they believed they can return to academic success by being optimistic. Participants shared that they are optimistic about their academic futures because they plan to be examples for others, use self-motivation to produce results, and seek support. Tinto (2012) stressed the importance of students being motivated and goal-oriented if they want to be successful in their classes. Balduf (2009), Dadgar et al. (2014), Nance (2007), and Trombley (2000) discussed how students who are on academic probation should be surrounded by support systems that help track their progress during their time on academic probation. All of the participants shared their future plans to return to satisfactory academic progress. Twelve out of the 15 participants had a positive outlook on their academic

future. For example, Amy shared that her experience on academic probation has forced her to confront her role in her academic status, and she is now ready to seriously focus on her academics. She wants to graduate to be an example for her child; therefore, she plans to create a support group that will consist of her parents and faculty, in order to assist her to stay focused on success.

Overall, the themes that emerged from the study supported the current empirical literature related to the phenomenon examined. However, the majority of existing empirical literature refers to general college students (including those in four-year institutions), rather than specifically community college students. Also, the majority of empirical sources do not focus specifically on the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online. Given that this study focused on a distinct group of students, this research extends the current literature to support the applicability of these existing principles to the specific population of first-year community college students on academic probation and taking the majority of their classes in an online format.

The results of this study diverge from the current research in one area. One theme in this study was Optimism for the Future. Although current research addresses students making changes and becoming academically successful after academic shortcomings, there was an apparent paucity of studies in which the words "optimism" or "being an example to others" were themes. This was a major finding of the current study, and thus underscores the particular role that optimism and the motivation to set an example for others has for the population of first-year community college students on academic probation taking the majority of their classes online. Overall, the findings from this study support the current literature and extend empirically

supported observations from the general population of community college students to the more specific population of interest in this study.

Theoretical Literature

This study added to the existing body of research on Tinto's (1975) student integration model, which focuses on the importance of social and academic integration if students are to be successful in higher education. This study examined the participants' social and academic interactions while attending college, therefore, addressing a gap in the literature and extending the current literature. Using Tinto's (1975) student integration model as a lens, this study provided a detailed description of structural and textural experiences, which conveyed a narrative of what the participants experienced and how they experienced it.

The four themes that developed from this study included: Lack of Preparedness, Lack of Perseverance, Lack of Communication, and Optimism for the Future. All four themes are consistent with Tinto's model. According to his theory, students who enter community college classrooms underprepared (Lack of Preparedness) often struggle (Tinto, 1975). Based on the results of this study, participants shared they often struggled to successfully make it through early transitional phases and had difficulty adjusting to college, therefore confirming Tinto's (1975) student integration. Participants who lacked the ability to be steadfast during challenging times (Lack of Perseverance) described their experiences as stressful and overwhelming, which is consistent with Tinto's model. If college students are to be successful, they must develop and build positive attitudes to persist in their academic studies (Tinto, 1975). Based on the findings of this study, students who do not attempt to communicate effectively with their faculty, and reciprocally students who do not receive timely and quality communication from faculty (Lack of Communication) fail to establish meaningful relationships or receive academic guidance,

which are both vital for success, this supporting Tinto's (1975) student integration model. Relationships between students and faculty and staff are crucial, as they create a network that students can utilize when they are confronted with challenges both within and outside of the classroom (Tinto, 1975).

Lastly, the results of this study confirm that students who are optimistic that they can improve their academic standing in future academic terms (Optimism for the Future) are more likely to progress as students than those who do not seek solutions to address their past academic struggles. Students must be hopeful that they can become academically integrated in order to grow academically and personally while establishing confidence and values (Tinto, 1975). This study provides a novel contribution to Tinto's (1975) student integration model. Although Tinto's (1975) student integration model focuses on the importance of students being motivated in college, this study, illustrates the importance and advantages of students being optimistic about the future and believing that they can be successful in their future academic terms, despite how bad their current academic status might seem.

This study also added to the existing body of research on Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, which models how adult students learn. By examining through this particular theoretical lens the experiences of first-year online community college students who were on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina, a description was provided that illustrated how the participants experienced the six basic beliefs about adult learners proposed by Knowles (1980): (a) the need to know, (b) the learner's self-concept, (c) the role of experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learn, and (f) motivation. As the participants shared, adult learners must realize why they need to take responsibility for their own educational choices and life decisions because the experience of

learning is shaped by who the learner is and who he or she desires to become in the future

(Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles, 1980). All four of the themes derived from the study

support Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. Students who lack preparedness

for college experience periods of turmoil and struggle with time management problems.

Therefore, it is important that adult learners understand the necessity of learning and take

responsibility for their educational and life choices (Knowles, 1980). Students who lack

perseverance while enrolled in college often are without motivation to learn and experience

pressure from challenging life events, resulting in failure to persist. Therefore, it is important

that adult learners develop their personal skills and talents to be successful.

Adult learners must mature in their personal and academic identities (Knowles, 1980).

Students who do not exercise effective communication skills often find it difficult to progress

academically due to lack of support and feelings of isolation. Therefore, students must also take

responsibility for their learning experiences, which entails being proactive in obtaining assistance

from others. It is also important for students to build relationships with faculty who are eager to

support their learning (Knowles, 1980), which was reflected by the participants of the current

study. However, this study provided a novel contribution to Knowles' (1980) theory of adult

learning- andragogy. Although Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy focuses on

the orientation to learn it does not stress the importance of students being optimistic about their

future. Similar to the findings of the current research, Tinto (1975) and Knowles' (1980) argued

that students must be committed to their educational experience and determined to become

successful if they plan to meet their academic goals.

Overall, the themes that emerged from the study supported the current theoretical

literature related to the phenomenon examined. However, as previously stated, the majority of

empirical literature refers to overall college students, not community college students. Also, the majority of empirical sources do not focus specifically on the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online. This investigation of the experiences of a distinct group of community college students extends the current literature by generalizing applicability of existing empirical observations.

Implications

This transcendental phenomenological study produced findings that have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. This section addresses these implications and offers recommendations for college students and those working with first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online.

Theoretical

This study was based upon Tinto's (1975) student integration model and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. As stated earlier, the student integration model focuses on the importance of social and academic integration for all college students. In addition, Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy focuses on the method and practice of teaching adults how to learn.

All participants in this study experienced deficits while enrolled in community college and failed to successfully establish meaningful social (primarily through lack of communication) and academic connections during their first year in college. The majority of participants struggled to successfully progress through transitional phases, lacked perseverance during challenging times, and lacked effective communication skills. Based on the study's findings, all four themes, Lack of Preparedness, Lack of Perseverance, Lack of Communication, and Optimism for the Future corroborate Tinto's (1975) student integration model. According to

Tinto's (1975) student integration model and the results of this study, students who enter college academically underprepared struggle. Students who lack the ability to be steadfast during challenging times experience stress. Students who do not attempt to communicate effectively with their faculty, and similarly, students who do not receive quality communication from faculty fail to establish meaningful relationships or obtain academic guidance. Lastly, students who are optimistic that they can improve their academic standing in future academic terms are more likely to progress as students than students who do not seek solutions to address their past academic struggles. Overall, given that this study focused on a distinct group of students, it extends the current literature to support the applicability of these existing principles to the specific population of first-year community college students on academic probation and taking the majority of their classes in an online format.

This study also added to the existing body of research on Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, which models how adult students learn. By examining through this theoretical lens the experiences of first-year online community college students who were on academic probation at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina, I provided a description for this unique group of students. All of the participants in this study lacked one or more of the six principles of Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy: (a) the need to know, (b) the learner's self-concept, (c) the role of experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learn, and (f) motivation. As the participants shared, adult learners must realize why they need to take responsibility for their own educational choices and life decisions because the experience of learning is shaped by who the learner is and who he or she desires to become in the future (Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles, 1980).

All four of the themes derived from the study support Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. Students who lack preparedness for college experience periods of turmoil and struggle with time management problems. Therefore, it is important that adult learners understand the necessity of learning and take responsibility for their educational and life choices (Knowles, 1980). Students who lack perseverance while enrolled in college often are without motivation to learn and experience pressure from challenging life events, resulting in failure to persist. Therefore, it is important that adult learners develop their personal skills and talents to be successful. Adult learners must mature in their personal and academic identities (Knowles, 1980). Students who do not exercise effective communication skills often find it difficult to progress academically due to lack of support and feelings of isolation. Therefore, students must also take responsibility for their learning experiences, which entails being proactive in obtaining assistance from others. It is also important for students to build relationships with faculty who are eager to support their learning (Knowles, 1980), which was reflected by the participants of the current study. Students who are optimistic about the future are more likely than other students to return to satisfactory academic progress. Similar to the findings of the current research, Tinto (1975) argued that students must be committed to their educational experience and determined to become successful if they plan to meet their academic goals.

However, this study provided a novel contribution to Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy. Although Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy focuses on the orientation to learn and the importance of students developing competence to achieve their full potential in life, it does not stress the importance of students being optimistic about their future. This study illustrates that students who are optimistic about the future are more likely than other students to return to satisfactory academic progress.

Empirical

There is a growing concern in this country about the number of college students who are struggling in college or at risk of dropping out (AACC, 2015). One way to examine and address this issue is by listening to the voices of college students who struggle and their beliefs about *what* they experienced in college and *how* they experienced their difficulties in college (Creswell, 2013). This study examined the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who took the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. The results of this transcendental phenomenological study has empirical implications for college students and faculty.

In regards to implications for college students, the results indicated that the participants generally described their experiences in college as stressful and unenjoyable. This is consistent with current research about the experiences of students who have been on academic probation. Students on academic probation typically have a difficult time adjusting to college life (Balduf, 2009; Renzulli, 2015). Even though all student participants in this study had a desire to obtain a college degree and realized that it would improve their quality of life, they lacked certain skills to overcome internal and external barriers to their success. Participants experienced struggles specific to their status as first-year students, community college students, academic probation status, and students who took most of their classes online. Fourteen out of 15 participants struggled with a lack of preparedness, 10 out of 15 lacked perseverance in college, and 15 out of 15 did not effectively communicate with instructors or staff in college. However, despite these shortcomings, 12 out of 15 participants were optimistic about their futures. This does not mean that all first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online will struggle to be successful, but it is plausible that others will have similar

difficulties (Balduf, 2009; Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Liu et al., 2009; Lundberg, 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Moss & Yeaton, 2015; Renzulli, 2015; Roberts & Styron, 2010; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Others can use the findings from this study to help future college students have a better understanding of how to avoid many of the same challenges as the participants of this study.

One finding of this study was about the importance of faculty regularly engaging with their students to provide a sense of belonging and thus foster academic success. This is consistent with current research pertaining to college students. First-year and unexperienced students need the support of educators to help them become academically successful. Once students receive initial guidance and support, they mature as students and learn to guide themselves in their academic journeys (Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Knowles, 1980). This study can provide faculty with an additional resource, which will help them see the importance of working with students who are often isolated and desperate for help.

As stated previously, because this study focused on a distinct group of students, it extends the current literature to support the applicability of these existing principles to the specific population of first-year community college students on academic probation and taking the majority of their classes in an online format. Also, this study provides a novel contribution to the current field of research in the theme Optimism for the Future. Current research stresses the importance of college students increasing their sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-identity, but there has been a lack of emphasis on the importance of students having an optimistic outlook on their future, despite their current academic experiences (Hougaard, 2013; Lundberg, 2014: Roberts & Styron, 2010). This study illustrates that students who are optimistic about the future are more likely than other students to return to satisfactory academic progress.

Practical

   The practical implications of this study are listed below in the form of recommendations for stakeholders who play an important role in helping students become and remain successful in college. Recommendations for students, faculty, and colleges are listed in this section.

   Recommendations for students. Feedback from participants about what they believed they needed to be successful informed the following recommendations for current and future college students.

- Attend new student orientations, if available, to learn best practices.

- During the first semester, take a reduced course load until students become accustomed to the rigor of the college experience.

- During the first semester, reduce the number of online courses in proportion with courses in a seated environment to increase students' familiarity with online components.

- Attend workshops and seminars on college campuses to learn more about topics such as time management and stress management.

- Create personal and academic goals that are obtainable and realistic.

- During the first semester, visit each instructor and academic advisor and introduce yourself in person to build rapport.

- Develop a schedule (complete with study time) and stick to it.

   Recommendations for faculty. I used feedback from participants related to the subtheme Lack of Faculty Interaction with Students to compile the following recommendations for faculty of current and future college students.

- Communicate with every student in your classes within the first week of the semester.

- Send out weekly messages to students in online classes to let them know that you are invested in their personal and academic success and are available if they need help.

- If possible, keep the response time to student emails to within 24 hours or less.

- Hold office hours on campus, but also have other synchronous options available for online students so they have an opportunity to hold face-to-face conversations.

- When students experience difficulties, refer them to student support offices as needed.

Recommendations for colleges. Feedback from participants informed the following recommendations for college leadership and administration.

- Offer a robust first-year experience program that consists of new student orientation, summer bridge programs, and academic success courses.

- Implement an early-alert system to contact students who are struggling academically.

- Offer students workshops that provide tips and strategies that can help them become successful learners.

- Provide students with a success coach who can offer them personal and academic support.

- Ensure that campus activities and events are tailored to the diversity of the students on campus.

- Market the available resources that are available for students, such as free tutoring, writing labs, and online technical support.

- Establish academic forgiveness policies for grades of D or lower.

- Find ways to help students realize that they can be successful and foster a culture that is celebratory of successes.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study has delimitations that limit the scope of and provide boundaries to the phenomenon under investigation. The delimitations for participants in this study include the following: (a) students who were 18–25 years of age, (b) first-year students, (c) students who were on academic probation, (d) students who took the majority of their classes online, and (e) students who were attending a rural community college in North Carolina. This study was limited to this particular age group because I intended to examine only traditional students. Students who are 25 years old or older are considered to be nontraditional (Choy, 2002; Hoyt et al., 2010; Kantrowitz, 2010; Soares, 2013).

There were several limitations present in this study. Qualitative research consists of using emerging qualitative approaches to inquiry and the collection of data in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013). As qualitative research occurs in the natural setting, replication of this study in the future could prove difficult (Creswell, 2013). Another limitation is that all of the participants were located in the same southeastern state and limited to only one college. This study was also limited to the campuses that students identified. Experiences from students at other colleges or universities might be different than the experiences of the participants in this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study involved the examination of the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who took the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. This study addressed the gap in the literature that there is insufficient understanding of the experiences of first-year community college students who take online courses and are placed on academic probation. This study was limited to one community college in the Southeast region of the United States. Researchers in the future could replicate this study at multiple community colleges in various graphic regions across the nation. Future studies could also examine the interface of race and gender on the experience of students in this population.

This study was based on data from participants during an eight-week semester. Future researchers could expand this time frame to examine student experiences over one to two full semesters to capture a broader range of experiences and investigate how students' perceptions may change over the course of a semester or year. Researchers could also consider adding an additional focus group at the beginning of the study and comparing the data from the focus groups at the beginning and the end of the semester.

None of the participants in this study attended college the semester following their high school graduation. Given that a large portion of first-year students enroll in college directly after high school, future researchers could examine the experiences of the population of students who attend college the semester following high school graduation (Balduf, 2009). It would be informative for future researchers to conduct a study with two groups: first-year students directly out of high school and first-year students who delayed enrollment into college since graduating

high school. The research design of a two-group study could help determine whether there are any major differences related to academic difficulties between the two groups.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to describe the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina. This study addressed the gap in the literature that there is insufficient understanding of the experiences of first-year community college students who take online courses and are placed on academic probation. To address the gap in the literature, four research questions guided the study: How do first-year, online community college students who are on academic probation describe their academic experiences? What do participants identify as reasons for receiving poor grades and placement on academic probation? How do participants on academic probation describe what they could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation? What do participants who are on academic probation do to successfully return to satisfactory academic progress? For this study, I used three data collection methods: interviews, participants' written documents, and a focus group. I gathered data were gathered from 15 participants and used the Moustakas' (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology to analyze data. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: Lack of Preparedness, Lack of Perseverance, Lack of Communication and Optimism for the Future. I examined these themes in relation to the existing theoretical and empirical literature, and used the themes to formulate implications and suggestions for future research.

Looking toward the future, it will greatly benefit community college students and the faculty and administration working with them for other researchers to continue to examine this identified gap in the literature. Based on this study and future studies, community college

students will have an opportunity to learn from the experiences of previous community college students, which will ideally provide a greater knowledge base with which students can be helped to obtain their academic goals. This research provides a basis for community colleges and their faculty and staff to implement best practices, programs, and services that meet students' needs at the time of enrollment and help them ultimately reach academic success.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Triangle Community College Data Request Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina, and I am writing to ask for your support for this study. I would like to submit a formal request to gather a list of all instructors that teach ACA-085 during the Fall 2016 semester. I would also like to submit a formal request to gather a list of all students that are enrolled in ACA-085 for the Fall 2016 semester. If you are able to fulfill my requests, I will reach out to these instructors and ask that they help me identify students that are interested in participating in this study. I will also email students to ask if they meet the criteria for the study and willing to participate.

An IRB application has been approved through Liberty University and Triangle Community College and both are currently on file at the college.

Sincerely,

Michael Ellis Beck
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX B: Instructor Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina, and I am writing to ask for your support for this study.

I am currently looking for students to participate in my study, and I am asking for student referrals. If you have first-year students between the ages of 18–25 who are enrolled in a two-year curriculum program at Triangle Community College, take most of their classes online, and are on academic probation, would you ask if they are willing to participant in my study? Participants will be asked to participate in one individual interview, create personal documentation and records such as private memos and journal writings each week throughout the study, submit these items to me biweekly, and participate in one focus group session. It should take approximately five hours for participants to complete the procedures listed. Their names and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of their participation, but the information will remain confidential.

If you identify students who may be interested in participating, please have them contact me at mebeck@liberty.edu to express their interest. If it is more convenient, I can visit your classes to recruit and speak with your students. Please let me know which method works best for you. Also, please mention to your students that I am offering a $100 Walmart gift card and a $10 gas card to the participants that fulfill the requirements of this study. I will also raffle off one new laptop (under $250) for participants once the study concludes.

Sincerely,

Michael Ellis Beck
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX C: Classroom Visitation Recruitment Script

Dear [Recipient]:

I am a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, and I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina, and I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are currently a first-year student between the ages of 18–25 who is enrolled in a two-year curriculum program at Triangle Community College, take most if your classes online, are on academic probation, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in one individual interview, create personal documentation and records such as private memos and journal writings each week throughout the study, submit these items to me biweekly, and participate in one focus group session. It should take approximately five hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

Again, in order to be considered to be a participant for this study you should currently be a first-year student between the ages of 18–25 who is enrolled in a two-year curriculum program at Triangle Community College, take most if your classes online, and be on academic probation.

If there is anyone here that meets these requirements and would be interested in participating, email me directly within the next two days at mebeck@liberty.edu.

Once I receive your email, I will respond via email and send you a consent form. At that time, please complete the form and include your contact information, which includes your telephone

number and email address and email the completed form back to me at mebeck@liberty.edu. I

will review your forms after you complete them. Once I review your forms, I will contact you to

schedule an interview.

Sincerely,

Michael Ellis Beck
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX D: Student Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of first-year community college students on academic probation who take the majority of their classes online at a small, rural community college in central North Carolina, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are currently a first-year student between the ages of 18–25 who is enrolled in a two-year curriculum program at Triangle Community College, take most of your classes online, are on academic probation, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in one individual interview, create personal documentation and records such as private memos and journal writings each week throughout the study, submit these items to me biweekly, and participate in one focus group session. It should take approximately five hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate please sign the attached consent form and return it to the researcher at mebeck@liberty.edu. In the body of the email, please include your name and the best contact information, which includes your telephone number and email address. Once I receive your email, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

The consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the consent document and return it via email during the next two days if would like to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Michael Ellis Beck
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX E: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
Experiences of First-Year Online Community College Students on Academic Probation: A
Phenomenological Study
Michael Ellis Beck
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that will describe the experiences of first-year students on academic probation taking online classes at a community college at a small, rural community in central North Carolina. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently enrolled as a first-year community college student in a two-year curriculum program, are between the ages of 18-25, take the majority of your classes online, and are currently on academic probation. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Michael Ellis Beck, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences that you have had as a first-year student on academic probation taking online classes at a community college at a small, rural community in central North Carolina.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in one individual interview that should last no longer than 60 minutes. You will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure your privacy during the interview and will retain this name throughout the duration of the study. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. This interview will be confidential.
2. Create personal documentation and records such as private memos and journal writings each week throughout the study, and submit these items to me biweekly using your assigned pseudonym. The writings should address your personal experiences as a community college student. These responses will be keep confidential.
3. Participate in one focus group session with up to 14 of your fellow classmates. During this focus group you will continue to use your assigned pseudonym to ensure your privacy. The focus group will last between one and two hours. Your participation in this focus group will be recorded and transcribed.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study: The risks involved in this study are minimal, no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, the indirect benefits may include helping other educators and community colleges understand the experiences of first-year students on academic probation taking online classes at a community college at a small, rural community in central North Carolina and find ways to more effectively serve their students and implement effective support services.

Compensation: Participants will be given a $25 Walmart gift card upon completing their interview, submitting personal documents, and participating in the focus group session for the study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and the college being examined. Audio recording for the interviews and focus group and all written transcripts and documentation will be stored securely for three years and will then be shredded and/or erased and destroyed.

During the interview, I will provide you with a pseudonym that you will use throughout the study. The same pseudonym will be used by you when you submit personal documentation and attend the focus group. This procedure will help ensure confidentiality of all participants. I will know to whom the data belongs, but will not share this information with anyone. During the interviews and focus group, I will audio record all sessions and store all recordings in a locked file cabinet that will be located off campus. All transcripts, participant documentation, and notes from the study will be stored digitally on a password-protected computer at all times. All records from this study will be destroyed three years after the study has been completed.

To ensure privacy, the researcher will take precautions by using pseudonyms. To meet the standards of confidentiality in psychological research, computer files containing transcripts and any other documentation will be safeguarded using up-to-date security software and password protection.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or prejudgment.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Michael Ellis Beck. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 919-775-9978 or mebeck@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. John Duryea, at jrduryea@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature   Date

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

APPENDIX F: Interview Invitation Email to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study *Experiences of First-Year Online Community College Students on Academic Probation: A Phenomenological Study.* Please reply and let me know which day and time during the next two weeks is the most convenient for you to meet to conduct your interview. After the interview has been completed, I will also make a request for you to send relevant personal documentation such as personal memos and journal writings that relate to the study. These documents will be analyzed and reviewed to help me understand how you reflected upon your experiences during the study.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Michael Ellis Beck
Doctoral Student
mebeck@liberty.edu

APPENDIX G: Interview Guide

Michael Ellis Beck

Project Title: *Experiences of First-Year Online Community College Students on Academic*

Probation: A Phenomenological Study

1. Tell me a little about yourself: your family, your job, and your personal interests. (RQ1)

2. Describe your personal experiences being a first-year, online, community college student who is on academic probation. (RQ1)

3. Describe your experience as a student prior to this academic year. (RQ2)

4. Which component of learning have you found the most challenging to manage? (NOTE: Components include being first-year, taking online courses, and being enrolled at community college) (RQ2)

5. What are the primary reasons that led you to be placed on academic probation? (RQ2)

Prompts include:

- Internal factors

- External factors

- Specific events

6. Is there anything that you could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation? (RQ3)

7. Describe the greatest challenge of completing an online class in an asynchronous format. (RQ3)

Prompts

- Personal support

- Academic support

8. What are the most important actions that you believe you can take to be more successful as a student? (RQ4)

9. Describe what you believe you need to help you become a successful student and meet your academic goals. (RQ4)

APPENDIX H: Participant Written Document Instructions

Dear [Recipient]:

The research project will require that you create memos and/or a journal writing at least once each week during the study. Specifically, you should address your personal experiences that relate to the topics of academic probation, community college, first-year experience, and online learning. You will be asked to label each document with the date, time, and location of each comment and email them to me in a compiled document during the last week of the semester. Your writings should not exceed 100 words and should be emailed using your college Gmail account.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Michael Ellis Beck
Doctoral Student
mebeck@liberty.edu

APPENDIX I: Focus Group Interview Invitation Email to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an on-campus focus group for the research study

Experiences of First-Year Online Community College Students on Academic Probation: A

Phenomenological Study. The focus group will meet at 5:00 p.m. on November 21, 2016, at the

address listed below. Please send me an email if you have any questions.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Michael Ellis Beck
Doctoral Student
mebeck@liberty.edu

Triangle Community College
Student Learning Center - Room 9000
123 Academic Way
Central, NC 34567

APPENDIX J: Focus Group Questions with Probes

Introduction:

The purpose of this study will be to describe the experiences that you have had as first-year, online, community college students on academic probation at a small, rural community in central North Carolina. This interview is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the group at any time. Your participation in this group will be recorded and transcribed. Your names and the name of your school will not be shared to ensure confidentially; this study will use pseudonyms to ensure your privacy. All copies of this session will be kept digitally and password protected at all times.

Consent:

Instructions:

I will ask multiple questions throughout our group session that relate to the experiences that you have had as first-year online community college students at a small, rural community in central North Carolina who are on academic probation. Please be sure to use pseudonyms during our focus group.

1. Please introduce yourselves to the group and share your academic backgrounds. (RQ1)

2. Why did each of you decide to enroll in online courses? (RQ1)

3. What is the greatest struggle that each of you face while attending college? (RQ1)

4. Do each of you know the primary reason for your being placed on academic probation? If so, please explain (RQ1)

5. What is your greatest pleasure that each of you have from being in school? (RQ3)

6. Is there anything that each of you could have done differently to avoid being placed on academic probation? (Life choices, class scheduling, or any other significant events) (RQ4)

7. When struggling academically, where do each of you go to receive academic support? (RQ4)

8. Are courses that are offered primarily in an online format better or worse than being in a seated classroom? (technology, lack of live support, or any other major concerns) (RQ3 and RQ4)

9. What are the most important actions that each of you can take to be more successful as a student? (RQ4)

10. What is required to help each of you become a successful student who will meet your academic goals? (RQ4)

11. Does each of you believe that you will be able to meet your personal academic goals? Please elaborate. (RQ4)

APPENDIX K: Sample Memoing Using Atlas.ti

Memo Manager [HU: Beck Codes Updates as of 123116]

Memos   Edit   Miscellaneous   Output   View

Search (Name)

	Name	Type	Grou...	De...	Size	Author	Created	Modified	PDs	Families
	early memo	Com...	0	0	333	Super	12/10/2...	01/02/2...	-	
	121816	Com...	0	0	192	Super	12/18/20...	12/18/20...	-	

Families
Show all Memos

12/10/2016 09:27:06 PM

Some of my initial thoughts- many students sturggle with procrastination and many also work many hours and have social relationships they deem important. It is too early for me to draw any conclusions, and I look forward to reviewing all transcripts to see what the analysis of data provides and highlights.

Memo Manager [HU: Beck Codes Updates as of 123116]

Memos   Edit   Miscellaneous   Output   View

Search (Name)

	Name	Type	Grou...	De...	Size	Author	Created	Modified	PDs	Families
	New look at co...	Com...	0	0	621	Super	12/15/2...	01/02/2...	-	
	Early glance	Com...	0	0	185	Super	12/11/2...	01/02/2...	-	

Families
Show all Memos

Starting to see time management, resilance, relationships, and stress develop as potential themes. I plan to connect the codes soon. I am feeling like I am gathering a better understanding of the data, the more that I read it. I have read most data at least 2-3 times. Continuing to operationlize definitions to combine similar themes.

I have found evidence that would lead me to beleive that students that are on acadmic probation appear to have a tremendous fear of failure while being on academic probation. However, this can also serve as a motivation to continue to find ways to be successful in the future.

APPENDIX L: Sample Journaling

October 18, 2016

Today, I conducted my first three interviews for the research study. As I prepared to meet with each participant, I removed myself from the role of being an educator and approached each interview as a researcher. I did not address myself as an employee, but as a researcher from Liberty University. During the interviews, my goal was to ensure that all participants were comfortable and knew that they could be honest and share their true experiences. I was also mindful not to ask leading follow up questions, but remained neutral throughout the process.

November 8, 2016

I have completed all face-to-face interviews with participants and have started to move data into *Atlas.ti*. Now that all transcribed interviews are successfully uploaded into *Atlas.ti* I am a bit overwhelmed after reviewing the number of statements that need to be reviewed. After quickly reading through many of the statements, I am surprised to already see similar themes among the responses of participants. However, I do not intend to draw any early conclusions about the formulation of themes. My next step is to continue to read the transcription and review my research questions to guide me in the process.

December 18, 2016

I am now entrenched in the process of reviewing and analyzing the data for interviews, written documents, and the focus group. I have learned that this is a slow and tiring process. I have been dreaming about coding. However, I want to ensure that the data becomes saturated and significant themes continue to develop and emerge from the data. Therefore, I have been taking numerous breaks to help me reenergize to approach the data with a clear mind and fresh

perspective. I continue to feel overwhelmed with the process of analyzing the data, but I am learning to take it one day at a time. On many days, I am coding and analyzing the data immediately after I get off from work. It has been a challenge to shift from an educator to a researcher mindset, but I am mindful of the importance of approaching the data with the mindset of wanting to examine the lived experiences of the participants, not my own experiences.

APPENDIX M: Examples of Coded Transcripts Using Atlas.ti

P11: Interview 5 Jordan.docx

Michael Beck:	Okay. Can you describe for me the greatest challenge of completing an online class in an asynchronous format, where you don't have live instructors or live students there with you while you're learning. What's the greatest challenge for you in regards to that.
Jordan:	I would say not being able to ask questions and getting answers right away.
Michael Beck:	How does that make you feel when you can't get answers right away?
Jordan:	Very frustrated because then it's hard to know exactly what I'm supposed to be doing on the homework or classwork or whatever.
Michael Beck:	Okay, all right. I understand that completely. When you feel that way, do you feel like you have any other options or is your only option just to wait for your classmates and instructor to get back to you? Is there anywhere else that you typically reach out or do you just wait usually?
Jordan:	Usually I can email another student who's in the same class. Sometimes they'll be able to give me an answer, sometimes I'll have to wait for the instructor.
Michael Beck:	Yeah, okay. I think that's good. Only a couple questions left. It's a pretty easy process. What are the most important actions you believe that you can take to be more successful as a student in the future? What actions do you feel like you need to take to move, like you said, the right direction in being where you want to go?
Jordan:	Really just to set aside more time than what I already am.
Michael Beck:	Time ...
Jordan:	Time management.

Codes (margin):
- IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION
- IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION: GET TO KNOW YOUR INSTRUCTOR
- INTERNALIZED STRESS
- INTERNALIZED STRESS: : OVERWHELMED~
- TIME MANAGEMENT
- TIME MANAGEMENT: BALANCING PRIORITIES~
- TIME MANAGEMENT
- TIME MANAGEMENT: BALANCING PRIORITIES~

P 9: Interview 3-Michelle.docx

Speaker 2:	I feel like I've already taken steps to becoming a better student. Okay, can you repeat the question, actually?
Speaker 1:	Yeah, sure. Yeah. What are the most important actions that you believe that you can take to become more successful as a student? It sounds like you have already taken some of those actions.
Speaker 2:	Yeah. It does. I can answer that now because I've I guess found out what works for me and what doesn't and so just not continuing the actions that have not helped. That is one step I can take and just I guess I've been trying ... With this, I've succeeded at this and other things I've succeeded at working or doing more college activities and more of the school activities and I think that helps. You find other people or mentors that can help you. That's another thing.
Speaker 1:	Cool. Yeah, I think that's a great direction. Absolutely. Last question: Describe what you believe you will need to help you become a successful student and meet your academic goals. We just focused on your actions, but what do you believe that you'll need? I guess you'd say even from external to become a more successful student and help you meet your goals?
Speaker 2:	Oh, a quiet place to live in. Moving. I think that's the one goal I have. That's what I need. Let's see. A place that is all just to myself and I guess my desk. I don't know. My desk. It would be really helpful having my own area.
Speaker 1:	Do you not get a lot of peace and quiet at home?
Speaker 2:	No, no. As you can tell. I think.
Speaker 1:	Yeah.
Speaker 2:	I think you can tell.

Codes (margin):
- IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION
- IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION: PEERS
- LACK OF PREPARDNESS FOR COLLEIGATE ENVIROMENT
- LACK OF PREPARDNESS FOR COLLEIGATE ENVIROMENT: LACK OF USE OF RESOURCES~

APPENDIX N: Sample Interview Transcript Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for volunteering to be a participant in my research study. In this email, I have attached a copy of the transcript of your one-on-one interview. I ask that you please review this document within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments. If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of weeks, I will assume that you are satisfied with the transcribed document.

Thank you again for your help!

Sincerely,

Michael Beck
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX O: Sample Theme Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

Because of your help and willingness to participant, I have been able to start analyzing the interviews, written documents, and focus group for my study. To increase the trustworthiness of my study, I would like to ask you to please review the following list of primary themes that have developed for my study and I would like your feedback. I ask that you please review these themes within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments. The primary codes are below:

1. Most participants were initially underprepared to be successful in college. This is not a discouraging factor; rather, the participants were not aware of many of the expectations that were required of them by the college during their college experience.

2. Many participants experienced a lack of perseverance as students. The majority of participants shared that they have faced new problems, anxieties, and expectations that have tested their persistence as students and individuals.

3. All participants shared reasons why they identified with being placed on academic probation. However, a common theme that continued to emerge throughout the review of transcripts was the importance of communication. Most participants shared that they did not always communicate effectively with faculty. Conversely, many participants shared that faculty often lacked the initiative to communication with students effectively.

4. After reflecting upon their academic experiences, most participants shared that they are optimistic about the future. Regardless of their current academic standing, many believe they will still reach their academic goals.

Sincerely,

Michael Beck
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX P: Audit Trail

Date	Task	Reflective Notes
August 18, 2016	Successfully defended proposal.	Started IRB application.
September 15, 2016	Received IRB approval.	Started working on site IRB.
September 20, 2016	Received site IRB approval.	Planned to begin share recruiting plan.
September 26, 2016	Reached out to zero-level ACA instructors to recruit participants.	Concern for low sampling pool. Prepared for second set of eight week classes.
October 4, 2016	IRB change in protocol to receive list of students on academic probation form TCC Institutional Effectiveness Office.	Designed to obtain a list that would help me reach out to students. Supplement classroom visits and instructor referral.
October 6, 2016	Began sending recruitment emails to students.	Recruited for upcoming eight-week semester.
October 8, 2016	Began to review consent forms.	Ensured that all participants would have consent on file.
October 18, 2016	Began making classroom visits to recruit for 2nd-8 week classes.	Designed to help recruit willing participants.
October 18, 2016	Interviews began.	Interviews were conducted on-campus and recorded by audio device.
October 26, 2017	Written document instructions are emailed to participants.	Designed to help capture experiences from participants.
October 31, 2016	Began having interviews transcribed.	Interviews were completed by a hired transcriptionist.
November 1, 2016	*Atlas.ti* installed.	Reviewed numerous online videos and visited UNC-Chapel Hill for support.
November 1, 2016	Began moving data into *Atlas.ti.*	Preliminary review of data.
November 8, 2016	Began coding and reviewing interview transcripts.	Began organizing data and identifying significant statements.
November 21, 2016	Conducted focus group.	Completed on Adam Campus and recorded with an audio device.
November 29, 2016	Began having written documents and focus group recording transcribed.	Completed by a hired transcriptionist.

December 5, 2016	Started reviewing written documents and focus group notes in *Atlas.ti.*	Continued to organize forms of data and continued to look for significant statements.
December 26, 2016	Completed data analysis.	Focused on chapters 1-3 revisions.
December 30, 2016	Revised chapters 1-3.	Focused on drafting chapters 4-5.
December 31, 2016	Started drafting chapters 4-5.	Submitted to chair for review.
February 9, 2017	Made edits based on my chair's comments.	Submitted to committee for review.
February 27, 2017	Made edits based on committee members' comments.	Submitted to chair for consultant review.
March 7, 2017	Received comments from research consultant and addressed comments.	Scheduled defense date.
March 13, 2017	Submitted my final manuscript to my chair for my defense.	Prepared for defense.
March 30, 2017	Defend dissertation on campus.	

APPENDIX Q: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

9/15/2016

Michael Beck
IRB Approval 2618.091516: Experiences of First-Year Online Community College Students on
Academic Probation: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Michael Beck,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This
approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol
number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as
it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms
for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the
requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included
as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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UNIVERSITY.
Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971