DIFFERENCES IN POST-SECONDARY PERSISTENCE, BY GENDER:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRADITIONAL
COLLEGE STUDENTS

by
Karen Louise Clark
Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
April 2015
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APPROVED BY:
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore persistence differences by gender, among traditional-age college students at a private, residential, liberal arts college in a Mid-Atlantic state. The number of students attending college has steadily increased. However, females have increasingly outnumbered males in college enrollment and persistence. This is a growing concern for higher education. The following research questions guided the research: How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence? What are the persistence differences, by gender? Twenty females and thirteen males (n=33) participated in the data collection which included focus groups, individual interviews, and follow-up email questions. Each participant also provided basic background information through a data collection instrument. In the data analysis phase, statements were categorized according to the research questions and then coded. The codes were organized them into themes. The most prominent factor that contributed to persistence for both genders was a combination of a goal, a relentless internal drive, and at least one supportive family member. Other factors included supportive faculty and a friend group that espoused similar academic values. Gender differences in the persistence process were unveiled. Females were more likely to initiate asking for help, especially during the vulnerable freshman year. Females also expressed more stress over grades and the college experience, in general. Males expressed more academic regret when reflecting on their freshman priorities. Males were more likely to attribute their persistence to athletic involvement, either on a varsity level or through intramurals.

Keywords: gender gap, gender differences, persistence, post-secondary education, traditional-age college students, qualitative design, goal setting, motivation, parent involvement.
Dedication

Mom, it was in 1987, during Peter’s graduation from Brandeis University, when I looked at you and declared, “I want to get one of those doctoral hoods one day.” The seed was planted. Having such a dream was not far-fetched thanks, in part, to your constant support of my educational endeavors.

As a highly intelligent woman during a time when women were steered away from education and into clerical careers, you were not able to achieve some of your own dreams. Still, you never stopped encouraging me to pursue mine. In fact, you went as far as taking classes in order to keep me company on those arduous trips to Rhode Island College while I was working toward my master’s degree.

Although you are not here now to witness this event, I know, if you could, you would be in the front row with your trademark smile. And just as I did as a child, I would find it easily among the throngs of people. Because of your continual support, along with my enhanced understanding of the obstacles to your own educational attainment, I dedicate this culminating event to your legacy. Thanks, Mom.
Acknowledgements

God, Almighty! I am speechless as I come to this place in the journey. Speechless at Your constant presence and strength through it all. Speechless that I have actually made it. Only You and I know the extent of Your presence at every step of this arduous sojourn. “Apart from You I can do nothing” (John 15:5), and I easily acknowledge that. In my weaknesses, temptations to quit, frustrations, and tears, You were strong, wise, and faithful. Thank You, Father.

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To you, my earthly father, I am indebted both financially and emotionally. You cheered me on even though I know you hardly understood a word I was saying. You constantly reminded me how proud Mom would be. I trust you will be there the day this becomes official. Mom would be there; we both know that.

I am so very thankful for my Chair, Dr. Anita Fauber. I realized, almost at the outset, that your style of leading and guiding me was precisely what I needed. First, I was blessed that you were local which meant a light-hearted cup of coffee was a regular part of this labor-intensive process. Second, you were encouraging and supportive. Having heard horror stories of overly picky and even nasty Chairs, I recognize the gift that your style was to me. I also know you were praying for me during the more difficult seasons. That meant more to me than I could express.
Thanks are also sent to the other members of my committee, Dr. Eric Lovik and Dr. Michael Patrick along with my research consultant, Dr. Russell Yocum. Your timely suggestions were perfect. You were so ever patient during my times of befuddlement and naïveté.

This is a good place to express heartfelt thanks to my Home Fellowship: Michael, Marsha, Jerry, Barbara, Berk, and Lee. For four years, you walked with me through every step of this process. You prayed with me. You prayed for me. You encouraged me. You never let up. I cannot thank you enough.

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Needless to say, I am indebted to the enthusiastic and astute student participants. You sacrificed precious time, from your already full schedules, to share your stories. This means more to me than I could express! Without you, I could not complete my dissertation. Each of you provided a unique perspective that added to the richness of my discoveries. To top it off, I simply enjoyed meeting with you. What a privilege to hear about your struggles and triumphs as you reflected on your college years. It was also an honor to listen as you described your dreams
and visions for the next leg of your life’s journey. You blessed me richly. In turn, I pray God’s richest blessings over you.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Although more students are pursuing post-secondary education, females have consistently outpaced males in both enrollment and completion rates for almost four decades. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2010, 47% of females 18 to 24 years old were enrolled in post-secondary education while 39% of same age males were enrolled (Ross et al., 2012). Currently, females comprise 57% of the undergraduate population in the United States. Males make up 43% of this population (Aud et al., 2013). This gap between males and females in college enrollment is projected to widen (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

A similar trajectory is occurring in completion rates. Although more students are completing college, the overall completion rate of females for any post-secondary education is higher. For example, in 2009, of the cohort who entered any level of higher education in 2003, the graduation rate of females was 6% higher than that of males (52% to 46%) (Ross et al., 2012). Breaking it down even further, for students entering a four-year college, the number of females who received a bachelor’s degree was 8% higher than that of males (72% to 64%) (Ross et al., 2012). According to Hussar and Bailey (2013), this gap in completion rates is also expected to grow. For bachelor’s degrees, the number awarded to women increased 45% between 1997 and 2010. The projected increase is 23% by 2021. Bachelor degrees awarded to males, on the other hand, increased by 36%. They are expected to increase 19% by 2021.

This gender gap is a concern for some researchers and authors (Buchmann, 2009; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Mortenson, 2006; Sum, Fogg, & Harrington, 2003). In the title of her book, Sommers (2013) referred to the gap as The War against Boys. Tyre (2008) labeled it in her own book title, The Trouble with Boys, while Sax, L. (2008) called his book title, Boys Adrift. On the other hand, there are others who insist that there is no crisis. Contending that the statistics
merely reflect that women are doing better, they celebrate these achievements (King, 2006; Mead, 2006; Yakaboski, 2011).

Whatever the argument, the facts alone are alarming: Males are not enrolling nor graduating from college at the same rate as women. With growing competition from an educated global labor force, this trend seems problematic. A college degree is becoming a necessity to compete for many jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Mortenson, 2006; Sum et al., 2003; Tinto, 2012; White House, 2013). The once ubiquitous blue-collar job, which employed many men, is no longer a safe alternative (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Mortenson, 2006). To illuminate this reality, in 1973, only 28% of all jobs required some level of post-secondary education (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). Some researchers hypothesize that this figure could be as high as 63% by 2018 (Habley et al., 2012). Consequently, this widening gender gap is eliminating many males from the competitive labor force.

Unfortunately, there is limited research directed at the reasons for the gender gap in higher education. Many acknowledge the statistics; however, few are engaged in deeper analysis. Buchmann (2009) observed, “The paucity of research on the realms where women outpace men, namely college enrollment and completion, constitutes a major gap in the literature” (p. 2320).

This study attempted to fill one portion of this research gap. It examined persistence differences, by gender, in persistence-to-completion. Once enrolled, men’s persistence at the college level is weaker than that of women (Ross et al., 2012). This qualitative research explored possible reasons for this persistence gap: Are there persistence differences, by gender, in the experience of persistence?
The gender gap is a complex societal issue embedded in a myriad of divisive opinions. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research. Thus, this study filled a gap in the literature.

**Background**

The good news for many is more students are enrolling in post-secondary education. The more alarming news, however, is that since 1979, there is a growing gender gap that overwhelmingly favors women (Aud et al., 2013; Hussar & Bailey, 2013; Peter & Horn, 2005; Ross et al., 2012). In 2011, females comprised 57% of the total enrollment of undergraduate students while males made up 43% of the undergraduate population (Aud et al., 2013). This gap in enrollment is expected to widen (see Figure 1).


A gender gap also exists in completion rates. In 2010, 52% of females who had enrolled in any post-secondary institution had completed their program within six years. In comparison, 46% of males had persisted to completion (Ross et al., 2012). For traditional-age students
entering a four-year bachelor’s degree program, 72% of females had received a degree within six years. Only 64% of males had graduated (Ross et al., 2012).

Women surpassing men in higher education was not always the trend. Historically, it had been just the opposite. However, during the twentieth century, women painstakingly made gains toward parity. By the 1970s there was equal numbers of men and women participating in post-secondary education (Solomon, 1985). However, the equality was short-lived. In 1979, women surpassed men and since that time, the gap has steadily increased (Aud et al., 2013; Freeman, 2004). It appears this pattern will continue without some kind of intervention or policy change.

Mainstream media has taken note of the widening gap (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Yakaboski, 2011). Yet many policy makers and administrators seem unconcerned (Kleinfeld, 2009; Schellpfeffer, 2012; Tyre, 2008). Additionally, research on the gender gap has been limited (Buchmann, 2009; Butterfield & Pemberton, 2012; Ewert, 2012; McGauvran, 2011; Sax, L. J., 2008). Buchmann (2009) lamented that more research is needed in this area:

Most research on gender inequalities in education continues to focus on aspects of education where women trail men, such as women’s underrepresentation at top-tier institutions and in science and engineering programs. The paucity of research on the realms where women outpace men, namely college enrollment and completion, constitutes a major gap in the literature (p. 2320).

It seems college officials should be more concerned about the current gender gap. One reason is based on economics. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics (2011), a growth in professional and management positions is anticipated. This raises the demand for college educated workers. With more males lagging in the attainment of college degrees, they are being eliminated from this labor trend (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Sum et al., 2003; Whitmire &
Bailey, 2010). Even more disconcerting is the increase in the global competition for United States white-collar jobs. The landscape in the professional job market seems to magnify the importance of a literate and educated populace (Mortenson, 2006; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) explained that “the completion of the baccalaureate degree is a central determinant of occupational status and income” (p. 373).

There is also little research on gender differences in retention and persistence-to-completion (Buchmann, 2009; Conger & Long, 2010; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Although most retention research has unveiled some gender differences in retention rates, there has been little deeper analysis of this finding. Most of the researchers admitted that further study would be necessary (Astin, 1964; Bean, 1980; Conger & Long, 2010; Ewert, 2012; Hoeff, 2004; Leppel, 2002; Sax, 2008; Spady, 1960; Tinto, 1975). Bean (1980) acknowledged that men and women leave college for different reasons. Do they also stay for different reasons?

The proposed topic of this current research filled this gap in the literature as it explored persistence differences, by gender. It sought to determine if there are variances in what propels men and women to complete their degree. This in turn could provide insight for policy makers and administrators who can improve the college environment to better assist males in persisting to completion.

In her seminal work on gender differences in the college experience, Linda Sax (2008) unveiled significant differences. Astin stated, in the preface of her book, “More than half of the 584 different college effects that she identified are not the same for women and men” (p. xvi). It was thus quite likely that when specifically examining persistence, persistence differences by gender would be unveiled. This insight could help colleges aim their retention efforts more specifically. “It is now incumbent on researchers to extend our understanding of college impact
by uncovering which types of students benefit from which college experiences” (Sax, L. J., 2008, p. 4).

Generally, it seems prudent to acknowledge the gender gap in higher education. When women were lagging, there was a valiant effort to reverse the trend. It was the right direction. Thankfully, as a result of those herculean efforts, women have been thriving at every level of education. However, it is not a zero-sum game (Sax, L. J., 2008). Men are now falling behind, and so it seems logical that they would receive similar interest. With further research and changes in campus policies, it is possible to reverse the sobering trend. As Weaver-Hightower (2003) declared in the title of his literature review, it is now the “Boy Turn” (p. 471).

**Situation to Self**

With a biblical worldview as my foundation, I assert that there is one God who created the world. God also created man in His image. I believe in absolute truths. Ontologically, there is a reality that was established at the creation of the world. God breathed life into man; man did not evolve. Furthermore, God created one man for one woman and each are wonderfully exclusive in their gender roles. Neither is better. They are simply different with different needs and motivations. Both deserve every opportunity to thrive educationally, socially, spiritually, economically, and physically.

This overarching belief in one God and His truth also transitions into the epistemological assumption that some knowledge is certain and that we gain that knowledge by observing, listening, and studying. However, how each person experiences knowledge and life is subjective. No two people experience the same reality in the same way. This view of constructivism does not negate that certain knowledge exists; it merely adds a human element to
interpreting and experiencing that knowledge. How knowledge is obtained is a combination of firmly established truth and one’s subjective response and interpretation of that truth.

Methodologically, the ideal study of this complex world is a combination of empirical and naturalistic inquiry. Deductive insights, gained from a quantitative platform, shed light on some generalities of human behavior. However, gathering data through interviewing and observing people provides multiple points of view from a variety of participants. Inductive research often reveals richer insight and deeper knowledge about a phenomenon. This is often missed by statistical reporting.

In regards to the axiological assumption, I cannot avoid these core values. They are deeply woven into the fabric of who I am and they do affect my research. Therefore, as Creswell (2013) explained, as a researcher I position myself in the study in regards to my biases and values and I discuss them openly. Although I am thankful for the advancement of women, I feel it is imperative that administrators and policy makers, at every level of education, seriously examine the reasons behind the current gender gap. Males deserve the same interest that was given to females in the 1960s and 1970s.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is there is a gender gap in higher education both in enrollment rates and persistence rates. Males simply are not keeping pace with females (Aud et al., 2013; Buchmann, 2009; Hussar & Bailey, 2013; Ross et al., 2012). There has been an abundance of retention studies and theories in higher education over the past five decades (Astin, 1964; Bean, 1980; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Spady, 1970; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 1975, 2012). Nevertheless, there is little research regarding the reason for this gap either in enrollment or persistence (Buchmann, 2009). Here laid the focus of this
particular research, the gender gap in persistence in higher education. Even Mead (2006), who balked at the claim that males are in crisis, stated, “This appears to be the area in which gender-focused concerns are most justified, with men less likely to stay in school and earn a degree” (p. 12). Ewert (2012) noticed that “the bulk of female advantage in college graduation arises at the college level” (p. 826), meaning there are experiences, while on campus, that directly affect the gender gap.

Some of the previous research revealed gender differences in what leads to attrition, especially during the first year of college. They admitted that more research was necessary to explore these differences (Astin, 1964; Bean, 1980; Conger & Long, 2010; Ewert, 2012; Hoeff, 2004; Leppel, 2002; Sax, L.J., 2008; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). However, there still has been little gender-focused empirical research in these factors or in the factors that lead to persistence (Buchmann, 2009). Is there a difference, according to gender, in the experiences that contribute to persistence? Spady (1980) noted that men and women leave for different reasons. That raises the question: Do they persist to completion for different reasons? There is a paucity of research in this area. This study filled this gap in the literature.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research design was to explore the persistence differences, by gender, in traditional-age college students at a private, liberal arts, college in a Mid-Atlantic state. The phenomenon being studied was persistence as evidenced by the class level of these students. The sample was senior students. Persistence was operationalized by these students being poised to graduate at the end of the year. Their tenure in higher education must have been six years or less.
Significance of the Study

As has been noted, there is little concern among policy makers, administrators, and government officials over the growing gender gap (Kleinfeld, 2009; Mortenson, 2006; Schellpfeffer, 2012; Tyre, 2008). However, as has been explored, an educated populace strengthens society and its labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Mortenson, 2006; Sum et al., 2003; White House, 2013). Without some delving into solving this inequality, the upper-level management positions in all facets of life will be controlled by women. With the uniqueness of both genders being valuable in providing leadership, this cannot be the ideal scenario.

As researchers have admitted, however, there seems to be little interest in researching this trend, especially at the higher education level (Buchmann, 2009). Males are neither enrolling nor persisting in post-secondary education at the same level as females (Aud et al., 2013; Hussar & Bailey, 2013; Ross et al., 2012). A limited number of quantitative studies revealed persistence differences, by gender, in persistence variables (Conger & Long, 2010; Ewert, 2012; Hoeff, 2004; Leppel, 2002). Each of these researchers admitted that further research is warranted in this area. Hoeff (2004) even suggested a qualitative approach. There is also limited research on persistence beyond the first year of college enrollment (Braxton et al., 2014; Lord, Bjerregaard, & Hartman, 2013).

Within this miniscule body of research, there seem to be very little in the area qualitative studies. Hearing the voices of senior college students could shed light on this issue. To what did they attribute their educational success? Are there stark persistence differences, by gender, in these attributes? Their insights could lead to more intentional actions in bringing parity to the
persistence rate. Linda Sax (2008), in her seminal work on the gender gap in the college experience, made a valid observation:

Too often the focus is on the relative numbers of women and men on campus . . . and not on how college enrolled women and men differ from each other in potentially important ways. Though they are enrolled in classes together, use the same campus services, and often live in the same residence halls, the backgrounds and needs of college women and men are not the same. Information about these student characteristics is valuable to the campus because it enables planning and programming that addresses incoming students’ needs and interests. (p. 13)

Ewert (2012) contended that the persistence gender gap is directly related to experiences during college. “The behaviors and experiences of students during college affect persistence to degree completion and the gender gap in graduation” (p. 842). She added, “Men’s experiences in higher education limit their persistence to graduation” (Ewert, 2012, p. 842).

Persistence is a complex phenomenon. A qualitative study was in order because human experience is not easily confined to mere statistics. With an issue as far reaching as the gender gap in higher education, it seemed evident that intentionally exploring the actual experiences of a wide sample of both men and women would shed light on this matter. They were able to purposefully describe their own experiences with persistence. In hearing from both males and females, I unveiled persistence differences by gender. These insights could in turn help college administrators strengthen their persistence rates among all students, but especially their male students since they are the ones more likely to drop out.
Research Questions

“The intent of qualitative research questions is to narrow the purpose to several questions that will be addressed in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 138). Van Manen (1990) stated that the research questions are the starting point of any research. “To do phenomenological research is to question something phenomenologically and, also, to be addressed by the question of what something is ‘really’ like. What is the nature of this lived experience?” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 42).

For this particular study, the questions guiding the study pertained to the experience of persistence as described by traditional-age college students. According to Tinto (1993), persistence in higher education is rooted in the interaction between a student’s background and personal dispositions and the institutional culture, both socially and academically. Therefore, this study’s questions aimed to determine students’ actions and attitudes toward persistence as well as how they interacted with the college environment in order to persist-to-completion. What was their experience with persistence? It seemed also valuable to examine situations that could have hindered persistence and how the students overcame. Through it all is the underlying query: Are there gender differences in the experience? With that understanding, I explored persistence with these questions as my framework:

- How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence?
- How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences and beliefs that contributed to their persistence?
- How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this persistence?
- How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence?
• What are the persistence differences, by gender, in the experience?

**Delimitations and Limitations**

With the focus of the study being persistence, there were specific demographic characteristics that were required of all participants. The participants had to be traditional-age senior students, between 21-24 years of age, at a small, private, residential, four-year liberal arts college. Obtaining a degree within six years is one of the agreed upon operationalized definitions of persistence (Hagedorn, 2012; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2011). The population was senior students poised to graduate during the current school year.

Although current college demographics include many non-traditional-age students, the majority of post-secondary undergraduate students are traditional, especially at four-year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012). For this reason, I was more interested in the persistence of traditional-age students within a four-year institutional setting. The common definition of traditional-age seniors is that they are under the age of 24 (Morrison & Silverman, 2012). Their needs, interests, and attitudes, as a matter of maturity and life stage will generally, be vastly different from older students.

The sample had a variety of students, both male and female, of different races, socioeconomic and family backgrounds, interests, activities, involvement, and achievement levels. The goal was finding persistence factors of traditional students according to gender; however, even within that demographic, there were a myriad of differences. I contended that the wider the sample, within each gender, the more enriching were the findings. Lastly, the chosen institution was a matter of convenience, since it was located close to the researcher. However, its current gender gap in both enrollment and completion perfectly fit the needs of the study.
There are inherent limitations of all qualitative studies. For this particular study, the small sample size limited the scope of generalizability. Furthermore, the population was from a small, private college. Each type of post-secondary institution has its unique blend of student populations, professors, opportunities, and experiences. Again, generalizing at too wide a range beyond the small, private college setting may not be prudent. Research is clear that institutional characteristics have an impact on persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). Therefore, making too broad an assumption from one study, at a particular institution, with its unique characteristics, would not be prudent.

In their most recent pivotal work, How College Affects Students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted the limitations on persistence research. “Most of the research erroneously infers conditional effects from differences found between various subgroups (men versus women, Blacks versus Whites and so on) in the factors significantly associated with educational attainment” (p. 430). They added, “Simple chance sampling errors across independent samples can produce an artificial situation in which a variable has a statistically significant association with outcomes in one subsample but not another. More often than not, such differences are due to chance” (p. 430). For this particular study, admittedly, the findings could have been circumstantial, based not only upon the institution but also the student participants. Everyone has a unique perspective. This was definitely the case in this study. The participants had their own personal experience with persistence.

**Research Plan**

The chosen methodology was a qualitative phenomenological design. In a phenomenological design, the researcher seeks the story behind the statistics (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). According to Moustakas (1994), in phenomenology, the research questions grow
out of an “intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (p. 104). My focus on the gender gap in higher education drove this particular research with a particular emphasis on persistence differences by gender.

Needless to say, the gender gap in higher education is the manifestation of complex socio-cultural and educational issues. Persistence-to-completion in college is also complex. The singular focus of this particular paper was on that complex phenomenon: persistence of traditional college students. What propels them to persist? Are there gender differences in this phenomenon? Hearing their stories shed light on this topic. A qualitative method maximized the pursuit of information in an area with so many complexities and nuances (Piantanida & Garman, 2009).

**Definitions**

**Academic Integration** – refers to the student’s meeting of certain academic standards and identifying with certain standards and norms of the academic system. Grades are often the measurement indicating how well a student has integrated academically.

**Attrition** – refers to a student who fails to re-enroll at an institution in consecutive semesters.

**Dropout** – refers to a student whose initial educational goal was to complete at least a bachelor’s degree but did not.

**Institutional Commitment** – refers to the student’s commitment to and satisfaction with a particular institution.

**Persistence** – refers to the action of the student to remain within the system of higher education until degree completion. The duration is six years or fewer.

**Retention** – refers to the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation, although most retention studies refer to retention as being from first-to-second year.
**Social Integration** – refers to the level of congruence between the student’s background and values and the institution’s culture. Social integration occurs through peer group associations, along with involvement in extracurricular activities and interaction with faculty.

**Stop-out** refers to a student who temporarily withdraws from an institution or system.

**Withdrawal** – refers to the departure of a student from a college or university campus.

(Berger, Blanco-Ramirez, & Lyons, 2012; Tinto, 1975).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, a college education in the United States was relegated to upper-class white males. Not only were women considered too frail for the rigor of college, their presumed role as a wife and mother did not warrant the need for a college education. “Fear lingered that education might unfit a girl for her subservient role as a wife” (Solomon, 1985, p. 6). Consequently, for females, higher education was “a forbidden world” (Solomon, 1985, p. 1). Over time, however, the demographics of the college population changed drastically to the point where women now outnumber men on most campuses.

There is not only a gender gap in the overall composition at most campuses; there is a gender gap in completion rates (Buchmann, 2009). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2010, 52% of females who had enrolled in any post-secondary institution in 2003-04 had completed their program. In comparison, 46% of males had persisted to completion (Ross et al., 2012). Further review of the statistic reveals an even wider gap for traditional-age students entering a four-year bachelor’s degree program. While 72% of females had received a degree within six years, only 64% of males had graduated (Ross et al., 2012).

According to Hussar and Bailey (2013), the gender gap in completion rates is also projected to widen. For associate’s degrees, the number awarded to women increased by 52% between 1996-97 and 2009-10. It is projected to increase 23% by 2021-22. Comparatively, between 1996-97 and 2009-10, the award rate increased for males by 44% and is expected to increase by 19% by 2021-22 (see Figure 2).
A similar trajectory is occurring in the attainment of a bachelor’s degree (see Figure 3). The number awarded to women increased 45% between 1996-97 and 2009-10. The projected increase is 23% by 2021. Bachelor degrees awarded to males, on the other hand, increased by 36% and are expected to increase 19% by 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).
The purpose of this literature review is to examine this multi-faceted phenomenon of the gender gap in higher education, with a focus on the gap in persistence. First, however, it is important to establish the theoretical framework. In this area, I employ three theories: goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990); self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997); and models of student attrition (Bean, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Next, the review explores the history of the gender gap in higher education, demonstrating how women were the ones who lagged until 1979. Although the numbers of women finally reached parity in 1979, they did not stop there. I explore some of the research regarding the reasons for the widening gender gap both in enrollment and completion.

I also elaborate on research in persistence and retention, exploring the history of retention research and then providing a representation of the most recent and seminal investigations. I further break this down into the studies that explore persistence differences, by gender. It is also
important to mention the implications of this gender gap both in society in in higher education. Throughout this treatise, I address the gaps in the literature that this research fills.

**Theoretical Framework**

“Theories are not added only as a final gloss or justification; they are not thrown over the work as a final garnish. They are drawn on repeatedly as ideas are formulated, tried out, modified, rejected, or polished” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 158). With that as the basis for the theoretical framework for this research, this particular study was supported by a triad of theories (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4](image)

*Figure 4. Theoretical framework supporting the research of persistence differences, by gender in post-secondary persistence. Adapted by the author.*

The first was goal-setting theory of Locke and Latham (1990). Their premise is that goals affect behavior which includes academic behavior. Students with specific goals by which they are highly motivated are more likely to persist than those without a specified goal (Tinto, 1993).

The second was Bandura’s (1997) perceived self-efficacy theory, which is a natural outgrowth of goal-setting theory. Locke and Latham (1990) postulated that self-efficacy is a
core component of goal setting and achievement. Perceived self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), is an individual’s belief in one’s capabilities to perform a certain task. Higher confidence in one’s ability will embolden one’s resolve toward a particular goal. This also translates to persistence, as high academic self-efficacy strengthens the attitudes associated with persistence.

The third theory was college student attrition theory. By examining student attrition, theorists developed models which sought to explain reasons for student departure. Their thinking was that by understanding attrition, colleges and universities could better assist students in persisting (Tinto, 2012). The first theories and models of college attrition and retention were developed by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and Bean (1980). Because Tinto is the most often cited theorist in college student retention theory (Braxton et al., 2014), his theory was the most prominent in this particular study.

**Goal-Setting Theory**

Goal-setting theory emerged in industrial and organizational psychology over the past 40 years. According to its developers, Locke and Latham (1990), more than 400 studies supported the theory’s validity. Recently, researchers have applied its principles to academics (Schunk, 2009). For example, Morisano et al. (2010) determined that academic performance was positively related to goal strength and clarity. Thus, for the purpose of this research, goal-setting theory seemed highly appropriate when considering the persistence experience of undergraduate students. Tinto (1993), the major theorist in college retention studies, pointed out “the higher the level of one’s educational and occupational goals, the greater the likelihood of college completion” (p. 38).
Goal-setting theory evolved from some of the more comprehensive theories of motivation such as psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and drive theory. Unlike its predecessors, this theory was more limited in scope and was more cognitively based. It grew out of an interest in motivation, in particular, based upon the question, “Why do some people perform better on work tasks than others?” (Locke & Latham, 1990, p. 1).

While other theorists proposed motivators to be needs, drives, values, instincts, attitudes, or other concepts, Locke and Latham (1990) assumed that “goals—(or ideas of future desired end states)—play a causal role in action” (p. 2). To answer the question, Locke and Latham (1990) posited that the differences in performance were based on varying goals, or something individuals desired to achieve. “Goal setting theory assumed that human action is directed by conscious goals and intentions” (Locke & Latham, 1990, p. 4). The goals remain as a reference point that guides and gives meaning to both mental and physical actions that lead to the goal. It was also assumed that individuals’ goals for a certain task would influence what they do and how much effort to apply toward excellence (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Goals are the end result, or the object/aim of an action. They originate in personal values as well as societal values. Schunk (1990) noted, “People are likely to act when they believe an action will produce positive outcomes and when they value those outcomes” (p. 73). Values are the abstract driving force behind the more specific goal. For example, an individual may value ambition while the specific goal that reflects ambition is to become the president of a company (Locke & Latham, 1990). In regards to college persistence, it would seem the more students value a college degree, the greater effort they will extend to complete the college journey. Habley and his co-researchers (2012) in their recent treatise on research based strategies in
college persistence explained that motivational theories, that include goal-setting, were becoming more prominent within retention research in the last twenty years.

Goal-setting theory contends that cognitive factors of feedback and self-efficacy are key components. These qualities greatly influence the relationship between the goal and the behavior or task performance that works toward that goal. In other words, the greater one’s belief in personal ability to achieve the goal, and the stronger the positive feedback from external sources, the more likely the goal will be achieved (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Undergirding this theory are two core concepts. One is the “linear relationship between degree of goal difficulty and performance” (Locke & Latham, 1990, p. 27). The more difficult goals elicit higher performance than do the easier goals. The theory is that harder goals require more effort and persistence. Thus, individuals will put forth greater effort, especially if they believe the goal is attainable (Locke & Latham, 1990). Interestingly, Tinto (2012) observed that colleges with high expectations for their students tended to yield higher student persistence rates.

The second core concept is that goals that are specific yield higher performance than do vague or non-quantitative goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). In the academic setting, Morisano et al., (2010) explained that individuals with clear goals are more likely to direct their efforts and attention to goal relevant activities and are better able to avoid goal irrelevant activities. More specific goals yield greater self-regulation.

Still, there is one more important component of goal-setting theory that directly correlates to college student persistence. That is goal commitment: Only when individuals are genuinely committed to a goal will they perform at high levels. Commitment, as defined by Locke and Latham (1990), refers to an individual’s personal attachment to a goal. This, in turn, is
accompanied by a determination to reach the goal. In regards to college students, Tinto (1993) postulated that commitment is a foundational attribute in persistence-to-completion.

**Self-Efficacy Theory**

Goal-setting theorists confirmed a positive relationship between self-efficacy, or the personal expectancy to perform well, and performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). This observation presents a natural segue way into Bandura’s (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory as the second part of the theoretical framework that buttressed this research. Tinto (2012) observed that helping students succeed, particularly during their first year of college, will “enhance students’ sense of self-efficacy, reduce stress, and in turn, increase the likelihood of future success (p. 27).

Social cognitive theory, in which self-efficacy is a core principle, grew out of a disenfranchisement with behaviorist ideology. Bandura, the father of social cognitive theory, recognized that behavioral responses were not as simple as stimulus and response. He noted a “conscious involvement of the responders” (Bandura, 1977, p. 192). His contention was that cognitive processes play a prominent role in the acquisition and retention of new behavior patterns (Bandura, 1977).

He posited that most human behavior is initially developed through modeling or observational learning. As humans observe others’ successful or desired behavior, they attempt to generate similar patterns of behavior (Bandura, 1997). This behavior is “further refined through self-corrective adjustments based on informative feedback from performance” (Bandura, 1977, p. 192). Through either beneficial or punitive consequences, behavior is either reinforced or discouraged. This ongoing process delineates acceptable or non-acceptable behavior (Bandura, 1977).
In regards to college persistence, researchers continually unveil the direct correlation between parents’ education level and college student persistence (Tinto, 2012). First-generation students—or those whose parents did not graduate from college—struggle more to persist to completion. Astin and Oseguera (2012) confirmed that parent education levels are predictive in regards to persistence. This reflects a form of role modeling as espoused by Bandura.

Just as behavior requires a cognitive component, Bandura (1997) argued that motivation is also rooted in cognitive activity. As individuals anticipate a positive outcome, they foster the belief that current behavior will produce these future outcomes. For this, Bandura (year) coined the term “outcome expectancy.” Individuals believe a particular behavior will lead to desired outcomes. This is the motivating drive to continue in that behavior, according to Bandura (1977). As noted, goal-setting theory postulated similar interactions of motivation, goals, and behavior (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Playing robustly into motivation is perceived self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defined perceived self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (p. 71). Bandura (1997) added, “The outcomes people anticipate depend largely on their judgments of how well they will be able to perform in given situations” (p. 21).

Bandura (1977, 1997) hypothesized that perceived self-efficacy is built upon four sources of information. The first, and most influential, is “enactive mastery experience” (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). These are previous experiences of success that in turn, “build a robust belief in one’s personal efficacy” (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). Achieving certain levels of success raises individuals’ beliefs in their capability, or their perceived self-efficacy for that particular skill. Tinto (2012) applied this idea to the work of college students:
Feeling of competence encourage individuals to engage in complex tasks and influence the amount of effort they will expend on those tasks and how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles. This is particularly true for those who have struggled in the past to succeed in school and college (p. 27).

The second source of perceived self-efficacy is “vicarious experience” (Bandura, 1997, p. 86) or modeling. As individuals with a similar skill-set find success, those observing begin to believe in their own potential to similar success. “They persuade themselves that if others can do it, they too have the capabilities to raise their performance” (Bandura, 1997, p. 87). Bandura (1997) noted that observing the success of others with similar skills was more effective in strengthening self-efficacy than persuasion or observing professionals’ success.

This observation of others clearly plays into the research regarding college student persistence. Ting (2003) and Adelman (2006) noted that first-generation college students, or students whose parents did not graduate from college, statistically, do not persist at similar levels to their second generation peers. Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tacz (2010) attributed this to the lack of modeling or observation of parents’ succeeding in higher education. DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) noted the effects of peer culture on academic achievement. Cultures that reward academic success yield students who are motivated to invest time and energy into their education. When the peers denigrate academic achievement, however, those in the group are less likely to invest energy in their education.

“Verbal persuasion” (Bandura, 1997, p.101) is the third source of perceived self-efficacy. Here, the encouragement or feedback from others emboldens individuals’ beliefs in their competence. “It is easier to sustain a sense of efficacy, especially when struggling with
difficulties, if significant others express faith in one’s capabilities than if they convey doubts” (Bandura, 1997, p. 101).

The last source of perceived self-efficacy is “physiological and affective states” (Bandura, 1997, p. 106). How individuals perceive their somatic states will affect their levels of self-efficacy. If anxiety or heart palpitations are viewed as positive energizers then self-efficacy is either strengthened or unaffected. Comparatively, those with a weaker level of self-efficacy will be more inclined to “conjuring up aversive thoughts about their ineptitude and stress reactions” (Bandura, 1997, p. 104). The higher levels of stress eventually produce the failure they fear, and so future somatic responses will most likely yield similar results of failure. This, in turn, negatively affects perceived self-efficacy. As these individuals learn to reduce stress levels and negative emotional patterns, and, in turn, learn to correctly interpret their bodily states, their self-efficacy is no longer affected by negative somatic states (Bandura, 1994).

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy beliefs play a key role in self-regulation of motivation and goal-setting. As noted earlier, Bandura (year) opined that motivation is cognitively generated through a process. First, individuals, through the four sources, develop beliefs about their capabilities. In turn, they set goals that align with these capabilities. From there, they develop a course of action (Bandura, 1994).

Similarly, without a goal, individuals may believe they can perform, but they will have no incentive to do so (Bandura, 1977). Thus, goals and perceived self-efficacy form a symbiotic relationship in motivation; both are the underpinning of most achievement. “Efficacy expectations are a major determinant of people’s choices of activities, how much effort they will expend, and how long they will sustain effort in dealing with stressful situations (Bandura, 1977, p. 194).
In examining college students’ persistence, it seems that goal-setting and perceived self-efficacy would play an important role. In their seminal work on this topic, Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) pointed to the combined effects of self-efficacy and goal-setting on academic success. “Perceived self-efficacy to achieve motivates academic attainment both directly and indirectly by influencing personal goal-setting” (p. 674). Like Bandura (1997) and Locke and Latham (1990), they found that those with higher self-efficacy had higher goals and were more likely to persist toward those goals even in the midst of difficulty (Zimmerman et al., 1992). Most college retention studies will reiterate this claim (Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012).

**College Retention Theories**

Retention is one of the most heavily researched issues in higher education (Berger et al., 2012; Braxton et al., 2014; Tinto, 1993). There exists a myriad of theories and models attempting to explain this phenomenon. By examining characteristics of students who left college, these theorists hypothesized factors involved in retention. In his later writings, Tinto (2012) admitted that this may not reveal the most accurate data on retention. Assuming qualities of retention by examining characteristics of students who leave higher education is not necessarily appropriate. According to Tinto (2012), it is weak logic in deducing that attrition is a mirror image of retention (Tinto, 2012). Although the prior research is insightful, “understanding the reasons for leaving doesn’t necessarily translate into helping students persist” (Tinto, 2012, p. 4). This certainly seems to reveal a gap in the literature and theories of retention: studying the qualities and attitudes of students who actually persist.

In an earlier examination of student retention theories, Tinto (1993) recognized another flaw. These theories did not consider the role of the institution in attrition. Moreover, he argued
that the so-called theories were not truly theories but were mere attempts at explanation of the departure process. They concentrated more on the personality, or individual actions, of students who left the institution than the interaction of the student with the institution (Tinto, 1993). Thus, Tinto (1975) produced his first Interactionalist Theory and further refined it in the following decades (Tinto, 1993).

Many argue that Tinto’s (1993) Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure has contributed most to the field of retention theory (Braxton et al., 2014). For that reason I will explore his theory. With its roots being in Spady’s (1970) theory, I will commence this section with a deeper exploration of Spady’s theory. While Spady (1970) and Tinto (1993) developed two of the most prominent early models of attrition, Bean (1980, 1981) played an important role in the landscape of college student retention theories. Therefore, I will also expound upon his theory.

As an interlude, however, it is important to differentiate between the terms retention and persistence. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, researchers and practitioners view them as distinct processes. Most retention studies usually refer to the institution’s ability to retain the students after their first year. As Hagedorn (2012) pointed out, however, there remains little agreement among colleges and universities in defining and measuring retention: “Higher education researchers will likely never reach consensus on the ‘correct’ or ‘best’ way to measure this very important outcome” (p. 81).

For the sake of simplification for this particular study, and in agreement with Hagedorn (2012), the assumption is that a persister is a college student who remains enrolled until attaining a degree within six years. A student who enrolls, withdraws, and never attains a degree is a dropout. Generally speaking, I defined retention as being more aligned with the year-to-year
experience at a particular institution while attrition refers to students who do not return to a particular institution. Admittedly, the vocabulary in the retention landscape is often ambiguous, confusing, and overlapping (Hagedorn, 2012).

Spady’s model of student dropout. Throughout the 20th century, the college dropout phenomenon and its cousin, college persistence, had attracted the attention of researchers. However, it was not until William G. Spady (1970, 1971) that any dropout theory was established. He developed a “more interdisciplinary-based, theoretical synthesis of the most methodologically satisfactory findings and conceptually fruitful approaches to this problem” (Spady, 1970, p. 65). For him, an attrition model based upon Emile Durkheim’s theory of suicide provided the initial vehicle through which to filter the research (Spady, 1970).

Emile Durkheim, one of the fathers of modern sociology, introduced applying statistical method to social investigation. His treatise, Suicide (Durkheim, 1951), was one example of sociological theory formed upon statistical models. Relating suicide to social concomitants, he theorized that suicide “results from the lack of integration of the individual into society” (Durkheim, 1951, p. 14). Those who commit suicide feel less integrated into some kind of community whether it be religious, social, or political. Suicide is a result of a complex interaction, or lack thereof, of individuals with their surroundings (Durkheim, 1951).

After reviewing numerous empirically based studies on postsecondary dropout, Spady came to a similar conclusion. Through his sociological model of the dropout process, Spady (1970) posited that a student’s retention in a particular collegiate environment is a result of the interaction between the student and the academic and social environment of the institution. Spady (1970) noted that each student brings to college individual dispositions, interests, aptitudes, and skills, along with unique family, socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. How
this student assimilates with the social and academic environment yields either dropout or persistence.

According to Spady (1970), the institution’s academic and social communities posed opportunities for reward for students. Within the academic arm, grades were the most concrete form of extrinsic reward. For those students seeking intrinsic satisfaction, however, intellectual development was more important than grades. The personal development that came as a result of learning would be their reward. In both situations, according to Spady (1970), this represented success and reward in the academic community.

Social system success means having attitudes, interests, and personality dispositions that are compatible with the college community. Spady (1970) referred to this as social congruence. A social reward would also be in the area of friendship or friendship support (Spady, 1970). The stronger the student’s network of friends, the less likely a student would drop out. The academic and social components of his theory were very much parallel to the social integration of Durkheim (1951). However, Spady was quick to add, “Although dropping out is clearly a less drastic form of rejecting social life than is suicide, we assume that the social conditions that affect the former parallel those that produce the latter” (Spady, 1970, p. 78).

It was also apparent to Spady (1970) that other variables influence the phenomenon of dropout. Family and cultural background as well as academic potential certainly influence a student’s academic success. Thus, these components were also added to the foundation of his theory. Overall, Spady theorized that college persistence is a result of a complex interaction of many variables.

Using longitudinal data from the University of Chicago in 1965, Spady (1971) found support for his theory. Satisfaction at the college depended directly upon social integration,
grade performance, and intellectual development. Interestingly, he found academic performance and intellectual life to be more important to the males while social integration was a dominant value among the females (Spady, 1971). Nevertheless, Spady admitted that there were many ambiguities and complexities that required further research and a possible refining of the model (1971).

**Bean’s model of student attrition.** Bean (1980, 1981) acknowledged the advancements in theoretical models of persistence espoused by Spady (1971) and Tinto (1993). However, he argued that there was little empirical evidence for the suicide model of attrition. Additionally, he felt that Spady and Tinto offered unsuitable definitions of variables for measuring directional causality (Bean, 1980). He was more interested in the specific reasons, or measureable causes, of dropout. He saw higher education dropout as being similar to work place turnover. “Students leave institutions of higher education for reasons similar to those that cause employees to leave work organizations” (Bean, 1980, p. 157). Thus, he developed a causal model of attrition based upon studies on employee work place turnover.

Bean observed that organizational determinants affected satisfaction which, in turn, could influence dropout. He also pointed to background variables, or students’ pre-matriculation characteristics, that must be taken into account. They interact with the environment. These, in turn, influence institutional satisfaction. He postulated that institutional determinants, such as institutional quality, integration, GPA, relationships with faculty, major, and campus organizations are key components in deciding attrition.

Bean’s original theory included 23 independent variables, while a more refined theory contained 10 independent variables: intent-to-leave, practical value, certainty of choice, loyalty, grades, courses, educational goals, major and job certainty, opportunity to transfer, and family
approval of the institution. To test his model, he conducted a study involving first-year students at a mid-western university. The results revealed that intent-to-leave was the strongest predictor of attrition (Bean, 1982). In a later study, Bean (1985) referred to dropout syndrome which was the “conscious, openly discussed intention to leave coupled with actual attrition” (p. 36). In his conceptual model of dropout syndrome, Bean (1985) theorized that academic, social-psychological, and environmental factors influence dropping out.

Similar to Tinto and Spady, Bean (1980) concentrated his theory on students withdrawing after the first year at particular institutions and not on student persistence-to-completion. In other words, a student who transferred out of the institution was considered a dropout (Bean, 1980). He also limited the research on his theory to Caucasian, traditional-age, higher ability, first-year students (Bean, 1980). Additionally, Bean (1985) noted that little research had been conducted in the area of dropping out at other class levels other than first year. Worthy of note for this particular study is that Bean (1980, 1981) found a clear gender difference in the causes of dropout. These will be explored more in depth in latter portions of this Literature Review.

**Tinto’s Interactionalist Theory.** Vincent Tinto (1975) refined Spady’s (1971) attrition model. Like Spady, he recognized the parallels between dropout and Durkheim’s theory of suicide. Tinto agreed that lack of integration with both the social and academic realms of the institution increases the probability of dropout (Tinto, 1975).

However, Tinto noted that Spady’s theory was merely descriptive: “It does not yield a theory of dropout that helps explain how varying individuals come to adopt various forms of dropout behavior” (Tinto, 1975, p. 92). For that reason, Tinto posited that individual characteristics and dispositions that lend themselves to educational persistence must be built into a persistence model. He suggested that this not only includes background variables but also
motivational attributes. “With specific reference to dropout from higher education, one would need to know the individuals’ educational expectations and their institutional manifestations” (Tinto, 1975, p. 93). He called this portion of his theory educational goal commitment (Tinto, 1975).

Noticing that certain educational expectations often included specific institutions or institutional components, Tinto altered his theory. He added institutional commitment as an integral aspect of his theoretical model (Tinto, 1975). Still, he noted that “the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of completion” (Tinto, 1975, p. 96).

As Tinto (1993) continued to refine his theory, he turned to the field of anthropology. Notably, he applied the work of Arnold Van Gennep who studied the rites of passage in tribal societies. With life being comprised of a series of transitions as one moves from involvement in one group to involvement with another, Van Gennep noted the stages in which this occurred: separation, transition, and incorporation.

Tinto posited that in order to persist in college, students must move through the same transitional stages. In the separation stage, students disassociate from family and high school friendships. With the norms and values of past social groups being different than those of the collegiate environment, some degree of separation from the past is necessary for a student to persist. This stage is more important for resident students as opposed to commuters. The transition stage is the passage-way between the old and the new. Students are no longer deeply tied to the past nor are they fully committed to the present college community. This can be a difficult time for some students. If the college culture, both academically and socially, is vastly different than students’ background, this can be an intensely emotional period. For some, it is
too much, and they withdraw. The last stage, according to Tinto (1993), is becoming integrated or, as Van Gennep stated, incorporated into the college environment. “Without external assistance, many will eventually leave the institution because they have been unable to establish satisfying intellectual and social membership” (Tinto, 1993, p. 99).

Tinto (1993) considered his revised theory a “longitudinal model of institutional departure” (p. 115). In it, he recognized the interaction between individual student characteristics and the institutional environment. His model, however, was institution specific. “Whether a person transfers to another institution is not an issue of immediate concern” (p. 112). Although his theory offered insight into the process of student withdrawal, its focus was on institutional retention rather than overall student persistence-to-completion.

All three theories have merit, with Tinto’s theory holding the most preeminence. It is the most researched and applied to retention studies and policies (Braxton et al., 2014). The most recent retention research will be presented in latter sections of this Literature Review.

**History of the Gender Gap in Higher Education**

When referring to the gender gap in higher education, most historians noted the inequality and discrimination against females. In fact, for the majority of the first two centuries of higher education in America, 1636-1850, women were completely shut out of institutions of higher learning (Solomon, 1985). Not only were women considered too frail for the rigor of college, their presumed role as a wife and mother did not warrant the need for a college education (Ladda, 2012). “Fear lingered that education might unfit a girl for her subservient role as a wife” (Solomon, 1985, p. 6). Consequently, for females, higher education was “a forbidden world” (Solomon, 1985, p. 1).
That sentiment notwithstanding, women slowly made strides in the world of higher education during the mid-1800s. The creation of female seminaries, normal schools, and all-women colleges, along with the creation of coeducational institutions, afforded more opportunities for women. By the mid-1900s, the gender distribution in higher education was almost equal with the exception of a deluge of males after World War II (Solomon, 1985). Table 1 shows the enrollment pattern of women during this period.

Table 1


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of women (thousands)</th>
<th>Percentage of all students enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The gender distribution did not stop at parity. For the past four decades, women have outpaced males in higher education. As a result, the gender gap label in higher education now refers to the inequality in numbers of males in post-secondary institutions (Peter & Horn, 2005). The next section will further explore this rich history of women in higher education.

**Early History (1636-1800)**

The greatest portion of the history of higher education in America overwhelmingly favors upper-class white males. At its outset, the university system was established to train these young men to be godly (Owens, 2011; Swezey, 2012). Harvard, the first American university, was established in 1636 by the New England Puritans. The primary goal of education, at the time, was not to produce scholars. The purpose was to indoctrinate the next generation with Christian ideals (Owens, 2011).

The College of William and Mary, the second institution of higher education in America, was established in 1693 by the Church of Virginia. Like its predecessor, it was religious training...
ground where only white upper-class males were enrolled (Owens, 2011). The thinking at the
time was that these privileged men would, one day, inherit prestigious and successful businesses.
It was imperative that they were Christian gentlemen with upstanding influence (Thelin, 2004).
“The bachelor’s degree was the mark of distinction of potential leaders” (Solomon, 1985, p. 2).

During this colonial period, women were deemed intellectually inferior and incapable of
greater thoughts. Most assumed that women had smaller brains along with weaker minds
(Solomon, 1985). “Her place was in the home where men had assigned her a number of useful
functions” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 308). Women, for the most part, understood and accepted that this
was their role (Solomon, 1985).

There are a few stories, however, of intellectually precocious young women who,
according to the educational elite, could take an entrance exam. However, this gesture seemed
odd. Even if a woman had passed the exam, she would be prohibited from matriculating (Thelin,
2004). The educational opportunity for even the most intelligent women was sparse. Although
early records are admittedly incomplete, there is no formal record of a woman receiving a degree
prior to the 19th century (Thelin, 2004). Nevertheless, the debate over female education
increased (Solomon, 1985).

Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence,
was one of the first public advocates for female education. His major premise was that fathers
frequently traveled or were out of the home working. Thus, mothers were the primary educators
of their children, which included the sons. With the realization that these sons were the future
leaders in government and society, it seemed prudent, according to Rush, that mothers have more
formal education (Rudolph, 1962).
In the midst of females’ exclusion from higher education, some parents still sought higher academic opportunities for their daughters. Privately, they, or their tutors, trained their daughters in various subjects—sciences, art, literature etc. (Solomon, 1985). Any formal education for their daughters, however, remained an elusive ideal (Thelin, 2004).

**Middle History (1800-1940)**

The situation began to change in the early part of the 19th century. Public opinion toward female education slowly shifted toward a more favorable stance (Solomon, 1985). Between 1800 and 1860, it is recorded that 14 institutions permitted women to take classes (Thelin, 2004). In 1821, the first female seminary was established in Troy, New York by Emma Willard, while in 1832, Catherine Beecher opened Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut (Solomon, 1985). More followed suit. These precursors to women’s colleges set the precedent for higher education for women (Rudolph, 1962).

Additionally, in the mid-1800s many normal schools, otherwise known as teachers’ colleges, were opened. Some were for women only, while others were co-educational. Their purpose was professional teacher education. The majority of women in higher education were enrolled in these institutions. The two-year teacher certification provided by these normal schools was considered less prestigious than a bachelor’s degree (Thelin, 2004), but this arrangement was attractive to the less wealthy who could not afford a four year education. Single women were also drawn to the normal schools. Without the potential of a husband’s earnings on which to rely, women realized that being trained school teachers was a respectable alternative. The burgeoning public school population yielded a plethora of opportunities for these certified teachers (Solomon, 1985).
Four-year college opportunities were also expanding for women. Mount Holyoke, founded by Mary Lyon, in Massachusetts in 1837, is considered the first “most thoroughly and academically advanced women’s college” (Thelin, 2004, p. 55). Also in 1837, Oberlin College of Ohio became the first co-educational institution when it admitted four female freshmen (Rudolph, 1962). From that point, more all-male colleges became co-educational and more all-women’s colleges were started. The latter were considered the “seven sisters” schools: Wellesley, Radcliffe, Mt. Holyoke, Smith, Vassar, Barnard, and Bryn Mawr. Some men’s colleges birthed separate women’s colleges. For example, Brown University established Pembroke (Rudolph, 1962; Thelin, 2004).

According to Rudolph (1962), Vassar College is worth noting. Founded in 1860 by Matthew Vassar and John Howard Raymond, it was not the first women’s college nor was it the first college women could attend. However, by establishing the *Collegiate Rights of American Women*, it was the “first college to make the world take notice of the neglect which has long characterized the higher education of women” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 244).

The Civil War was a significant historical event in regards to the education of women. As women demonstrated a great deal of resilience during the war and its aftermath, men recognized women’s fortitude both intellectually and physically (Rudolph, 1962). It was also during this time that the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 opened more opportunities for coeducation. In the land grant act, the federal government provided incentives for states to build public universities. For financial reasons, these new schools needed strong enrollment numbers, especially in the Midwest. As a result, this period observed a rapid increase in the numbers of women (and minorities) entering colleges and universities (Rudolph, 1962). Most Midwestern
and Western colleges were coed, while most southern and New England schools were single gendered (Thelin, 2004).

In spite of the expansion of opportunity for women in higher education, women were gravely underrepresented. Where women were enrolled in coeducational institutions, many male students and faculty still considered them second-class citizens. Women students frequently faced overt discrimination and ridicule. Faculty often discouraged their female students from pursuing certain fields of study (Thelin, 2004).

Because more educated women were viewed as unappealing potential spouses, some parents discouraged their daughters from pursuing education (Thelin, 2004). Even as late as the early 1900s, there were parents, educators, and psychologists who felt that “collegiate education was harmful to women, linked to such dangers as brain fever, physical fatigue, and the risk of becoming aesthetically unfeminine” (Thelin, 2004, p. 186). This sentiment was waning, however, because women had painstakingly proven themselves. The growing stories of women in higher education revealed that the American college woman could be married and bear children. Furthermore, females’ presence at the university was not threatening or harming men, as had been once feared (Thelin, 2004). By the early 1900s, women were becoming a viable and active part of higher education.

Between the world wars, the coeducational campus was growing the fastest. After World War I, both men and women flocked into higher education. Women were encouraged by expanding opportunities, as more people were willing to accept the higher education of women. Women reached virtual parity with men in enrollment in the 1920s (Solomon, 1985). However, it must be noted that a substantial amount of these numbers was in teacher training colleges, which was a two-year program (Goldin, Katz, & Kuziemko, 2006). Generally, women were
discouraged from certain majors, such as business and the sciences, while being directed toward others, such as education. They were rarely given any leadership opportunities such as editor of the yearbook. Their opportunities in post-graduate study such as medicine and law were also greatly limited (Thelin, 2004).

During the depression, the percentage of women in higher education dropped. Again, their rise toward uniform numbers was hampered. However, their absolute numbers rose. Many of them, especially from lower income families, were forced to contribute financially to their education, which placed an added burden on the more ambitious women. As the effects of the depression waned, women slowly returned to campus, so that by 1940 they comprised 40% of the student population (Solomon, 1985).

Modern Era (1940-present)

With many college-age men absent due to World War II, hindrances for women in many fields were removed. Without as many males on campus, faculty paid more attention to their talented female students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. More women began pursuing majors in sciences and engineering, as well as advanced degrees. However, all that changed in the decades following the war due to the Montgomery GI Bill (Solomon, 1985).

Montgomery GI Bill. The Montgomery GI Bill of 1944 was the main culprit in halting the educational momentum for women. Because of this bill, returning veterans were awarded tuition-free education. By 1950, 16% of eligible veterans took advantage of the program, doubling the enrollment at many colleges and universities. This surge had an effect on the percentage of female students in higher education. The 40% female enrollment in 1940 plummeted. By 1947, undergraduate males outnumbered female 2.3 to 1 (Goldin et al., 2006)
“Not until 1970 would women regain the 40 percent proportion of higher education enrollments that they had attained in 1940” (Thelin, 2004, p. 267).

During the women’s movement of the 1960s, a new feminism arose. The National Organization for Women, founded in 1968, sought equality for women in all spheres of life. One result of the feminist movement was that more all-male campuses, like Virginia, Yale, and Princeton, began admitting women (Solomon, 1985). Additionally, young women’s career expectations began to shift. “No longer did young women anticipate that they would follow in their mother’s footsteps” (Goldin et al., 2006, p. 133). Realizing that a career outside the home was a possibility, these women began opting for later marriage and childbirth. These decisions were augmented by the increasing access to birth control. This expanse in expectations and opportunities for women increased their enrollment numbers in college. “Barriers to female careers were lowered and their access to higher education was expanded” (Goldin et al., 2006, p. 153).

**Title IX.** The passing of the Title IX amendment, as part of the Education Amendment Act of 1972 (Ladda, 2012), was another by-product of the women’s movement. A small piece of legislation, Title IX revolutionized women’s advancement in higher education (Solomon, 1985). Title IX states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1998).

Kristen Galles, a specialist in Title IX policy explained, “Title IX enabled women to get an education and enter the work force and changed what it means to be female in America” (Filisko, 2013, p. 8). Heralded as a landmark decision, Title IX was not merely an equalizer for women’s athletics, as some would assume. “The initial intent was to address the problem of
women being denied employment at and admission into colleges and universities” (Ladda, 2012, p. 12). It prohibited sex discrimination at every level of education (Ladda, 2012).

Prior to the implementation of Title IX, schools could legally exclude women because of their gender. Consequently, poorly qualified males were often accepted before highly qualified females. If they were actually admitted, these women faced further discrimination. They had more restrictive rules, such as curfew; they were prohibited from participating in some “male only” organizations and leadership positions; and they had limited access to scholarships (Filisko, 2013). The passing of Title IX made these inequalities illegal.

Another positive effect of the Title IX legislation was in athletics. Prior to 1972, most colleges and universities did not have women’s intercollegiate athletics (Filisko, 2013). Since its inception, however, colleges and universities have witnessed an increase of approximately 134,000 women participating in intercollegiate athletics (Ladda, 2012). Obviously, this rise has added to the overall increase of women enrolling in post-secondary education.

By 1979, women’s enrollment in higher education had finally reached uniformity with men (Peter & Horn, 2005). But it did not stop there. Rather than settling at equal distribution, women forged ahead, creating a new gender gap. With time, it has widened (Aud et al., 2013). Many anticipate that this trend will continue (Hussar & Bailey, 2013).

**Women’s Educational Equity Act.** The Women’s Education Equity Act was established in 1974. It was a federal program that provided large amounts of funding to help institutions meet the requirements of Title IX. “This program promotes education equity for women and girls through competitive grants. The program designates most of its funding for local implementation of gender-equity policies and practices. Projects may be funded for up to
four years” (US Dept. of Education, 2013). The aim was to increase the fight against bias toward women in education (Tyre, 2008).

**American Association of University Women (AAUW).** Still concerned that girls were falling behind, the AAUW, in 1992, published a controversial report *How Schools Shortchange Girls.* It provided a “comprehensive assessment of the status of girls in public education today” (p. 1). It claimed that teachers gave more attention to boys and that teaching methods fostered competition rather than collaboration. For many girls, according to the authors, this affected learning. Interaction patterns, especially in sciences and math, were particularly biased toward boys. As a result of the bias in education, girls were graduating with lower levels of self-esteem. The report did admit, however, that in college girls tended to do better (AAUW, 1992).

Sommers (2013) questioned the validity of the report. “What was so bizarre is that it [the report] came out right at the time that girls had just overtaken boys in almost every area” (p. 102). She was dubious of the data used to support some of the arguments of male bias in the classroom. She claimed that the actual data was non-existent. “Despite the errors, the campaign to persuade the public that girls were being diminished personally and academically was a spectacular success” (Sommers, 2013, p. 102). The report was so compelling that in 1994 new funds were poured into education. These funds were allocated to train teachers to be better equipped in helping girls succeed (Tyre, 2008).

**Summary of History of Women in Education**

To review the extent of women’s progress is exhilarating as it is a story of extreme triumph. The same women who were shut out of higher education in the earliest part of this country are now surpassing men at every level. It seems logical that some of the current gender
gap can be attributed to this female achievement. Women have made tremendous strides, and this is definitely worth celebrating.

Still, it seems males have not experienced similar growth. As a mother of both a boy and a girl said to me in a personal conversation, “We have empowered our females but are not empowering our males.” For that reason, it may be time for society to take as much interest in advancing men as it did 40 years ago in its support of women’s education. Learning more about student retention, especially in regards to males’ persistence, may be one area where males can be helped.

**Student Retention Research**

Retention is the most heavily studied issue in higher education. With its volumes of literature, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) admitted that all the research is unmanageable. In a later work, they conceded, “The volume of this literature is staggering” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 396). For that reason, this will not be a comprehensive review of the literature. Instead, I will attempt to review ideas and studies that seem salient or overlapping. Generally, most of the theories and studies can be integrated into a comprehensive model that encompasses the most agreed upon institutional and student characteristics that promote persistence. First, I explore the history of retention research. Next, I examine the recent research in exploring agreed upon institutional and student characteristics that affect retention. I also review some of the recent studies that examine persistence after the first year.

**History of Retention Research**

High interest in retention did not arise in higher education until the 1930s when student enrollment numbers began to grow. This influx of students increased the awareness of attrition rates. One of the first studies was by McNeely in 1938. Referring to attrition as student
mortality, he explored the extent and pattern of attrition from sixty institutions across the country (Berger et al., 2012).

The expansion in higher education after the GI Bill, along with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, yielded a more diverse student body on most campuses. Many colleges were unprepared. Alongside these events and the growing student unrest of the 1960s came a growing desire to understand academic failure (Berger et al., 2012).

The work of Astin (1964) was one of the more prominent of the time. His longitudinal study, exploring dropout characteristics, used two questionnaires: One was during the freshman year in 1957 and the second was during the senior year of 1961. He surveyed 6,660 high aptitude students. His operational definition of dropout was any student who “reported that he (a) had not yet completed his undergraduate training and (b) was not currently enrolled in a college or university” (p. 220).

The dropout rate for the cohort was 10.4%. With only a 62% return rate on the second survey, he posited that this figure may have been greater had the response rate been higher. He found low socioeconomic status (SES), low high school class rank, lack of plans for a postgraduate degree, and limited application for scholarships were significantly related to dropping out. In personality, he observed that dropouts tended to be “more aloof, self-centered, impulsive, and assertive than non-dropouts” (Astin, 1964, p. 219). Also, “girls had a significantly higher dropout rate (13.8%) than the boys (8.7%)” (p. 221).

By 1970, the topic of retention was ubiquitous within higher education. Administrators were interested in systematically identifying the causes of attrition at their campuses. With research done by Astin (1964) as their springboard, the theories of Spady (1971), Tinto (1975), and Bean (1980) evolved. Rather than solely examining student characteristics, all three
theorists recognized the interplay between the student and the campus environment in influencing the dropout process. “If the student and the environment are congruent in their norms, the student will assimilate both socially and academically, increasing the likelihood of persistence” (Berger et al., 2012, p. 23).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1979), two foundational retention researchers, measured the interaction of Spady’s and Tinto’s models. In a small quantitative study, they found social and academic integration variables had different effects on different students, depending upon background characteristics. In their study, the most significant positive interaction effect was student-faculty relationships. In general, their findings, just like Spady and Tinto, underscored the complex interactions academically and socially in student decisions to persist or withdraw.

Astin (1999) continued his research, using national databases from hundreds of colleges. He recognized that involvement was a critical factor in persistence. Living on campus was one of the strongest predictors of retention. Additionally, playing an intercollegiate sport, participating in faculty research projects, working part-time on campus, joining fraternities or sororities, and being involved in honors programs were all positively related to persistence.

With the main theories established, retention research multiplied exponentially in the 1980s. Colleges recognized that the enrollment boom of the previous decades was over. Increasing efforts to retain students became a priority. By the end of this decade, most campuses had established an office of enrollment management. It became the coordinating place for financial aid, admissions, registration, and institutional research in attempting to better influence enrollment (Berger et al., 2012).

The 1990s saw expansion of research, knowledge, and strategies to improve retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Refinement of some of the earlier theories occurred (Berger et
al., 2012). For example, Berger and Braxton (1998) elaborated on Tinto’s theory by observing the role that institutional attributes play in the social integration of the student. Other teams of researchers sought to combine the theories of the early researchers (Cabrera, Castañeda, Amaury, & Hengstler, 1992; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). Tierney (1999) questioned the validity of Tinto’s theory for minority students while Braxton and others (2014) recognized the weakness of Tinto’s theory when applied to community colleges.

The effect of finances on retention also came into focus during this period. Contending that Tinto’s model was “silent about the role of ability to pay once students enroll” (Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990, p. 305), researchers found that ability to pay did affect persistence. Students satisfied with the cost of college were less likely to withdraw. Also, students from upper quartile of income were more likely to persist than those from the lowest quartile. Furthermore, Cabrera et al. (1990) also found that ability to pay moderated the effects of goal and institutional commitment although it did not moderate academic performance or social integration.

According to Berger and his research team (2012), “Recognizing that persistence and retention are distinct concepts began to fully emerge in the late 1990s” (p. 28). While retention was an important concept for institutions, many scholars were beginning to realize that persistence-to-completion, regardless of where it occurred, was the ultimate goal. Admittedly, many students attended more than one institution. Thus, withdrawing from an institution after the first year may only mean that the student had transferred.

**Current Retention Research and Trends**

In spite of the prevalence of theory, research, and campus wide initiatives, retention has been stagnant, and remains lower than what most campus officials prefer (Advisory Committee
on Student Financial Assistance, ACSFA, 2012; ACT 2013; Braxton et. al., 2014; Habley et al., 2012; Tinto, 2012). There are some indications that the retention rate is actually decreasing. According to the 2013 statistics for ACT, 33.9% of freshmen at four year institutions did not return for their second year. In 1998 that figure was 36.3% while in 1989 it was 39.9% (ACT, 2013; Astin & Oseguera, 2005). The numbers are more sobering for certain populations: minority groups, first-generation college students, those from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and males (ACSFA, 2012; Berger et al., 2012).

With increasing accountability for higher education, retention rates are now the core indicator for accreditation. Equally challenging for higher education institutions are the various national ranking systems, such as that of US News & World Report, which applies retention numbers in determining position of rank. These facts, along with the increasing competition for students and resources, make interest in retention an ongoing issue. Retention research and the fine tuning of theories continue to dominate higher education (Berger et al., 2012; Braxton et al., 2014).

Tinto (1975), the major retention theorist, observed the interaction of institutional variables and individual student characteristics in affecting persistence. Within these two broad categories are a myriad of variables as exemplified by Reason (2009) in Figure 5. He based his model on the earlier work of Terenzini and Reason (2005).
This model “takes into account the multiple student, faculty, and institutional influences research shows are involved in shaping first-year student learning and persistence” (Terenzini & Reason, 2005, p. 1). As far as these researchers were concerned, theirs was a “more comprehensive, integrated conception of the first year of college than is currently available” (p. 2). They added, “Multiple forces operate in multiple settings to influence student learning and persistence” (Terenzini & Reason, 2005, p. 5).

Students arrive on campus with back-ground variables. They possess socio-demographic traits (gender, race/ethnicity, parents’ education, etc.), previous academic preparation and performance, personal and social experiences, as well as their personal dispositions. These
variables have a significant influence on persistence (Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005). However, it does not stop there.

Once on campus, the organizational context interacts with the student socio-demographics. Institutional features are a powerful force in their impact on persistence (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). In regards to persistence, the aspects of organizational contexts that are worth noting are in regards to how they directly or indirectly influence student outcomes along with the kinds of student experiences they support or discourage (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). Using the massive amounts of retention research as the base, I will further explore the factors that consistently appear in the literature.

**Institutional context.** Although older theories in retention placed most of the fault for attrition on student personal characteristics, Tinto (1975) introduced the idea that retention was the result of an interaction of student variables with institutional variables. Most modern researchers and theorists agree (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Reason, 2009). “A great deal of attention has been given to the study of institutional culture and its impact on student persistence” (Habley et al., 2012, p. 101).

It is important to note that most retention research focuses on institutions retaining students at their particular institution. However, persistence-to-completion is larger than institutional retention (Tinto, 2012). Weak institutional variables may yield a high student departure rate, yet those students may transfer and still graduate from another institution. Thus, although institutional variables are important to consider, they are not the whole picture when analyzing persistence-to-completion.

Because each student responds and interacts differently to the campus environment, the institutional variables are worth exploring when comparing persistence factors (Terenzini &
Reason, 2005). “Though certain conditions may be more important for some students than others, such as academic support for academically underprepared students, they all matter” (Tinto, 2012, p. 8). This section provides a brief overview of institutional conditions that seem to buttress student retention. However, because transfer is a viable pathway to persistence-to-completion, the focus of this particular research is not on specific institutional variables. The more in depth analysis is towards student variables.

As with any other aspect of retention research, the landscape regarding institutional characteristics is flooded (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Thus, this review, albeit incomplete, examines the more recent conclusions. For example, looking at the abundance of literature and research, Tinto (2012) pointed to four institutional conditions that seem to promote retention. With most research having similar findings (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Reason, 2009), while often using different terms, Tinto’s (2012) will be the framework for this portion of the review. Some of the other studies will be woven throughout.

It is important to point out that no one is espousing a one-size-fits-all approach in regards to institutional culture. Higher education is an extremely diverse organism. This is merely a presentation of broad and general principles that have been known to promote student retention because institutions definitely impact student success (Habley et al., 2012).

**Expectations.** First, according to Tinto (2012), is the environment of institutional expectations. Statements and actions of administrators, faculty, and staff reveal the level of expectations. Actions will speak louder than words. Clear and consistent high expectations of what it takes to succeed in college breed success while low expectations lead to failure. Faculty who expect quality work and extended student effort embolden student persistence. Appropriate academic advising is an integral part of institutional expectations. Whether or not a student
receives helpful advice about course load and major choices strongly affects motivation and resilience to continue, especially during the first year.

Support. Second, Tinto (2012) argued, is support. Terenzini and Reason (2005) also believed this to be influential in student persistence. This includes academic, social, personal, and sometimes financial support. This quality would scaffold the high expectancy. Having high expectations without a great deal of support is a death-wish for colleges. Tutors, remedial courses, study groups, freshman seminars, and study skills courses are some of the elements that fall in this category. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found evidence that these types of interventions had a positive effect on persistence. As struggling students experience success through this support, their level of self-efficacy grows; they have more confidence that they are able to be a successful college student. Other avenues of support are counseling services, a health center, residential life, campus activities such as clubs and organizations, and having particular groups for typically under-represented students.

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) confirmed the importance of high-quality institutional support. In a study of 18 baccalaureate-granting institutions, they found patterns of success at institutions that were intentional in providing academic support. Like other researchers (ACT, 2010), they observed that intrusive advising, especially for students needing extra support, correlated with higher grades during the first year which is a building block to retention. Other areas of support they unveiled were early warning systems, redundant safety nets, peer tutoring, supplemental instruction, and mentoring. Adelman (2006) added that intentional advising can protect students from a too difficult course load especially during the first year.
Assessment and feedback. Frequent assessment and feedback is one more institutional characteristic that promotes student retention (Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 2012). “To be effective, assessments must be frequent, early, and formative as well as summative in character” (Tinto, 2012, p. 54). Faculty who give frequent mini exams, for example, are providing opportunity for ongoing assessment of student strengths and weaknesses. This keeps students better on track in assessing areas of improvement. It also provides early-warning systems in preventing the proverbial student falling through the cracks.

Involvement and social integration. Lastly, but most important, is a campus that provides meaningful involvement or social integration (Astin, 1999; Reason, 2009; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Tinto, 2012). “The more students are academically and socially engaged on campus, especially with faculty and student peers, the more likely (other things being equal) they will stay and graduate from college” (Tinto, 2012, p. 64). Student satisfaction is directly related to social integration. Academic success often builds upon satisfaction. Most research and theory have confirmed this as being a vital factor for persistence (Astin, 1964, 1999; Bean, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 2012). Socially, finding a community of peers, whether through a campus organization, residence hall, fraternity/sorority, or athletic team strengthens retention levels. Living on campus is significantly related to persistence as it offers students ample opportunity to connect with other students and feel a direct involvement in the campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999).

One component of successful integration is informal interaction with faculty inside and outside of the classroom. This has been found to be one predominant factor in student persistence (Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 2005; Tinto, 2012). Faculty
who employ more collaboration and group work in their pedagogical practices also seem to produce more involvement and thus satisfaction for their students (Kuh et al., 2008).

**Student variables.** Every college student is unique. Every college student has a story that involves background characteristics, intellect, academic experiences, academic goals, vocational ambitions, and personal qualities that have a direct effect on persistence. This section synthesizes the massive literature regarding the qualities that seem to propel a student toward graduation day.

**Background.** Kuh, Kinsley, and Buckley, in their 2007 report for the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), made a poignant observation when considering student success in college.

Students do not come to postsecondary education as tabula rasae. Rather, they are the products of many years of complex interactions with their family of origin and cultural, social, political, and educational environments. Thus, some students, more than others, are better prepared academically (Kuh et al., 2007, p. 5).

Other researchers observed that degree completion is, in large part, based upon student backgrounds. Those background variables include high school grades and class rank, gender, ethnicity, parental income and education, standardized test scores, and honors classes taken in high school (Adelman, 2006; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Habley et al., 2012). Kuh et al., (2007) also found that background had the strongest influence on first-year GPA. In their study, these demographics accounted for 29% variance in the grades. Reason (2009) noted that “academic preparation and performance, including successful completion of college preparatory coursework in high school, are likely the strongest precollege predictors of college persistence and degree attainment” (p. 664).
In 2000, Astin and Oseguera (2012) performed a comprehensive analysis of nationally-based data in order to examine pre-college, or background characteristics that seemed to most significantly correlate with completion of a bachelor’s degree within six years of enrolling. For the first-year student information, they drew from a sample from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s (CIRP) annual survey of entering freshmen. Six years later, they followed up the 1994 CIRP data by obtaining graduation data in 2000. In the end, they randomly selected 90,619 students for the analysis upon which they ran a series of descriptive weighted analyses to determine differences in degree completion.

Their results confirmed what other researchers (ACT, 2010; Kuh et al., 2007; Habley et al., 2012) have found in regards to background characteristics. High school grades were unequivocally the most significant background factor correlating with persistence. Standardized test scores were also significant. Additionally, parents who were alive and living together, as well as those who had post-secondary education levels and higher income levels were also statistically related to persistence-to-completion.

A national survey of four year public universities, What Works in Student Retention, had similar findings. Its researchers determined that the level of student preparation for college was positively correlated with retention (ACT, 2010). Horn and Kojaku (2001) agreed. A rigorous high school curriculum was strongly related to still being on track to receive a bachelor’s degree after three years (79% still on track). Among those with a mid-level curriculum, 62% were still enrolled and among students with a core curriculum, 55% were still on track.

In regards to parental education, Adelman (2006) found that being a first-generation college student was the most significant factor in negatively influencing attainment of a bachelor degree. Ting (2003) proposed that parents of first-generation students may encourage higher
education, but their lack of information in the college application process for both admission and financial aid may impede their children’s success. Additionally, first-generation students often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, which is a significant precursor to attrition.

Vuong et al. (2010) suggested that first-generation students may be at a disadvantage because of the lack of modeling. As Bandura (1977) noted, self-efficacy is built upon modeling. Therefore, not having parents who experience college success places first-generation students at a disadvantage.

Along the lines of family support, Tinto (1975) identified family encouragement as being an important source of emotional support in persisting to completion. Bean (1980) also iterated that family approval affects students and their determination to persist. Kelly, Lavergne, Boone, and Boone (2012) found that family encouragement was one of the strongest predictors in persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that parent influence on persistence was more significant than faculty influence.

However, as Kuh et al. (2008) pointed out, “pre-college characteristics do not explain everything that matters to student success in college” (p. 546). Personality factors also have a significant impact on college student success. Students from weak backgrounds often persist in the presence of strong academic non-cognitive variables. Once they arrive on campus, some students from weaker backgrounds find a way to succeed.

**Personality/non-cognitive variables.** In spite of the research support of the impact of traditional variables like high school grades and standardized test scores on college success, there are those who question their weight in college admission practices. These writers insist that personality characteristics should be considered in admissions because these qualities have been shown to significantly impact the college experience (Credé & Kuncel, 2008; Lounsbury,
Saudargas, & Gibson, 2004; Mattern & Shaw, 2010; Robbins et al., 2004; Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). Alarcon and Edwards (2013) also challenged the prevailing notion that ability is the traditional determinant of college success. “Ability is a key aspect of whether or not a student remains in the University. However, motivation is also a key aspect in that students with ability but lacking motivation to perform at school may leave the University” (p. 134). Tinto (1993) admitted that student dispositions play an integral role in persistence.

Personal variables, or student dispositions (Reason, 2009), may include attitudes such as motivation (goal-setting), work ethic (conscientiousness), organization (study skills, time management), and self-perceptions (self-efficacy). These variables have a significant impact on persistence (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Kim, Newton, Downey, & Benton, 2010). In a 2004 meta-analysis exploring the role of psychosocial factors on college outcomes, Robbins, and his team of researchers, found overwhelming evidence for their influence on college success. Academic related skills (study skills and time management), academic self-efficacy (academic self-confidence), and academic goals (valuing a college education) had the strongest positive relation with retention (Robbins et al., 2004). “Educational persistence models may underestimate the importance of academic engagement, as evidenced by academic goals, academic-related skills, and academic self-efficacy constructs in college students’ retention behavior” (Robbins et al., 2004, p. 275). In another meta-analysis of 19 studies examining study skills, study habits, and study attitudes (SSHA), Credé and Kuncel (2008) found a high correlation with academic success. “Aspects of SHSAs best explain why some succeed despite predictions of failure and why some fail despite predictions of success” (p. 439).

In a more specific study, Mattern and Shaw (2010) examined effects of self-efficacy on retention. Their national sample of freshmen (n= 107,453) revealed a positive relation between
academic self-efficacy and retention. Likewise, Vuong et al. (2010) had similar results with their sample of college sophomores ($n=1,291$). Academic self-efficacy was significantly related to both GPA and persistence.

Thus, some of the research indicates that although students may have low high school grades and scores, a high level of non-cognitive qualities may mitigate the effects of weaker high school achievement on college success. In turn, this could buttress persistence. As Kuh and his colleagues (2008) iterated, pre-college characteristics are not the sole determinant in college persistence. Nevertheless, Tinto (1993) concluded that academic ability certainly plays a role in persistence. The complex question seems to be: What is the interplay between academic competence and non-cognitive skills? Research shows that both are vital to academic success.

*Goal commitment/institutional commitment.* Another aspect of non-cognitive attributes is commitment. Commitment to college can take two forms: goal commitment and institutional commitment. In the arena of goal commitment, Spady (1970) noted “Survival in college is dependent largely on a clear and realistic set of goals” (p. 72). Others have concluded that the higher the level of goals or aspirations, the greater likelihood there is of college completion (Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993; Wells, Seifert, Padgett, Park, & Umbacck, 2011). Lord and her cohort of researchers (2013) found that students with lower aspirations and vague goals were more likely to leave school even as juniors and seniors. Tinto (1993) postulated that a student with a high goal commitment “may decide to ‘stick it out’ even in unsatisfactory circumstances because the perceived benefits of obtaining a college degree are so dependent upon obtaining that degree” (p. 44).

Institutional commitment can be defined as “the person’s commitment to the institution in which he/she is enrolled” (Tinto, 1993, p. 43). Although this concept is important for
institutions’ retaining students, it may have less impact on persistence-to-completion. A weak level of institutional commitment may lead to transfer; however, a student with high career goals will most likely continue on to graduation even if at a different institution (Tinto, 1993). This seems logical. Then again, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that transferring did have a small but significant negative effect on persistence-to-graduation.

Goal commitment alone, however, may not be enough if the student lacks academic ability. Tinto (1993) observed that goal commitment is “contingent upon the intervening effects of student ability” (p. 43). Noting various studies, he showed that students with high academic competence and moderate to high goal commitment are most likely to persist. In comparison, “individuals with low competence but with moderate to high commitment tended to persist in college unless forced to leave because of failing grades” (p. 43). Students’ lack of ability may mitigate their high levels of goal commitment.

**Academic/cognitive variables.** Once on campus, academic performance, as measured by GPA, is one of the most important factors affecting persistence (Adelman, 2006; Bean, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tinto (1975, 1993) stated that academic integration is one of the foundational principles in persistence. Contextually, academic integration refers to students’ meeting certain academic standards as well as identifying with the standards and norms of the academic system. Grades are typically the measurement of the strength of students’ academic integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Donhardt (2013) noted that a GPA above a 2.0 is significantly related to persistence and an increasing number of failing grades is the strongest predictor of non-completion.

Another study examining the role of grades on retention was done by Adelman (2006). Using data from National Center for Education Statistics, he found that earning less than 20
credits during the freshman year was a “distinct drag on degree completion” (p. 48). Earning so few credits could be a result of failing courses, repeating a course, or withdrawing from a course. It could also be the outcome of taking remedial courses which are often not given college credit. Adelman (2006) noted that half of the low credit group had taken remedial courses.

To study factors external to the actual grades and credits, Kuh and his colleagues (2008) examined student engagement which “represents both the time and energy students invest in academically purposeful activities” (p. 542). Such activities involve, but are not limited to: contributing to class discussions, collaborating on class projects, interacting with instructors outside of class, and coming to class prepared. In their study, measuring the interaction between educationally purposeful activities and pre-college academic achievement, they found that students who were academically engaged tended to earn higher first-year grades. This particular statistic was significant even for students who had higher high school grades. Favorable pre-college characteristics were somewhat inconsequential if a student was not academically engaged on campus (Kuh et al., 2008).

Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka (2010) conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between class attendance and academic outcomes. Using 68 published and unpublished research articles that spanned 82 years, they found a significant correlation between class attendance and GPA (k=33, n=9,243, p=.41). Class attendance was a better predictor of college grades than any other predictor of performance such as high school GPA and standardized test scores when compared to meta-analytic reviews for those two variables (Hezlett et al., 2001). Interestingly, class attendance was also found to be more significantly correlated with grades than study habits and skills when compared to the previously mentioned meta-analytic findings of Credé and Kuncel (2008). Credé et al. (2010) attributed the strength of class attendance to “repeated and
extensive contact with information and repeated practice of skills” (p. 285), which reflects the academic engagement concept espoused by Kuh et al. (2008).

For similar reasons, disrupted attendance, or stopping out of college attendance only to return at a later date, has a negative effect on persistence (Ewert, 2012; Kuh et al., 2008). These students are less likely to be socially integrated due to their limited time on campus (Ewert, 2012). Social integration, like academic integration, has been shown to be a critical component of college persistence.

**Social integration/fitting in.** Bean (2005), after a multitude of empirical and theoretical studies on college student retention, concluded, “Few would deny that the social lives of students in college and their exchanges with others inside and outside the institution are important to retention” (p. 227). In their review of the research, Peltier et al. (1999) found overwhelming evidence supporting the notion that being involved on campus is significantly related to persistence-to-completion. Milem and Berger (1997) observed that social integration is even more significant than academic integration when correlated with retention, while Leppel (2002) found “integration into the college environment does appear overall to have a positive impact on persistence” (p. 444). Ewert (2012) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) had similar findings. This empirical evidence supports the theories of involvement of Astin (1999) and social integration of Tinto (1975).

Within the experience of social integration, there is a caveat if students become unbalanced. For example, Astin and Oseguera (2012) found that excessive partying, drinking, and smoking had a negative effect on persistence. The conclusion seems obvious. Although social integration is a critical component of most students’ persistence, ultimately, balancing social activities with academics is vital. This observation certainly confirms the basic college
retention theories that posit that both academic and social integration are components of college persistence (Astin, 1999; Bean, 2005; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975).

**Finances.** No longer being able to financially afford the education is certainly one of the more acceptable reasons to leave college. However, Bean (2005) pointed out that many students leave college for other reasons but blame it on financial issues. That point notwithstanding, financial concerns are a major factor for many students according to the research.

The cost of a college education continues to grow (Robb, 2012). St. John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (2000) suggested that financial variables need to be incorporated into studies and theories of persistence: “Student perceptions of their ability to pay are integral to the commitments students make to their institutions and, thus, need to be included for multiple logical reasons” (p. 43). Butterfield and Pemberton (2012) observed that in some cases, “in terms of retention, financial pressures likely trumped academic achievement” (p. 23). Some students, in spite of strong academic achievement, do not continue their education due to financial pressure.

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been shown to be a factor in persistence (Adelman, 2006). Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen (1990) were the first to posit that financial issues factored into persistence decisions. They pointed to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data that reported low SES students were less likely to persist than students from higher SES backgrounds. Cabrera et al., (1990) argued that financial constraints, like so many other persistence variables, interacted with other variables such as institutional commitment, academic integration, and social integration.

The researchers used longitudinal data from a national sample of 1,375 college students attending four year institutions. They measured the impact of ability to pay on other variables
such as goal commitment, academic integration, social integration, and skills and abilities and their effects on institutional satisfaction and persistence. Using logistic regression, the researchers found persistence was directly related to SES. Those in the highest quartile of SES were less likely to withdraw than those in the lowest quartile. They also found that ability to pay had a moderating effect on goal and institutional commitment. This revealed that ability to pay can indirectly affect college persistence. Interestingly, they found that ability to pay had no effect on the academic and social integration.

With college costs rising, and ability to pay a known concern, financial aid has dramatically increased over the past three decades in an attempt to help students from the lower SES quartiles (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1992; Haynes, 2008; Robb, 2012). Financial aid can take on many forms such as grants, loans, and work-study programs. It can also be need-based, merit-based, or a combination of the two. The research regarding the effects of financial aid on persistence is mixed (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In 1992, Cabrera and another team of researchers presented a causal model that incorporated studies from financial aid literature and persistence literature. To test their model, they used a longitudinal research design. The sample was from a large commuter urban institution. A total of 466 students participated in the survey. The dependent variable was institutional persistence while the intervening variables were institutional commitment, goal commitment, academic integration, social integration, significant others’ influence, financial aid, and financial attitude (concerns about finances). They used structural equation modeling via Linear Structural Relations (LISREL) to estimate the parameters of the relationships among the variables.
They found that the largest total effect on persistence was intent-to-persist followed by college grade point average. These were followed by receiving financial aid. The researchers concluded that although financial aid did not appear to have a direct effect on persistence, receiving aid had a significant indirect effect. The researchers postulated that the aid facilitated students’ social interactions on campus because students did not have to work to pay for school. It also freed them from financial anxiety which released them to engage in academic activities. The researchers concluded “Financial aid appears to do what it was intended to accomplish, that is, to facilitate both the academic and social participation (involvement) of students in college” (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1992, p. 590). Most theories of college student persistence acknowledge the importance of both these variables.

Haynes (2008) conducted a literature review on 7 research studies examining the effects of financial aid on persistence. Although there were no clear indicators of specific role of financial aid on persistence, one thing seemed clear: “Student borrowing has a negative effect on persistence for all students” (Haynes, 2008, p. 32). Haynes (2008) added that some studies revealed that financial aid may lead to a student to enroll in an institution; however, it is academic performance and social integration that are the stronger predictors of persistence. “Simply funneling dollars to aid programs, therefore, only goes halfway in addressing precollege deficits in low socioeconomic, first-generation students” (p. 34). In spite of the negative effects of student loans, Robb (2012) pointed out that they are becoming the more frequently applied form of financial aid.

**Summary of Student Retention Research**

Student retention is the most heavily researched topic in higher education (Braxton et al., 2014). As a result, the copious amounts of information are unmanageable (Pascarella &
Terenzini, 1991; 2005). However, amidst the volumes of information and theories, there are consistent patterns of understanding. Admittedly, persistence is a complex interaction between institutional variables and student variables. Thus, it is difficult to determine a one-size-fits-all approach to retaining students. However, there are elements of persistence that are consistent. Students’ pre-college characteristics, such as high school grades and test scores, SES, and level of parents’ education are significantly correlated with persistence. Once on campus, students’ ability to become academically and socially integrated is also directly related to persistence. Within the academic construct are grades and academic acumen as well as non-cognitive qualities such as self-discipline, organization, class attendance, and goal commitment.

Institutional qualities assist the students in persisting to completion. Schools that have high expectations with high levels of faculty-student interaction along with a myriad of opportunities for student involvement along with financial, academic, and personal assistance for students seem to have higher levels of student retention. As has been noted, most of these concepts have arisen from first-to-second year attrition studies. Will research after the first year reveal substantial information?

**Persistence-to-Completion Research**

Most retention research focuses on first-to-second year retention. According to Braxton and colleagues (2014), there are a myriad of reasons for this. First, most student attrition occurs during the first year of matriculation. Second, first-year students are simply more vulnerable and thus warrant attention. Finally, according to researchers and policy makers, institutions of higher learning “can act more quickly with interventions to prevent departure during the first year of enrollment” (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 7).
Also noteworthy is that most retention research is based on attrition studies. By examining characteristics of students who leave higher education, researchers have assumed student qualities that yield persistence in higher education. The faulty notion is that attrition is a mirror image of retention (Tinto, 2012). Although the prior research is insightful, “understanding the reasons for leaving doesn’t necessarily translate into helping students persist” (Tinto, 2012, p. 4). Instead of examining failure to determine success, it seems prudent to explore those who have experienced success. Unfortunately, even in studying upper-class students, most of the research concentrates on attrition.

By studying why students leave during or after their first year of college, institutions hope to improve their retention rates. However, especially more recently, more research is being conducted during the years after the freshman year. “To merely focus on year-to-year retention as an indicator of success may obscure latent causes of non-completion” (Donhardt, 2013, p. 208). Nevertheless, the number of studies in this area is small.

In one of the earlier studies exploring junior and senior attrition factors, Neumann and Neumann (1989) theorized that upper class students leave for different reasons than first-year students. They posited that by the time students are juniors and seniors they have integrated socially and academically. Their conclusion was “these components, which play a key role in Tinto’s framework, are not the dominant predictors of juniors’ and seniors’ departure from college” (p. 131).

Rather than low GPAs or failure to socially integrate, that are typically associated with first-year attrition, Neumann and Neumann (1989) determined that quality of learning environment is correlated with attrition for juniors and seniors. With classes being more demanding, upper-class students thrive on more faculty-student contact and becoming more
actively involved in their academic program. They also value high quality programs. Attrition is more likely to occur at this stage when these components are lacking. Although the researchers seemed to eschew Tinto’s theory, their study reinforced the value of higher levels of academic integration during upper-class years.

Also noting the scant research on upper-class students’ retention, Lord and her colleagues (2013) pointed to the different kinds of stress faced by upper level students that can lead to dropping out. According to their statistics, 25% of students leave between their freshman and sophomore years. However, they deduced that upwards to another 25% of students leave before graduating. The researchers argued that the transitions in the advanced years “may be a critical link to understanding student persistence to graduate” (p. 154). During the later stages of a college education, students’ majors become more solidified. This transition ushers in a new level of responsibility in establishing goals. For example, borderline grades that are acceptable in general education courses may not be competitive within the academic requirements of a major. These classes may be more difficult. Also, in this stage, students may become disillusioned with their major. In regards to social integration, it may have lost its novelty. Many upper-class students move off campus. Thus, they are more disengaged from campus life.

After conducting research, Lord et al. (2013) found that the grades from the first two years of college attendance were the strongest predictor to persistence-to-graduation. They also concluded that students with lower aspirations and vague goals were more likely to leave school even as juniors and seniors. In their research, intervention with upper-class students had a small, but significant effect on persistence. The intervention involved: connecting students with graduate mentors who encouraged more involvement with faculty. These mentors also assisted with class preparation and encouraged faithful class attendance along with providing easily
accessible resource information. The results simply confirmed that improving academic integration, even for upper-class students, is directly related to persistence. It also reinforced the findings of Neumann and Neumann (1989) that more comprehensive academic intervention strengthens upper-class students’ persistence.

Donhardt (2013) also found a direct correlation between academic integration effects and persistence-to-completion. The researcher performed an ex-post-facto study, correlating certain variables to degree completion after the fourth year of attendance. The variables that were significant were stopping-out, or not remaining consistently enrolled during the four-year tenure, taking remedial classes, receiving failing grades, taking less than 12 credits (part-time enrollment) in a semester, and withdrawing from classes. The more these variables rose, the lower became the probability to completion.

In a study that supported most aspects of social and academic integration, Allen, Robbins, Casillas, and Oh (2008) also determined that first-year grades were the best predictor of persistence to the third year. The researchers also found social connectedness (integration) and motivation (goal commitment) were directly related to remaining in school. However, these components were not as significant as first-year academic performance. Still the researchers observed, “Since a motivation construct [academic self-discipline] was a salient predictor of first-year academic performance. . . . We conclude that motivation affects long term enrollment indirectly [through academic performance]” (p. 660).

**Summary of Persistence to Completion Research**

Because most retention research involves first-to-second year attrition, some researchers have contended the focus may be invalid when considering persistence-to-completion. First, some argued that attrition is not necessarily a mirror of retention. Therefore, researching drop-
out patterns may not be an accurate assessment of actual persistence variables (Tinto, 2012). Second, some hypothesized that upper-class students may face different stressors and thus will require a different set of persistence characteristics (Allen et al., 2008; Donhardt, 2013; Lord et al., 2013). In spite of these objections, there is a dearth of research in the area of persistence-to-completion or persistence past the second year.

Within the studies that do exist, there are commonalities. The most predominant finding is that the first-year grades have the greatest effect on persistence-to-completion (Allen et al., 2008; Donhardt, 2013; Lord et al., 2013). Other variables that affect upper-class students’ persistence are the strength and clarity of their goals (Allen et al., 2008; Lord et al., 2013) and the students becoming more thoroughly and intensely academically integrated (Allen et al., 2008; Lord et al., 2013; Neumann & Neumann, 1989). This higher level of academic integration includes interacting with faculty, being more active in classes, attending classes, and being prepared for class.

Within the various components that support persistence-to-completion, there is a more involved quest for my study: Are there differences, by gender, in these variables? Are there elements of persistence that are more significant for females? Or are there issues within persistence more salient for males?

**Differences, by Gender, in Persistence Factors**

Bean (1980) observed that males and females withdrew from college for different reasons. Other earlier researchers (Astin, 1964; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975) also unveiled differences, by gender, in the patterns of leaving. In a more current treatise, Ewert (2012) argued that the “college experiences contribute to the gender gap in graduation” (p. 838). In her opinion, there is a definite difference in the college experience, by gender, and this difference has
a direct effect on the gender gap. Linda Sax (2008) outlined many of these gender differences in the college experience, although she was not as quick to attribute the gender gap to these differences.

All these researchers implored further study in the area of differences in attrition and retention by gender. However, there is still a very miniscule body of research in this area (Conger & Long, 2010; Buchmann, 2009; Ewert, 2012). There is even less research in differences, by gender, in persistence-to-completion. I will explore some of the studies that have occurred.

**Background Factors**

Background factors significantly contribute to persistence. The more influential background variables are high school grades, the rigor of the high school curriculum, and class rank (Adelman, 2006; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Habley et al., 2012). Generally speaking, girls have higher high school grades and rank, and are more likely to take rigorous courses, particularly in math and science (Buchmann, 2009; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Peter & Horn, 2005; Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Sax, L. J., 2008). This is in light of the fact that boys and girls share relatively the same levels of cognitive ability (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Jacob, 2002).

Jacob (2002) elaborated more fully on gender differences in background factors that are part of the k-12 educational experience. For example, boys are more likely to be retained in elementary school. During their k-12 experience, 40% of boys experience some type of behavior problems compared to 20% of the girls. Boys are more likely to be in remedial classes and spend less time on homework than girls. In the area of actual non-cognitive abilities and interest, Jacob determined that boys are significantly more likely to dislike school. On the other hand, girls are more attentive and organized. Others had similar findings in gender differences in high
school non-cognitive attitudes (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Kleinfeld, 2009; Ross et al., 2012). Overall, research has shown girls to be more academically motivated and successful than boys in every area of K-12 education (Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, & Lei, 2010).

A gendered-effect in parental education levels has also been found (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). When both parents had some level of college, there was no gender difference in college completion. But things changed drastically in other scenarios. For example, when a father had a high school education or less, daughters increased their levels of college completion while graduation levels of sons dropped. Graduation rates of sons without a father in the home also dropped drastically. Males’ only advantage in this comparison of parental education levels was when fathers had some college and mothers had a high school education. “The shift implies a growing vulnerability of boys in families with low-educated or absent fathers and a corresponding growing advantage for sons of highly educated fathers” (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013, p. 125).

**General Factors**

In the area of persistence variables once on campus, early research detected gender differences in why students withdrew from college. For example, Astin (1964) noted that male dropouts were more likely to have doubts about their major, low grades, and dissatisfaction with being a student. Males were also more likely to list financial reasons for leaving. Females, in comparison, attributed family responsibilities as being a main reason for leaving college.

Reflecting cultural attitudes, the study by Spady (1970) detected differences, by gender, in persistence factors. Persistence was more important for males, vocationally, because a college degree determined their future income and status. “For women, on the other hand, the decision to pursue a career is less often dictated by social or economic necessity. As a result, women are
both freer to deal with college as an intrinsically rewarding experience and face less pressure to finish” (Spady, 1970, p. 72). He did find, however, the women who had definite career aspirations were more likely to finish than men with similar aspirations. With modern women having higher career aspirations and being less likely to assume financial dependency on a man’s career, this finding is obviously outmoded (DiPrete and Buchmann, 2013; Goldin et al., 2006).

Bean (1980), in his quantitative test of a causal model of student attrition among freshmen students, added to the initial, albeit small, gender comparisons in departure. He found they left for different reasons. Although both were influenced by institutional commitment, women were more affected by their satisfaction level. Men would leave even if they were satisfied whereas women would tend to remain if they were satisfied. Women were also more likely to rank practical value, or the belief that an education would be useful in obtaining employment, as having an effect on their staying in school. This option ranked much lower on men’s departure variables. Lastly, men were more likely than women to leave as a result of low grades.

Bean and Vesper (1994) further compared the differences, by gender, in satisfaction. Women’s satisfaction was significantly correlated with contact with advisors, institutional quality, having friends, and living on campus. Women were also more concerned with funding their education. For men, father’s education and parental encouragement were significantly related to satisfaction, but these factors were not related to satisfaction for women. The researchers also found that, in general, women were more satisfied in being students than were men. With satisfaction being related to persistence, this factor could be one explanation for the gender gap in persistence.
In a more recent study, Leppel (2002) found marriage had a negative effect on persistence for both genders. She also deduced that children had a negative effect for men but not for single women. “Children appear to be a stronger motivator toward persistence for single women” (Leppel, 2002, p. 443). She noticed that marriage and children together had a negative effect for both men and women.

**Social Integration**

In a recent book, Linda Sax (2008) drew “on the nation’s largest and longest running study” (p. 5). She examined 40 years of Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) data and 4 years of College Student Survey data to address differences, by gender, in the college experience. Sax unveiled many differences in the areas that have significant relationship with persistence.

In the area of social integration, females were more apt to be involved in student groups and more likely to talk with their instructors. While half of the men admitted to partying, only one-third of women said the same. In another study examining social integration, Leppel (2002) determined that the most socially integrated males had lower grades. Fletcher (2002) noted student observations that women spent more time studying while men were more engaged in the social aspects of the collegiate experience. Excessive partying has been shown to be significantly related to attrition (Astin & Oseguera, 2012).

In comparison, women’s GPA was not negatively affected by heavy social integration (Leppel, 2002). The most involved women had the highest GPAs. Leppel (2002) speculated that women with high social integration were also highly academically integrated. In comparison, men with high social integration were not as equally integrated academically. According to the researcher, this could reflect that “women are more concerned than men with intrinsic factors
like intellectual development” (Leppel, 2002, p. 444). Such a conclusion is in line with research that points to stronger non-cognitive measures among women (Conger & Long, 2010; Jacob, 2002; Sax, L. J., 2008). It is also possible that women’s social integration involves campus activities and clubs, while men’s increased social activity is in non-campus related activities such as partying or socializing with friends (Fletcher, 2002).

Ewert (2012) found gender differences in the effects of social integration, particularly in playing a sport. Men were more likely to participate in varsity sports, which had a negative effect on GPA. In comparison, women’s participation in sports had a positive effect on GPA.

On another note, regarding college sports, Ewert (2012) noted the overall effect of sports on the gender gap after considering the number of men participating. “If it were not for men’s athletic participation in college, the gender gap in college graduation would be even wider than observed” (p. 838). In other words, many men’s attendance in college is primarily due to their ability to play an intercollegiate sport.

Comparing the effects of social integration as a function of gender, Jones (2010) examined social integration’s impact on subsequent institutional commitment. With gender role theory as his conceptual framework, he hypothesized that women would benefit more from social integration than men because “women are better prepared for social relationships and are socialized to desire and need social relationships more than men” (p. 689). He added, however, that women’s propensity to be more emotionally involved with their social network may create added stress not experienced by men. This could have a negative impact on institutional commitment and, thus, persistence for women.

Using data that was collected as part of a multi-institutional study of eight private United Methodist-related colleges, Jones (2010) surveyed 408 full-time freshman students. He detected
significantly higher levels of social integration among the females. Furthermore, he found social integration had a stronger, more positive impact on the subsequent institutional commitment of female students in comparison to male students.

Ewert (2012) disagreed that social integration was more influential for female students. In her study, both genders were positively affected by social integration. Furthermore, although both genders persistence levels benefitted from being socially integrated, she found that social integration, through intramural sports, was a significant positive correlation for men’s persistence to graduation. In comparison, it had no effect on women’s persistence.

Overall, the research seems to indicate that social integration is an important persistence variable for both men and women. The difference is the source of social integration—men find it in athletics, hanging out with friends, and partying; women find it in campus activities—and the extent of social integration, men’s excessive social integration has a negative effect on GPA, while women’s excessive social integration has a positive effect on GPA.

**Academic Integration**

In the area of academic integration, Sax, L. J. (2008) found that women had higher grades than men throughout their college career. Others had similar findings. Conger and Long (2010) found women had higher first-year grades and the grade gap only widened as they progressed. Allen et al. (2008) also found that females outperformed males in first-year grades. Like others, they determined that first-year grades are the strongest predictor of persistence (Lord et al., 2013). DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) contended that the gender gap in completion rates is related to this gap in academic performance.

Additionally, women take more credits their first year (Sax, L. J., 2008). As noted by Donhardt (2013), lower credit levels are often associated with failing classes or withdrawing
from classes. Conger and Long (2010) noticed that this gender gap in credits also widened throughout the college years. Donhardt (2013) found that lower credits were significantly predictive of attrition.

Linda Sax (2008) ascertained that women are also more likely to have plans to attend graduate school. Her findings in gender differences in aspirations buttressed the research of others (Ewert, 2012; Mattern & Shaw, 2010; Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Ross et al., 2012). Even as low as eighth grade, researchers have found that girls are more likely than their male peers to expect to get a doctoral-level degree or to aspire to jobs that require a college degree (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). Wells and his team of researchers (2011) contended that high educational aspirations are one of the major driving forces behind attaining higher levels of education.

In examining gender differences in academic engagement, Sax L. J. (2008) found, “Studying, tutoring other students, conducting independent study, taking honors courses, and spending quality time with faculty are each indicators of good grades for male students” (p. 182). On-campus academic engagement seemed to be an important element for men’s academic success. It is possible that males require the extra external motivation while women are internally motivated. Unfortunately, even though they may benefit from being more academically involved, males generally are less inclined to engage in these endeavors (Sax, L. J., 2008).

Ewert (2012) found males were more likely to experience disrupted attendance, or stopping out of their college career. They were also more likely to attend part-time. Both of these experiences have a negative effect on persistence and thus could account for some of the gender gap (Donhardt, 2013; Ewert, 2012).
Non-Cognitive Skills

The theory that girls possess more self-motivation is supported by the research of Conger and Long (2010). They demonstrated that females possess higher non-cognitive skills: organization, dependability, and self-discipline. This confirmed the findings of Jacob (2002) who claimed that non-cognitive skills account for 90% of the gender gap in higher education. He used student enrollment data from National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). This data included a national representative sample of eighth graders in 1988 that was re-surveyed every two years until 1994. It included data such as family background, cognitive ability, school achievement, and attitudes toward school. The 1994 data included information about post-secondary schooling and employment.

Not only did Jacob (2002) determine that females’ non-cognitive skills surpassed those of males, he also found that the college premium for women—or the differences in earnings between female college graduates and female high school graduates—was higher (55% more) than similar comparisons among men (40% more). In this area of vocation ambitions, the researcher also found that a higher percentage of high school boys (49%) than girls (41%) would rather work and earn money than go to school. Twenty-three percent of boys claimed they do not need more school for their jobs, while only 16% of girls said the same. This research confirmed the concerns of Mortenson (2006). He noted that men are still drawn to blue collar jobs in spite of those jobs becoming obsolete.

Finances and Debt

In one of the first studies exploring gender differences in taking on college debt, Dwyer, Hodson, and McLoud (2012) found a gender difference in students’ taking on debt. In the 2000s, 40% of female and 34% of male enrolled students took out educational loans, although
the amount of debt was similar between the genders. As debt for both genders grew in the years of college attendance, the researchers noticed that men were more likely to drop out at lower levels of debt. Women were more willing to take on increasing levels of debt to complete their education. This observation supports the findings of Jacob (2002). The value of college is higher for women than for men because of men’s better opportunities in the non-college labor market. Female dropouts face worse job opportunities than male dropouts (Dwyer et al., 2012).

**Summary on Persistence Differences, by Gender**

Although the research on persistence differences by gender is limited, some similarities have arisen in that miniscule body of knowledge. First are the stark differences between males’ and females’ non-cognitive abilities throughout their educational careers. Girls and young women enjoy school more, value the role of education in vocational preparation, have more ambitions for advanced degrees, study more, and are more organized and self-disciplined. Secondly, at every level of education, girls are more involved in school activities, which increases their level of social integration. This, according to Tinto (1975), is a viable persistence factor. And last, females have higher grades or are more academically integrated, which is another important precursor to persistence-to-completion.

Whether the college premium is higher for women than for men is debatable. Some researchers (Jacob, 2002) found that women who do not have a college degree face less opportunities for higher paying jobs than men in similar situations, while others (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), exploring studies from the 1990s, determined that there was no gender difference in the college premium. DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) noted that this particular incentive for women has grown over the years which could explain the lack of consistency in earlier studies; this is a newly growing trend. There do not seem to be any studies, however, that
determined the college premium for men was higher than for women. Therefore, it is possible this explains women’s willingness to accrue more college debt.

Although some of the gender gap in persistence can be attributed to k-12 education, higher education has a responsibility to ensure all its students succeed. A better understanding of the reasons for the disparity even at the post-secondary level is paramount. At this point, however, little has been done in response to the gender gap. This will be explored in the next section.

**Higher Education’s Response to the Gender Gap**

Mainstream media has taken note of the widening gender gap in higher education (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Yakaboski, 2011). Still, research has been limited (Buchmann, 2009; Butterfield & Pemberton, 2012; Ewert, 2012; McGauvran, 2011; Sax, L. J., 2008). Moreover, although there is mild concern over this trend amongst college administrators, beyond attempting to recruit more males, little else is being done to address this issue (Fletcher, 2002; Gose, 1999; Kleinfeld, 2009; Schellpfeffer, 2012).

According to Schellpfeffer (2012), numerous campus changes have accommodated the growing population of women. But many seem reluctant to over-emphasize the current gender gap. Until campuses reach the proverbial “tipping point,” when the balance becomes 60% female, administrators expressed only somewhat of a concern for the decrease in the numbers of male students (Schellpfeffer, 2012). Yakaboski (2011) admitted, “Feminists see the gender gap as a great success” (p. 573). For that reason—fear of disenfranchising the feminists—politicians, campus administrators, and other policy makers have seemed reticent to address the problem (Mortenson, 2006; Sum et al., 2003; Tyre, 2008).
Instead of being concerned about the male gender gap, they focus on income, race, and ethnicity with regard to gaps in higher education. King (2006) argued, “It [gender gap] should not obscure the larger disparities that exist by income and race/ethnicity for students of both genders” (p. 21). Admittedly, there have been racial disparities in every component of American life. It is hard to deny that a racial gap still exists in higher education. Rightfully, an abundance of research and resources have successfully been allotted to bridging that gap (Berger et al., 2012).

However, the gender gap is also worthy of study. Sommers (2013) explained that within the low income and minority family demographic, young women fare much better than young men in all areas of the education system. The same attention given to women and minorities in the past now needs to be directed toward males. DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) observed that one of the more stagnant rates in college completion has been among white males, while Reynolds and Burge (2008) explained that the greatest gender change in the past twenty years has been among white students.

Garibaldi (2007), a staunch advocate for improving the education of African American males, acknowledged, “A steadily growing gender gap exists among males and females of all races” (para. 1). McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann, and Shwed (2011) had similar observations. “Blacks’ rates of college completion have steadily risen over time but more rapidly for women than for men” (McDaniel et al., 2011, p. 892). In fact, black women have outpaced black men in college completion for more than 70 years (McDaniel et al., 2011). Although the race disparity in higher education is not over, higher education can no longer maintain its myopic focus on this race gap. It is time to also acknowledge the gender gap.
Attempting to Balance the Population

Many private colleges are now experimenting with an unspoken practice of affirmative action programs for their male applicants. As a result, high achieving girls are being overlooked in favor of lesser achieving males (Fonda & Berryman, 2000; Koerner et al., 1999). Some private campuses are close enough to the “tipping point” of 60% females to 40% males that this is becoming a necessity although few would outright admit to these actions (Buchmann, 2009; Gibbs, 2008; Tyre, 2008). For public universities, the consequences of gender-biased recruiting and admissions are more severe. Fearing lawsuits, public institutions have to be more careful in appearing to favor male applicants (Fonda & Berryman, 2000). The University of Georgia faced one such lawsuit in the late 1990s; a female student argued that she had been rejected partly due to her gender (Gose, 1999).

Using undergraduate admissions data from 1400 institutions, Kingsbury (2007) found in the past 10 years, many schools have been admitting men and women at very different rates. “The thumb on the scale [is] in favor of boys” (para. 6). With the gap seeming to be growing, “the thumb on the boys’ side of the admissions scale may have to press much harder in the coming years” (para. 8). What this yields is that some very accomplished young women are being rejected in order to accommodate less achieving young men.

Summary of Higher Education’s Response to the Gender Gap

Although many campus administrators do not seem overly concerned about the gender gap, many have altered their admissions process in order to favor men. However, without better preparing males to persist once enrolled, altering enrollment numbers is mere window dressing. Retention numbers will still stagnate or even, possibly fall which causes a direct and indirect financial burden to campuses. A better understanding of what propels males to persist could
shed more light on this issue. Unfortunately, with a preponderance of policy makers and administrators feeling tension from those who deny that there is a problem, higher education may continue to apply superficial measures.

**Reasons for the Gender Gap**

Theories explaining the gender gap abound. However, there is little research exploring these accounts (Buchmann, 2009; King, 2006). The gender gap is complex and multidimensional. This section will cover some of the contributing factors along with the most recent literature and research.

Many, like Gurian and Stevens (2005), Sax, L. (2008), Sommers (2013), and Tyre (2008), passionately decry the obvious struggle for boys. For them, it is a crisis. They insist that the k-12 educational environment is a major contributor. Their main contention is that education is feminized. The zero-tolerance discipline code is one example of a more feminized classroom. What some call normal boy activity and aggressiveness is now considered pathological (Sommers, 2013; Sax, L., 2008). Additionally, sky-rocketing academic standards are leading many boys to disengage from education at an early age. To many, it is no surprise that females are now outperforming males at every level of education (Sax, L., 2008; Tyre, 2008; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010).

There are many who, with equal passion, refute the claim that boys are in trouble (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008; King, 2006; Mead, 2006). They assert that the current gender gap can be attributed simply to the increase in female participation in higher education. Furthermore, Mead (2006) pointed out that more males are also pursuing post-secondary education. This research proves men are not in the grave danger some would claim.
In spite of these protests, the facts remain: There is a growing gender gap in enrollment and completion. Indeed, women are advancing at admirable levels. However, males are not keeping pace and this is worthy of investigation. The explanations for this gap, according to King (2006), fall into one of three categories: economic incentives, school effects, and social/psychological factors.

**Economic Incentives**

The job market for women with only a high school diploma has, historically, produced only low wage vocations. Women no longer accept that fate. Instead, more women are inclined to pursue post-secondary education as a means of increasing their wages (King, 2006). The study by Jacob (2002) confirmed this thought. He found that the college premium for women—or the differences in earnings between female college graduates and female high school graduates (55% more)—was higher than similar comparisons among men (40% more). However, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), in exploring numerous studies from the 1990s, found the college premium for men and women virtually the same. So the return on a college degree, in some studies, seems to hold more financial incentive for women than for men while, in others, there is no difference. It is possible that the shift represents the lower number of high paying blue collar jobs that were once readily available to men (Mortenson, 2006). It is also worthy to note that DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) observed a recently developing trend in this area. This, too, could explain the lack of consistency in earlier studies.

Additionally, modern women are more likely to consider full time employment as a viable lifestyle. They are not disposed to follow their mothers’ footsteps of eschewing a career while raising a family. Women are also less inclined to follow traditional occupations, such as clerical, that do not require a college degree (Goldin et al., 2006).
A potent additive to the equation has been the discovery of the birth control pill. With later marriage and later child bearing, women have been able to better plan their lives. They now have opportunities to complete both higher education and employment ambitions without an unplanned pregnancy causing them to drop out (DiPrete & Buchman, 2013; Goldin et. al., 2006).

Still one more economic incentive for women has been the rising divorce rate. Realizing that they can no longer rely on the financial support of a male companion for life, women have embraced the economic value of a college degree. The monetary returns for a female college graduate create a more secure future should divorce occur (Goldin et. al., 2006). “Among divorced persons, the return to college education is higher for females than for males” (Ge & Yang, 2013, p. 479).

In general, women with a college degree are less likely to live in poverty. The returns for a college degree for women are a strong incentive. In general, these returns have risen faster for women than for men (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). “The rise in the value of higher education to women during the 1970s was a stimulus that is likely to have strengthened the female-favorable trend that led to women overtaking men in their rates of college graduation” (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013, p. 68).

In comparison to the economic pattern for women, historically, men with high school degrees had more choices in the myriad of blue-collar jobs available to them. Unlike traditional female occupations, there were abundant opportunities for men to find well-paying jobs that did not require a college degree. Jacob (2002) found that more young males than females felt they could find acceptable employment without needing a college degree. Unfortunately, the changing economy in the United States has led to a decline in these opportunities. These jobs are
not as readily available to men (Mortenson, 2006). We have entered a “knowledge-based” economy where a college degree is essential (Sommers, 2013; White-House, 2013).

**School Effects**

Many exploring the college gender gap insist that the k-12 educational environment is a major contributor. Their main contention is that education is feminized. What some call normal boy activity and aggressiveness is now considered pathological (Sommers, 2013; Sax, L., 2008). Additionally, sky-rocketing academic standards are leading many boys to disengage from education at an early age. To many, it is no surprise that females are now outperforming males at every level of education (Sax, L., 2008; Tyre, 2008; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010).

Sommers (2013) declared it, in her book title, a *War on Boys*. She claimed that schools are hostile environments for boys, pointing to the decline of recess and the zero-tolerance disciplinary policies as some of the culprits. Gurian and Stevens (2005) pointed out that boys are prescribed 80% of the world’s supply of the Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) drug Ritalin. However, as the authors added, most ADD symptoms—short attention span, difficulty sitting still, impulsive behavior—are all within the range of normal boy activity. Statistically, more boys than girls are held back a grade and more are suspended or expelled from school (Ross et. al., 2012). Although boys’ facing more disciplinary problems than girls has been the norm in education, authors like Leonard Sax (2008), Sommers (2013) and Tyre (2008) argued that the number of incidents of boys being suspended and expelled are growing as are the prescriptions of ADD medication—500% growth in 10 years (Gurian & Stevens, 2005).

Others posit that boys are falling behind because school systems are not meeting the cognitive needs of boys. Gurian and Stevens (2005), in their convincing treatise *The Minds of Boys*, stressed that boys and girls learn differently due to physical difference in their brains.
They argued that modern education tends to favor female brain processing, putting boys at a major educational disadvantage (Gurian, 2001; Gurian & Stevens, 2005).

Leonard Sax (2008) lamented that boys are unmotivated and lost. He, too, asserted that the problem is rooted in k-12 education. Boys, overall, are less developed, mentally, in early elementary school. The stressing of early reading and writing skills often leads to early experiences of failure. It also, often, yields unnecessary special education labels (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Kleinfeld, 2009; Sax, L. 2008; Tyre, 2008). With boys dropping out of high school at an 8% higher rate than girls (Ross et. al., 2012), this seems to be a salient argument. By and large, females consistently outperform males at virtually every level and every area of k-12 education (Sax, L., 2008; Sommers, 2013; Tyre, 2008; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010).

Worthy of note is that other countries, where there is also growing concern of the struggles of boys, are observing “the distressing scholastic deficits of the nation’s schoolboys” (Sommers, 2013, p. 151). A council of British headmasters summarized best practices for boys in k-12 education. They were in sharp contrast to most pedagogical approaches in modern schools. Boys fared better when the following was in place: teacher-led classrooms; high expectations; consistently applied sanctions if work is not done; greater emphasis on silent work; a structured environment and single-sex classrooms (Sommers, 2013, p. 152). The modern collaborative learning approach, along with stressing creative assignments, has been found to be a detriment to boys’ style of learning (Sommers, 2013; Gurian & Stevens, 2005).

Boys also learn more effectively in situations that permit activity and stress kinesthetic, or hands-on learning. They also thrive on competition. Unfortunately, this word is engulfed in controversy in modern day education circles. It is no longer valued, but instead is rejected for its supposed detriment to self-esteem (Sommers, 2013).
On the other side, those claiming that the boy crisis is a hoax, point to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. Girls passing boys in reading, notwithstanding, in math and science scores, boys, at all levels, are still scoring higher than girls (Ross et. al., 2012). To counter this argument, Sommers (2013) pointed out that boys performing better in math and science has always been the trend. The difference is that even that gap is dwindling. Even more important is that, “on the whole, however, girls turned out to be far and away the superior students” (p. 12). In the big picture of educational achievement, girls have higher educational aspirations; girls have higher grades; girls are more likely to take Advanced Placement (AP) exams; girls are more likely to enroll and persist in college (Ewert, 2012; Reynolds & Burge, 2008; Sommers, 2013).

King (2006) and Mead (2006) resisted the notion that boys are in trouble. Their sentiment was not that boys are falling behind. Instead, the good news is simply that the girls are doing better. They even argued that in some levels boys are faring better than in the past. However, Leonard Sax (2008), like Sommers (2013) and Tyre (2008), disputed the claims that both boys and girls are doing better. Sax, L. (2008) pointed out that reading scores for both twelfth grade boys and girls have declined. Boys have declined further. When faced with that fact, Mead (2006) admitted that older boys’ performance on reading scores have been on the decline. Sommers (2013) vehemently argued that boys’ extremely low reading scores should be a serious concern. In today’s climate, reading skills are a building block of success. Unfortunately, “the looming prospect of an underclass of badly educated, barely literate American boys has yet to become a cause for open concern among American educators or political leaders” (Sommers, 2013, p. 151).
Sommers (2013) explored the 2000 National Education Statistics report *Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women* (Yupin, Choy, Geddes, Sable, & Snyder, 2000). Originally intended to buttress the “campaign on behalf of the nation’s young women” (Sommers, 2013, p. 12), the report did just the opposite. The empirical evidence in the report revealed that girls were doing far better than boys in almost every educational area. “There is evidence that the female advantage in school performance is real and persistent” (Yupin et. al., 2000, p. 12). Unfortunately, according to Sommers (2013), officials ignored these findings. One admitted to her, off the record, “Some of the staff worried that it will deflect attention away from worthy women’s causes” (p. 18). A new focus on boys is considered a “backlash against the gains of women” (Sommers, 2013, p. 20).

To further counter the concern for boys, The American Association of University Women published its own study on Gender Equity (Corbett et.al, 2008). Like others, they celebrated the gains made by women, insisting that any claim of a crisis for boys is a rejection of women’s success. According to Corbett and her AAUW colleagues (2008), the only disequilibrium in education is within race and family income.

However, Sommers (2013) pointed out that even among low income and minority families, young women fare much better than young men in all areas of the education system. Garibaldi (2007), an advocate for African-American males agreed with this claim; across all races, there is a gender gap. Leonard Sax (2008) added that among white boys of college-educated parents, one in four cannot read proficiently. The number is one in sixteen among same situation females. The AAUW report also relied heavily on the fact that more boys are attending college than in the previous 40 years (Corbett et al., 2008). Once again, though, Sommers (2013) explained that when one controls for population growth and the rate of improvement,
males literally stalled in the 1970s while females rapidly moved forward in regards to higher education.

As a counter point, Tyre (2008) admitted that even in her personal support of feminism, she began noticing a trend with the boys in her work as a journalist covering social trends and education. When she began writing about her growing concerns, she was attacked by ardent feminists. She responded wisely, “One of the enduring effects of the civil rights and feminist movements has been to cement the idea in parents that all children, regardless of their race and gender, have the capacity to succeed in school” (p. 11). She added that this cannot be a politically motivated argument. Statistically, boys are struggling. It is a societal problem that requires attention.

**Psychological/Social Factors**

Some researchers vehemently dispute the claims that k-12 education is responsible for the gender gap. They maintain that the male culture itself is a major contributor to the educational gender gap. Morris (2012), in a qualitative study involving two low-income high schools, found a masculine culture that promulgated a casual attitude toward education. Pro-school behavior was seen as inconsistent with manliness. To a similar degree, anti-academic behavior was indicative of the power of masculinity. The researcher contended that this gender attitude is merely a product of the socially constructed hegemonic male culture which legitimizes the dominant male prototype. He speculated that this masculine expectation is the downfall of many boys as it leads to outright defiance toward school.

Other researchers have unearthed similar attitudes amongst male high school students. In her qualitative study involving 99 Alaskan high school students, Kleinfeld (2009) found that girls saw themselves as the achievers while the boys were viewed as the lazy slackers. The girls spent
more time on their homework and were more likely to have clear plans for their future while the boys were more likely to spend their time playing video games. Girls had realistic and rational ambitions while many of the young men were aiming for the “dream jobs” such as designing video games, owning a recording studio, becoming music stars, or directing movies. “Many male seniors from working-class backgrounds were drifting, saying they would ‘take time off’ or postpone planning in hopes that some lucrative opportunity would eventually present itself” (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 178).

Blackhurst and Auger (2008) agreed with Kleinfeld’s synopsis. Their research unveiled the increasing numbers of boys aspiring to professional sports careers. “The emphasis on celebrity and wealth may inhibit career development by preventing boys from formulating realistic, long-range career plans” (p. 150).

In his qualitative dissertation, McGauvran (2011) also found a negative male attitude toward education. His sample was male high school seniors from three public high schools in New England. Through his six focus groups, he found a pattern of aversion toward school and its requirement for sitting still and obeying excessive rules. The negative attitudes toward school were more definitive among non-college bound males. These same non-college bound students were more positive about securing a well-paying job without obtaining a college degree. Like Kleinfeld (2009), he found that this group of males could name at least one very successful man who did not graduate from college. For them, this was an ideal role model. Many of these males, unlike their college bound peers, felt that college is too expensive and not worth the cost.

McGauvran (2011) also pointed to the culture’s glamorizing of the slacker lifestyle. He pointed to numerous movies and television shows “whose central characters are immature, underperforming men, often cast against high achieving women” (p. 57). While slackers seem to
garner positive attention, males who personify the masculine traits of leadership, courage, overachievement, strength, and competitiveness are often vilified. With these mixed messages, it seems understandable that young men would be conflicted in determining their role in society. “The gender equity movement has been leery of boys and has looked for ways to reimagine their masculinity” (Sommers, 2013, p. 54).

In regards to other non-cognitive factors, Ross et al. (2012) determined that girls do more homework outside of school. Interestingly, the parents of boys checked their homework more than the parents of girls. In other areas of interest, boys receive special education services at much higher rates than girls. In 2009, 13% of male 9th graders were in special education while 7% of females were in that category (Ross et al., 2012). Furthermore, researchers have found boys to be less prepared in school. They were more apt to forget utensils and other necessities for class. They were less apt to plan ahead on projects. Unlike their female peers, they did not feel that they need to study (Kleinfeld, 2009; Morris, 2012; McGauvran, 2011).

Gurian and Stevens (2005), however, posited that even the roots of males’ casual attitude toward education are found in k-12 education. They contended that this nonchalant and even negative attitude stems from academic failure in the early elementary school. It is a cover-up for boys’ struggling academic self-esteem. They posed the question: What second grade boy, regardless of background, is too cool to learn? The answer is obvious: none. Somewhere, along the line, boys become discouraged from learning due to a system that does not spark their interest or meet their academic needs.

Summary of Reasons for the Gender Gap

Reasons for the gender gap fall in one of three categories: economic incentives, school effects, and psychological/social factors (King, 2006). In the economic realm, many insist that
the main reason women are excelling is because of increased career opportunities, the rising divorce rate, and the discovery of the birth control pill (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Goldin et al., 2006). Educationally, there are many who feel passionately that the gender gap is rooted in k-12 education. They claim that education is now so feminized that behavior that had been considered normal boy behavior is now considered pathological. They also assert that the stricter academic standards have alienated boys from learning; they are failing early and becoming discouraged (Sax, L. 2008; Sommers, 2013; Tyre, 2008). The third possible explanation for the gender gap can be found in psychological and social factors. Some argue that there is a male culture that has a negative and nonchalant attitude toward education. Girls seem to be more academically motivated and are more likely to have goals for advanced academic degrees (Kleinfeld, 2009; McGauvran, 2011; Morris, 2012).

The gender gap in higher education completion has not been heavily researched. First, it is highly controversial; many deny there is a problem. For those who do admit that there is a problem, they readily admit that its roots are complicated. The gender gap is the result of an amalgamation of factors. Although some want to ignore it, there are reasons this should be a concern. I will explore those reasons.

**Implications of the Gender Gap**

Having females more literate and more educated than males is likely to create social problems (Fletcher, 2002; Sommers, 2013). For one, educated women will be unable to find mates of similar educational backgrounds (Fletcher, 2002). Second, college educated people, in general, are more productive and contributive citizens. Additionally, nationally and globally a college education is becoming more important than it was a few decades previous. Thus, in an economic sense, it is imperative for educators to ensure that all students can succeed at some
post-secondary level of education (Sum et al., 2003). Furthermore, bridging the gender gap would be a financial benefit for institutions of higher learning. There is a high cost not only to fail to enroll students but to fail to retain them to graduation. This section will look into both these areas in greater detail.

**Economic, Social, and Vocational Implications**


With more males lagging in the attainment of college degrees, they are being eliminated from this labor trend (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Sum et al., 2003; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010). If this trajectory continues, men may move into the second-class status as more women climb into positions of power and prestige. Women will become the main bread-winners (Koerner et al., 1999).

One more facet of this concern is that there is now, more than ever, global competition for the U.S. white collar jobs. The scenario magnifies the importance for U.S. employees, both males and females, to be highly literate and educated (Mortenson, 2006; Tuchtenhagen, 2008; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010). President Obama confirmed, “Employment in jobs requiring education beyond a high school diploma will grow more rapidly than employment in jobs that do not” (White House, 2013). Habley et al., (2012) purported that by 2018, 63% of all jobs will require some level of post-secondary education.
Mortenson (2006) added that goods-producing industries in the American economy are disappeari

g. The once ubiquitous blue-collar job, where men have historically found somewhat

lucrative employment, is becoming extinct (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Whitmire & Bailey,

2010). For example, in 1973, only 28% of jobs required a college education, but that number has

continued to rise (Habley et. al., 2012). Consequently, many men have to adapt because a

college education is becoming necessary. Unfortunately, men are failing to adjust.

Another area of concern is in unemployment. The January 2011 report from the Bureau

of Labor Statistics (2011) provided the employment rate comparison of college graduates with

others. At this time, the unemployment rate for employees with less than a high school diploma

was 14.2%. For those with a high school diploma the rate was 9.4%. This same rate was 8.0% for

workers with some college and an associate’s degree. Comparatively, the unemployment rate

for holders of a bachelor’s degree or higher was 4.2%.

There are direct financial benefits to a college education. Earnings for those with a post-

secondary degree are also greater than those with a high school degree or less. A bachelor’s
degree often yields as much as two times as high work-life earnings as a high school degree.

Doctoral degrees and other professional degrees can produce a 3 to 4 times the amount of work-

life earnings when compared to a high school degree (Tuchtenhagen, 2008).

Looking at the situation from a societal stand point, the implications of a growing gender

gap are a concern. Women will have difficulty finding mates who are equally educated and

literate. Thomas G. Mortenson, independent higher education policy analyst, called it an

“‘unhealthy social situation when the gender imbalance gets that bad. . . . You don’t create these

marriageable men out of the blue at the age of 30 or 35’’” (Fletcher, 2002, para. 24).
Additionally, Sum et al. (2003) outlined positive life-style characteristics of college-educated people. They tend to raise productivity levels of most industries. Better educated workers typically have higher earnings and thus, are less likely to need federal and state assistance (food stamps, subsidized housing, etc.). Their children tend to perform better in school and are more likely to succeed in college (Ge & Yang, 2013). Educated males are more likely to be married and less likely to father children out of wedlock. Finally, those with a higher education degree are more apt to vote than their less educated counterparts.

Overall, college-educated people add positively to the socio-cultural foundation of the nation (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Habley et al., 2012; Mortenson, 2006; Sum et al., 2003). Unfortunately, this nation that was once the world leader in higher education is now “rapidly falling behind other nations in our ability to produce college graduates” (Tinto, 2012, p. 2). One area where this development is more alarming is with males.

**Implications for Higher Education**

The growing gender gap should pose a concern for college campuses. Tuchtenhagen (2008), in a power-point presentation to a public university in Wisconsin, made a keen observation. “In 2005, the UW System granted 3,462 more baccalaureate degrees to women than men. If men had been graduating at the same rate as women, in 2005 the UW System would have graduated an additional 3,462 baccalaureate degrees” (slide 7). He also added that bringing men to parity, just in the Wisconsin system alone, would raise the enrollment rate by more than 16,000 students. Although these statistics present an extremely simplified view, they still magnify the extent of the gender gap’s effect on higher education.

This sobering trend translates into financial implications for colleges and universities. There are direct financial costs for not retaining students once they are enrolled. For example, in
2013, a private school spent an average of $2,433 for each student recruited while a public school spent $457 (Noel-Levitz, 2013). That net loss revenue, over the course of losing anywhere from 6-8% of recruited males (Ross et al., 2012), can be substantial. Additionally, there is the direct loss of tuition revenue along with housing, dining, and other sources of income for the institution. Even the smallest increase in retention can have dramatic financial benefits (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2012).

Moreover, early attrition yields indirect financial costs. One is in the area of financial aid. When a student who was given financial aid withdraws, that aid is lost. It could have been given to students who persist. Instead, “aid invested in students who leave the institution cannot be recovered” (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2012, p. 114).

The gender gap also affects the social climate of the school. Students miss out on a more well-rounded experience when one gender gravely outnumbers the other. It also changes the expectations for dating when there are almost three females to every male on campus (Koerner, 1999).

**Summary of Implications of the Gender Gap**

With rising competition within a global economy, higher education is becoming more important. People without a college degree limit their opportunities. Over time, those with a college degree earn exponentially more than those with only a high school degree. With the current trend in the gender gap, men will continue to fall behind in their ability to work in this growing knowledge based economy. Furthermore, college educated people simply are more productive citizens and their children tend to be more educated. Lastly, if this trajectory continues, women will have more difficulty finding mates with similar education levels.
Colleges and universities are also victims to the gender gap. Financially, when students fail to graduate, there are direct losses of tuition. There are also indirect losses of financial aid. Socially, the balance on campus becomes skewed which hampers the opportunity for a well-rounded education.

Unfortunately, as has been shown in this literature review, research in this gender gap has been limited. Although there are theories offering why it is occurring, there is a void in the actual research. Moreover, when it comes to actual persistence research, the focus is more on attrition and it usually involves only the first-year transition.

This study definitely filled a gap in this literature. It explored persistence-to-completion differences, by gender. Is there a difference in what propels men and women to persist? Exploring these differences could assist policy makers and administrators in establishing campus climates that support both men’s and women’s needs as they navigate through higher education.

Just as in the 1970s, when the nation not only took notice of women falling behind, but also took action, it is now time to seek understanding of why boys and young men are falling behind academically. From there, actions and policies must reflect a willingness to buttress boys’ educational pursuits. Without this intentionality, their academic failures will translate into deeper societal failures for men. In that case, no one wins.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the possible persistence differences, by gender, in traditional-age college students. Because my goal was to better understand their experience with persistence, I chose a qualitative phenomenological research design. A qualitative design examines the meaning behind the statistics (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). There are a plethora of quantitative statistics about the gender gap and even the persistence gap in higher education; however, there is little research exploring the reasons behind these gaps (Buchmann, 2009; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Ewert, 2012).

In this chapter, I more fully develop the description and rationale for this particular research design. From there, I explain my worldview and personal history that could bias the research. Applying the Epoche principle, or the setting aside of personal opinions, I aimed to mitigate their influence. I then explain how I recruited the participants through the purposeful sampling of participants and the setting at which I worked. Next, I describe how I used the particular data collection methods which were demographic data collection instrument, focus groups, individual interviews, and email. I also have included how I analyzed the data, employing the basic plan outlined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008). Lastly, I explain how this research met the criteria for trustworthiness as well as the ethical considerations that buttressed every aspect of the research.

Research Design

I chose a qualitative phenomenological design out of an interest in acquiring deeper understanding of participants’ experience. “Qualitative research in general, and phenomenology in particular, is concerned with describing and interpreting human phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced them” (Milacci, 2003, p. 3). Although quantitative
methods provide statistics, a qualitative approach probes into the meaning behind the statistics (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012). The qualitative inquiry helps the researcher and others “discern, portray, and interpret more carefully the nuances of experience” (Piantanida & Garman, 2009, p. 51). In other words, in qualitative research, the data is not numbers or statistics. Instead, the data is “contained within the perspectives of the people that are involved” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 7).

Phenomenology is a complex philosophy that is difficult to characterize (Schwandt, 2007). The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel constructed the first technical meaning for phenomenology before World War I (Dowling, 2007). Phenomenology “referred to knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Interest in phenomenology grew out of dissatisfaction with empirical sciences preeminence in explaining the world (Schwandt, 2007). These thinkers posited that personal consciousness of an experience, as opposed to science, was the only way to arrive at certainty (Groenewald, 2004).


Social research differs from research in the physical sciences by virtue of the fact that, in
the social sciences, one is dealing with ‘research objects’ that are themselves interpreting
the social world that we, as scientists, also wish to interpret (Wilson, 2002, para. 5).

The term phenomenon comes from the Greek *phaenesthai*, which means “to flare up, to
show itself, to appear” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). For Husserl, “the aim of phenomenology is the
rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear in order to arrive at an essential
understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). Its aim is to
understand both the commonalities and uniqueness of people’s lived experiences with a
particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), the
two guiding questions in phenomenology are: What are the experiences with the phenomenon?
In what context or situations did they experience it?

**Research Questions**

In this study, I was interested in the phenomenon of persistence in post-secondary
education. The gender gap in higher education is the amalgamation of complex socio-cultural
and educational issues. There is an abundance of quantitative research and theory on college
student persistence. However, in the area of differences, by gender, not only in persistence but in
the experience of higher education, there is little research. Thus, the singular focus of this
particular paper was on the phenomenon of persistence of traditional college seniors.

With persistence being complex phenomenon, it seemed appropriate to break it down.
The break down was covered through the research questions. The specific research questions
were:

- How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence?
- How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that
  contributed to their persistence?
• How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered their persistence?

• How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence?

Hearing their stories helped to shed light on this complicated topic.

**Participants**

I employed purposeful sampling in choosing participants. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling is inviting a certain kind of participant. In this case, it was those who have experienced persistence in post-secondary education. Obtaining a degree within six years is the agreed upon operationalized definition of persistence in this context of research within higher education (Hagedorn, 2012; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2011).

The population was senior students over the age of 18 who would be graduating sometime during the school year (December, May, or August). They had experienced the phenomenon in question which was post-secondary persistence. Additionally, these students were of traditional age. Although current college demographics include many non-traditional-age students, I was more interested in the persistence of traditional-age students within a four year institutional setting. The common definition of traditional-age seniors is that they are under the age of 24 (Morrison & Silverman, 2012). Their needs, interests, and attitudes, as a matter of maturity and life stage, will not be the same as older students. Also, this population forms the majority at most four year institutions (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012).

I also applied maximum variation of sampling by choosing a diverse participant population. Creswell (2013) noted that in maximum variation sampling, “the researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of the study [because] it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives” (p. 157). The study was open to all
senior students, both male and female, of different races, socioeconomic and family backgrounds, interests, activities, involvement, and achievement levels. The goal was to determine persistence factors of traditional students according to gender; however, even within that demographic, there are a myriad of differences. The more diverse the sample, the richer will be the information (Creswell, 2013).

I initially tried to recruit the students through an announcement on the college web site (Appendix B). This yielded a very limited response. Thus, I approached faculty. I emailed department chairpersons, asking for names of professors who taught senior classes. My campus contact person also referred me to professors who taught senior seminars. To the professors who taught seniors, I sent an email (Appendix H) requesting permission to make a short recruitment presentation to their senior classes. The response was more than adequate.

Using a power point (Appendix L), I presented to 15 classes, in five different majors, over the course of two weeks. The average number in each class was 20 students. After the presentation, interested students wrote down their email address on a piece of paper circulated around the room. To them, I emailed the link to the Survey Monkey Contact Information Form (Appendix C). If they were still interested, they filled out the form.

Ultimately, 42 students (M=18; 43%; F=24; 57%) completed the form. To them, I sent a follow-up email (Appendix J) to schedule either an individual interview or a focus group, depending on their preference. Five of them (M=4; F=2) never responded. Three of the females were not needed because they were not interested in a focus group (by the time they signed up, I had met saturation with individual interviews). One female was so intent on being part of the study, that she shared her story through an email exchange.
Outside of that particular contact through survey monkey, three males, after a class presentation, approached me personally. They formed their own focus group. Another male recruited two of his friends who had not been in any of the class presentation. They also formed their own group.

I eventually secured the participation of 33 students, to whom I gave a pseudonym. More females ($n=20; 61\%$) than males ($n=13; 39\%$) were involved. Not only did this composition parallel the national statistics in higher education related to gender ($F=57\%; M=43\%$) (Aud et al., 2013), it corresponded to the campus senior class demographic. I calculated this using data on the college website ($F=63\%; M=37\%$).

Their level of participation was varied. Fifteen participated in the individual interviews ($F=8; M=7$). Seventeen ($F=11; M=6$) took part in a focus group while one female corresponded only through email. For the focus groups, I conducted two male-only focus groups with three males in each. I conducted three female-only focus groups. Two of them had three participants and one of them had four. After each meeting, I emailed the students as a follow-up (Appendix K). Seventeen students responded with at least one email ($F=12; 60\%; M=5; 38\%$).

The goal was saturation. “Saturation is a term used to describe the point when you have heard the range of ideas and aren’t getting new information” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 26). I reached saturation prior to the conclusion of all meetings. However, I did not cancel the small number of already scheduled meetings. I also did not organize any more.

The group was diverse. It was composed of traditional-age college seniors between the ages of 21 and 23 ($M=21.9$). The participants’ background included mixture of races, SES backgrounds, and family situations. They also had varying GPAs, majors, and future plans after graduation. This breakdown is presented in Table 2.
Table 2

*Group Demographic Overview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n=20 (61%)</td>
<td>n=13 (39%)</td>
<td>N=33 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>18 (90%)</td>
<td>8 (62%)</td>
<td>26 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
<td>5 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td>3 (23%)</td>
<td>10 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>13 (65%)</td>
<td>8 (62%)</td>
<td>21 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (15%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GPA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0-2.49</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>2 (15%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-2.99</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>3 (23%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0-3.49</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
<td>5 (38%)</td>
<td>13 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5-4.0</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
<td>3 (23%)</td>
<td>11 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.32*</td>
<td>3.08*</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School GPA</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bio/Environ. Sci.</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (23%)</td>
<td>8 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>5 (38%)</td>
<td>8 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Major</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Human Sciences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Info. Systems/Comp. Sci.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Studies/El.Ed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Future Plans                  |       |            |
| Work                          | 13    | 65%        |
| Graduate school               | 5     | 25%        |
| Medical School                | 2     | 10%        |
| Unsure/Volunteer              | 0     | 0%         |
|                               | 1     | 8%         |

| Parents’ Marital Status       |       |            |
| Married                       | 14    | 70%        |
| Divorced                      | 3     | 15%        |
| Never Married                 | 2     | 10%        |
| One Deceased                  | 1     | 5%         |
| Other                         | 0     | 0%         |
|                               | 2     | 15%        |

| Mother’s Highest Level of     |       |            |
| Education                     |       |            |
| Didn’t graduate               | 0     | 0%         |
| H.S.                          |       |            |
| H.S diploma                  | 8     | 40%        |
| Some college                  | 3     | 15%        |
| Associates’ degree            | 1     | 5%         |
| Bachelor’s degree             | 3     | 15%        |
The majority of the participants ($n=27$; 82%) were Caucasian. Seven (21%) (Destiny, Sydney, David, Chris, Eric, Jacob, and Marcus) were minorities. In regards to SES, six
participants (18%) (Alexis, Sydney, David, Eric, Jacob, and Marcus) indicated a lower yearly family income (<$50K). Eighteen of the students (54%) reported middle to high-middle family incomes ($50K-$100K). Nine of the students (27%) reported higher incomes (>-$100K). The participant pool was almost equally split between those who received need based financial aid and those who did not (Aid, $n=16; 48%$; No Aid, $n=17; 52$%). Fourteen ($F=7; M=7; 42$%) were first-generation college students. Regarding their parents marital status, 24 of the participants (72%) stated that their parents were still married.

There was a wide distribution among the majors. The majority of the participants were either business majors ($n=8; 24$%) or biology/environmental science majors ($n=8; 24$%). The remaining students were distributed among communication studies majors ($n=6; 18$%), health and human science majors ($n=4; 12$%), information systems/computer science majors ($n=3; 9$%), double majors ($n=2; 6$%), psychology majors ($n=1; 3$%), and liberal studies majors ($n=1; 3$%).

As far as their future plans, most of the students were planning to directly enter the work force ($n=23; 70$%). Nine ($F=7; M=2; 27$%) had either graduate school or medical school plans. One thought he may enter volunteer service.

The college was a residential campus where students were required to live on campus unless they were living with their parents. Thus, the majority ($n=30; 91$%) of the participant population was residential students for the bulk of their college careers. Three (9$%)$ had commuted for most, if not all, of that time (the college did permit seniors, for the first time, to live off campus the year the research was conducted. Because these students did not live off campus most of the time, they were not considered commuters).
Three (9%) were transfers. The lone female transfer came from a local community college, after receiving her associate’s degree. The two male transfers arrived after one year or one semester at another four year institution.

**Setting**

The setting was also purposeful as this too can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). I chose a private co-educational four year liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region. This rural residential college was founded in the late 19th century and has a loose affiliation to a national church organization.

Its growing student body is comprised of 1,800 full time, mostly traditional-aged, undergraduate students. It is not considered a highly selective college nor is it open admission. Its non-writing SAT score, for the freshman class, is approximately 1,020. Currently, according to published demographic statistics, the student body is 59% female and 41% male. Furthermore, the publicly posted retention statistics of the freshman class cohort of 2006 stated that 63% of females graduated within six years of enrolling, while 49% of enrolled males graduated. Statistically, this particular institution fits nicely into the interest of this study.

**Procedures**

The procedure for recruitment is displayed in a visual diagram in Appendix A. Before obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, I had established a faculty contact on campus. This is required for outside researchers. After obtaining IRB approval from the institution, and from Liberty University’s IRB, my faculty contact posted an invitation on the campus notification web site for student participation in the research (Appendix B). After three days, only three females had indicated interest.
To solicit more participation, I emailed department chairs, seeking a list of department members who taught senior classes. My faculty contact for the research also gave me the names of whom she was aware who taught senior seminar classes. I emailed the professors of senior classes (Appendix H). Ten professors responded favorably. Over the course of a week, I presented a research recruitment power point (Appendix L) to 15 classes in five academic departments (Biology/Environmental Science, Business/Economics, Communications, Health Sciences, Math and Computer Science). The average class size was approximately 20 students.

Interested students wrote down their email address on a paper I circulated through the class. I sent them a link to the contact information form on Survey Monkey (Appendix C). On this form, they provided contact information, their preferred form of participation (focus group, individual interview, or both), and their schedules of available times. They were also encouraged to forward the link to their friends.

Until I reached saturation, I systematically established meeting times almost immediately upon receipt of their registrations. The individual interviews were scheduled first because of the meager number of participants in the beginning. Once more students signed up, I scheduled the focus groups. The entire process, from the initial posting of the announcement to the final focus group, took a little more than three weeks.

The individual interviews lasted 20-30 minutes. I interviewed eight females and seven males who had not been involved in the focus groups. The interviews took place on campus either in an empty classroom or at a public congregating spot where we found a quiet table. Most often, the student chose the meeting place. I also gave these students the informed consent form (Appendix D) and the demographic data collection instrument (Appendix E).
During the audio-recorded individual interviews, I used an interview guide (Appendix G). I kept sporadic field notes where I jotted down thoughts, impressions, or even personal biases that arose during the individual interviews. At the conclusion of each interview, I gave each participant a $10.00 gift card to 7-11. After their interviews, I sent each student at least one email as a follow-up (Appendix K). I transcribed the recordings verbatim, providing a copy of the transcript to the participants to verify its accuracy.

Concerning focus groups, I held two all-male hour long groups. Each had three participants. I also held three all-female groups; two had three members and one had four. These also lasted approximately one hour. The groups took place in either a classroom or one of the student apartments, per their request. I provided pizza or lasagna. First, I gave each student a copy of the informed consent form to sign (Appendix D). Next, I asked each student to fill out the demographic data collection instrument (Appendix E).

During the groups, I used an interview guide (Appendix F). Depending on the direction of the group topics, I either added or deleted questions. I audio-recorded the groups, alerting the participants to this fact both in the informed consent form and at the beginning of the group. I also took sporadic notes during the group meeting. At the conclusion of the group, I gave each participant a $10.00 7-11 gift card. Within 48 hours after the conclusion of the group, I emailed each focus group participant at least once (Appendix K). I transcribed all the recordings verbatim. Once the transcription was complete, I provided a copy to the participants to verify its accuracy.

I also exchanged emails with one female. She expressed interest in the study after I had met saturation. Feeling that her story was unique, she wanted to help in the research.
The data was analyzed using coding, phenomenological reductionism, and bracketing to identify recurring themes. These themes were organized and aligned according to the research questions and in line with existing research. It may be used to prepare presentations as well as to submit articles for publication in order to share the results with others in the field. I sent the participants copies of my interpretations and analysis for confirmation of accuracy.

**Researcher’s Role**

Unlike quantitative analysis, qualitative research acknowledges that a researcher cannot be completely objective and detached (Groenewald, 2004; Milacci, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). I acknowledge that in the area of the widening gender gap, I am passionate. Having two boys and working closely with other boys, as a substitute teacher in k-12 education, I am deeply concerned about their plight. Many of them seem aimless. The writings of Sommers (2013), Tyre (2008), and Sax, L. (2008) merely confirmed what I have been noticing for at least a decade.

Although I value tremendously the strides made in equality for women, I fiercely contend that this advancement should not ride on the shoulders of male failure, impotency, or disenfranchisement. As Linda Sax (2008) noted, this is not a zero-sum proposition where the success of one gender automatically neutralizes the achievement of the other. A productive society is when all—regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity—are treated equitably. Society is emboldened when each segment of our diverse culture is given equal opportunity and access to thrive. I believe firmly in the American Dream for those given the proper educational, emotional, and relational tools. For that reason, it is imperative that education considers all needs and learning styles. This includes the obvious needs of boys in a number of areas.
I find it interesting that those who are compelled to close the current gender gap are labeled negatively by mainstream media. The champions of boys’ equality are considered right-wing conservatives (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). The hypocrisy is frustrating. The same people who fought valiantly for women during the 1960s and 1970s are now belittling those who advocate for men with the same vigor. I always thought equality for all truly means equality for all. Apparently, this is not the case.

My Christian worldview is also a prominent piece undergirding this research. I posit that God distinctly created male and female. Within this creation are biological and societal gender differences. He unapologetically framed it this way. Moreover, He never intended there to be competition between the two. Both sexes are uniquely designed for a specific and wonderful purpose. They complement each other in magnificent ways.

Historically, cultural demands and expectations have influenced these inherent characteristics. As a result of various cultural misinterpretations of God’s original design, there are histories of excessive male dominance, control, and even abuse. Although some have leaned fixedly to scripture to support a heavy-handed patriarchal system, it was never close to God’s original design. Men have warped scripture by exaggerating, or taking out of context, certain scriptures to justify male dominance.

Personally, as a woman, I have experienced this hateful prejudice from church leaders. Sadly, many women, like myself, with a penchant for leadership, have been mislabeled and even evicted from church fellowships. Rather than trying to understand our passions and dreams, these leaders have pre-judged our intentions. We have been derided as rebels, Jezebels, insubordinates, and un-submissive. More than once I have heard pastors vilify strong female leaders. It happened to me.
I have also been treated unfairly in the work place. When first starting my career, my superior pointed to my single female status as justification for a lower wage. He argued that I did not need a higher salary.

Needless to say, with these painful personal experiences in my history, my passion to see men rise to their rightful place stems from a place of logic. I recognize that repaying men for dominating and abusing women accomplishes nothing. In the long run, it only hurts society.

In spite of an admission that culture affects gender identification and in spite of man’s misinterpretation of scripture, I will never be of the mind that gender is entirely socially constructed. Scientists have validated a myriad of differences between the two in hormones, physical attributes, and the brain. Thus, as stated previously, in order to accommodate the needs of males, it would behoove education to examine some of its current praxis.

As for my own college experience, I was raised to embrace education. It was always important to our family. Although I was a first-generation college student, my very middle-class parents were committed to finance all five of their children’s college education. This was no small feat, especially considering that four of us attended private institutions. It definitely revealed a passion for higher education.

Being the family overachiever, I graduated close to the top of my class in k-12, undergraduate, and graduate education. Furthermore, quitting school never crossed my mind. Persistence was a natural part of my nature. It was not that I loved learning. I was simply a perfectionist and very driven. Recognizing that the degrees and high grades would broaden my opportunities, I persisted without wavering.

In comparison, this doctoral journey was another story. The temptation to quit was constant. However, through the encouragement of friends, the support of my family, and an
unrelenting belief that God directed me toward this path, I resisted. Its difficulty notwithstanding, leaning into God in my weakness strengthened me to press on.

Even though I have strong feelings about gender equality and persistence, as I dove into phenomenological research, it was incumbent upon me, the researcher, to focus on the topic “freshly and naively” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). It was imperative to permit the phenomenon to unfold as it presented itself during interviews without imposing judgment or personal opinions. Husserl called this freedom of personal biases the Epoche. This Greek term means stay away or abstain (Moustakas, 1994). In this Epoche, which is the first step of all phenomenological research, I set aside, or bracketed out (Creswell, 2013), all preconceptions and biases while investigating the phenomenon. Thus, the inquiry was activated through fresh and unencumbered lenses. Still, Moustakas (1994) points out that in every type of research, presuppositions, and biases naturally exist. Suspending judgment was the goal; however, pure objectivity was impossible.

**Data Collection**

In qualitative research, triangulation, or having at least three sources of data collection, buttresses its validity (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Schwandt (2007) stated, “Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of inferences one draws . . . the central point of the procedure is to examine a conclusion from more than one vantage point” (p. 298). I used same-sex focus groups, semi-structured individual interviews, and follow-up emails. I incorporated a quantitative demographic data collection instrument, which provided important background information. It was for informational purposes and thus was not considered part of the triangulation.
Demographic Data Collection Instrument

Participants filled out the demographic data collection instrument (Appendix E). Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) referred to this type of instrument as a structured questionnaire that provides information items. They explained that this kind of instrument yields data that may or may not arise during the other data collecting processes. In this particular study, this instrument was not considered part of the triangulation of data. It was merely for gathering background information and it morphed into being the main source for information in compiling the participants’ composites. As Schwandt (2007) asserted, “qualitative studies can and often do make use of quantitative data” (p. 251).

Tinto (2012) noted that the background of students, such as high school grades and class rank, socioeconomic status, and parents’ education is the most significant predictor of persistence-to-completion. Although they are an integral component of persistence, most students did not discuss them during the interviews or focus groups. Therefore, obtaining this information was a vital part in answering the research questions regarding factors that contributed to students’ persistence.

Focus Groups

“A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic” (Patton, 2002, p. 385). According to Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups work well in understanding the perceptions, feelings, and thinking of people about a particular topic or experience. Carey and Asbury (2012) added that in well-implemented focus groups, “the conversation is usually very engaging and leads to rich stories that likely would not be told in such detail in another type of study” (p. 16). For a phenomenological study, the members will
have a shared experience. In this case, the shared experience was persistence-to-completion in college.

The value of a focus group, in comparison to the one-one interview, was “participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). Krueger and Casey (2000) added “The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others” (p. 11). Other writers observed that, with a natural tendency for being social animals, humans typically enjoy a focus group setting (Carey & Asbury, 2012; Patton, 2002; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The ultimate goal was to obtain high quality data (Patton, 2002). The focus groups also provided access to a greater number of people. “In one hour, you can gather information from eight people instead of only one, significantly increasing sample size” (Patton, 2002, p. 386).

I held five focus groups with three to four students. There were two all-male groups, with three students and three all-female groups. One group had four participants while the other two had three participants.

Krueger and Casey (2000) proposed that three or four focus groups composed of five to eight participants are an adequate number. Carey and Asbury (2012) argued that smaller groups, of three or four participants, tend to lead to “greater depth of data” (p. 45). They added, “The collection of better quality, even though from fewer participants, is a wise choice in any study” (Carey & Asbury, 2012, p. 45).

In this study, the smaller groups were engaging and rewarding. Having completed pilot groups with six people, I found the smaller groups presented more opportunity for each participant to share. In the larger groups, a few tended to dominate the discussion. Ultimately,
the goal was saturation. “Saturation is a term used to describe the point when you have heard the range of ideas and aren’t getting new information” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 26). Saturation was definitely achieved.

Because my ultimate goal was to compare persistence differences, by gender, I held gender specific groups. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), “If you want to be able to compare and contrast how certain types of people talk about an issue, you must separate these people into different groups” (p. 27). The authors added “If we mixed men and women in the same groups, it would be much more difficult to analyze based on gender” (p. 27). Carey and Asbury (2012) stated that two or more groups are an appropriate number when groups are segmented by demographics, such as gender. This set-up seemed to work well. At the conclusion of each group, students vibrantly expressed enthusiasm about their contribution to the research.

I invited more students than eventually showed up. No-shows, or lack of interest, are common when facilitating groups. Over-recruiting is sometimes a necessary practice (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). In regards to length, researchers suggest the groups last between one and two hours (Krueger & Casey, 2000). I was intent on keeping each group within an hour out of respect for the students’ time.

The groups took place on campus in either a class room or in the students’ residence, if they requested. Both Krueger and Casey (2000) and Creswell (2013) posited that holding focus groups on location helps ease the natural anxiety that often accompanies participating in a focus group. The groups were scheduled around the unique schedules of each group’s participants.

One other way to make the experience comfortable, according to Creswell (2013), is to provide refreshments. Thus, I either brought a pizza or made lasagna. Another approach is to
start with opening or easy questions (Carey & Asbury, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Patton, 2002). The intent of this line of questioning was not to “get profound information but rather to get people talking and to help people feel comfortable” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 44). It also was a building block in trust and rapport (Krueger & Casey, 2000). I also sought to establish trust and safety by stressing confidentiality. In order to maximize the sharing, “the group members must feel that they are respected and that they are valued as experts in their experiences” (Carey & Asbury, 2012, p. 29).

I used an interview guide during the focus group (Appendix F). As explained by Krueger and Casey (2000), a nondirective interview involves open-ended questions that have been developed beforehand. Through this line of questioning, group members were given ample opportunity to share experiences and insights, focused on the topic of persistence. Prior to leading focus groups for the research, I conducted a pilot study with two groups of college students (one all-male and another all-female) at another school to determine the efficacy of the questions and my role as a moderator. Creswell (2013) suggested the pilot testing helps “refine the interview questions and procedures” (p. 165). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) explained that pre-testing the interview questions aids in determining the appropriateness of the questions’ wording and to better understand the efficacy of the questions in eliciting good discussion.

The guide was flexible. As Carey and Asbury (2012) suggested is often necessary, I remained open to refining questions depending upon the direction of the group. “Often it is more appropriate to use the information from one group session to refine the questions for the next session” (Carey & Asbury, 2012, p. 63). As information arose in the other groups and through individual interviews, I mildly altered some questions while adding others.
I was intent on giving every participant an opportunity to talk. Additionally, as warned by Krueger and Casey (2000), I had to steer the conversation away from superfluous discussions and keep the conversation on task. Patton (2002) affirmed the use of an interview guide for all these purposes. “A guide is essential in conducting focus group interviews for it keeps the interactions focused while allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge” (p. 344).

I audio-recorded the focus groups, using two audio recorders (SONY ICD-UX-523 and an ASUS lap top) in case of failure of one of the devices. These devices ensured capturing the dialogue in its entirety. I made this clear to the participants. As Patton (2002) quipped, “No matter what style of interviewing you use and no matter how carefully you word questions, it all comes to naught if you fail to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed” (p. 380). The recordings precluded losing this valuable data. Patton (2002) also added that the recordings provide rich description, through providing actual quotes in supporting data analysis. I transcribed these recordings verbatim.

Upon immediate conclusion of each meeting, I jotted down some thoughts and impressions. Zabloski (2010) and Groenewald (2004) noted that immediate recording of impressions precludes memory lapse as time passes. Patton (2002) iterated that “immediate post-interview review is a time to . . . reflect on the quality of the information received” (p. 384). As Carey and Asbury (2012), pointed out, post-interview descriptive notes helps the facilitator note the important concepts that emerged during the group meeting. Additionally, writing down post-interview notes helped me make improvements for subsequent groups.

The goal of the focus groups was to answer the research questions: How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this
persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence?

What are the persistence differences, by gender?

Interviews

I conducted 20-30 minute individual interviews with interested students. Patton (2002) referred to a study that found “focus groups and individual interviews to be complementary to each other, each yielding somewhat different information” (p. 389). An individual interview permitted delving more deeply into issues in a way that could not be adequately covered in a group setting. For example, I did not ask questions about finances during the focus group because that information seemed to be private. In another case, a female student, who had been raped, requested a personal interview as her experience was still raw.

According to Fontana and Frey (2000), interviewing is one of the most effective means of understanding others. Janesick (2004) added “interviews provide such rich and substantive data for the researcher and are also a major part of qualitative research work” (p. 71). It permits the researcher to enter into others’ perspectives and gather their stories (Patton, 2002).

In qualitative research, data collection must be “constructed within conceptual schemes and by various means that are deemed appropriate to serving particular purposes and answering particular questions” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 129). With the intention of this research being a deeper understanding of post-secondary college students’ persistence, I engaged the participants in a semi-structured interview (Appendix G). Here, as explained by Patton (2002), the questions were not so structured that only closed, forced choice answers were nor were they be completely unstructured where the interview could become diverted from the main research questions that guided the interviews. “Using the logic of stimulus response (question and answer), the interviewer aims to ask the right questions so as to elicit responses in the form of authentic
feelings and meanings of the interviewee” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 162). These questions were pilot tested with a traditional-age senior from another institution. Creswell (2013) noted that this process strengthens the line of questioning as the researcher can better develop “relevant lines of questions” (p. 165).

I interviewed eight females and seven males. Although there were other students who were interested in participating, I concluded the research when I reached saturation. “Data saturation occurs when newly collected information does not add to the knowledge” (Carey & Asbury, 2012, p. 43). Creswell (2013) posited that the number of individual interviews conducted by a researcher can often have a wide range, depending upon the goals of the researcher. My goal was a deeper understanding of the experience of persistence. Between the focus groups and individual interviews, I conducted a well-rounded, in-depth exploration of persistence. Through these endeavors, I met saturation.

Creswell (2013) maintained that collecting data in the field where participants experience the phenomenon is the most effective approach in data collection for qualitative research. Therefore, I conducted the individual interviews on campus. For students who did not have a preference for a meeting place, we found an empty classroom, often one they suggested. The other students (three) chose a public congregating area where we found a private table, while one invited me to her residence.

I audio-recorded the interviews, using two recording devices (SONY ICD-UX-523 and an Asus lap top) in the case that one fails. This was known to the participants. I transcribed these recordings verbatim. Once complete, I provided a copy of the transcript to the participants to verify its accuracy.
The focus of the interview, in this research, was to answer the research questions: How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence?

Email

Within 48 hours of their conclusion, I followed up the focus groups and interviews with at least one email (Appendix K). First, this served as a follow-up to see if either I, or the participant, thought of anything to add. In phenomenology, “we can never exhaust completely our experience or things no matter how many times we reconsider or view them. . . . The possibility for discovery is unlimited” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). After the focus groups and interviews, it was likely that the participants have additional thoughts as they processed persistence and their experience with it. I sought to maintain open dialogue to insure I accessed as much from the participants’ experience as possible.

Second, email “helps create a non-threatening and comfortable environment, and provides greater ease for participants discussing sensitive issues” (Creswell, 2013, p. 159). Thirdly, follow-up emails maintained an ongoing relationship between me and the student participant. I did not want to be the kind of researcher who “research(es) and runs” (Janesick, 2004, p. 107). I valued the time and effort of the participants and wanted to demonstrate respect for them as human beings as opposed to mere objects of study. Fontana and Frey (2000) supported this attitude by challenging researchers not to use their participants as objects of research. Furthermore, I wanted to develop a trust that can be built upon an ongoing relationship. That kind of trust could lead to richer dialogue as noted by Janesick (2004).
One student participated only in an email exchange. She expressed interest in the study after I had met saturation. Initially, I turned her away. However, she appealed my decision. She felt her story was unique enough that it would bolster the research.

Seventeen students (F=12; 60%; M=5; 38%) responded to the email request. Most offered additional information or answered a direct question. A few emailed more than once.

The focus of the emails, in this research, was to answer the research questions: How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence?

Data Analysis

When examining qualitative data, the effective qualitative researcher uses many of her senses including a strong sense of intuition (Janesick, 2004). Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data is often part of an emerging story, full of “surprises open to serendipity and it often leads to something unanticipated in the original design of the research project” (Janesick, 2004, p. 106). Often, this unexpected information is uncovered through the researcher’s informed hunches during the analysis process (Riessman, 1993).

Even though intuition and creative interpretation undergirds some aspects of data analysis in qualitative research, it is not “sloppy, indiscriminate work” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 13). Research methodology is a disciplined process that requires rigor and care. There are a variety of strategies that provide such a framework (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Many admit, however, that there is not a single correct method of analyzing the data. The importance is not so much in the method but in being thorough and organized (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).
With a commitment to rigor and thoroughness, I adopted a basic plan from Bloomberg and Volpe (2008). As they and others (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 1993) suggested, the first step was immersing myself in all the data. One way to accomplish immersion, according to Patton (2002), occurred through personally transcribing the interviews. Riessman (1993) stated, “Close and repeated listenings, coupled with methodic transcribing, often leads to insights that in turn shape how we choose to represent an interview narrative in our text” (p. 60).

After listening to all interviews in their entirety twice, I personally transcribed them. As I transcribed, I started minimal coding, as recommended by Saldaña (2013). I also highlighted what appeared to be significant participant phrases. After that, using hard copies, I read over the transcripts twice. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) argued that this exercise yields a good sense of the whole of the data before breaking it into parts.

I would also take the data with me, at least in my head. For example, I am a long distance runner and swimmer. On many runs, and during copious laps in the pool, I would ponder the data. Enlightenment frequently occurred during these lengthy times of solitude and introspection.

Both Saldaña (2013) and Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) promoted using hard copies for initial coding. I followed their suggestions. With a different colored highlighter for each research question, I highlighted phrases accordingly. Saldaña (2013) suggested using the research questions for classification because the goal of the research was to answer the research questions. If a phrase or thought seemed pertinent to persistence, but did not fit into one of the questions, I assigned another color. This applied the thoughts of Bloomberg and Volpe (2008): “Not all your data will fit into your predetermined categories” (p. 103).

In a journal set aside as an audit trail, I kept notes or memos. “These memos are short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that occur to the reader” (Creswell, 2013, p. 183). In this journal,
I jotted thoughts, reflective notes, and initial impressions that arose during this stage. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) made it clear that analysis is ongoing even during the initial interactions with the data. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) labeled this phase as identifying the big ideas.

Next, I began a more intentional coding, or categorizing the data. Creswell (2013), who used the words interchangeably, maintained that coding “represents the heart of qualitative data analysis” (p. 184). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) removed the mystery that often surrounds the coding process: “Coding is essentially a system of classification – the process of noting what is of interest or significance. Identifying different segments of the data, and labeling them to organize the information contained in the data” (p. 102). Schwandt (2007) noted that the coding helps break the large volumes of data into “manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments” (p. 32) while others defined it as winnowing or reducing the data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002).

As suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), prior to the data collection process, I had created a tentative list of codes based on the research on persistence. Creswell (2013) called these *a priori*, or preexisting codes. It was still incumbent upon me to balance my own personal understanding with emerging ideas. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) explained, “Your conceptual framework must remain flexible and open to change throughout the entire analytic process” (p. 103). Creswell (2013) argued that analysis is a continuum between preexisting codes to emergent categories. He encouraged the researcher to “be open to additional codes emerging during the analysis” (p. 185). To ensure that my activities produced appropriate codes, I gave a section of the transcript to my dissertation chair for the inter-rater reliability. This step was also suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008).
Following the plan espoused by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), I maintained a data summary table, noting when a participant’s response fell within a code. A scaled down version can be found in Appendix M. Not all researchers support the use of this approach to the data. For example, for Creswell (2013), “Counting conveys a quantitative orientation of magnitude and frequency contrary to qualitative research” (p. 185). For that reason, I did not maintain a tight focus on the table when conducting the deeper analysis. However, the table did provide interesting insight when comparing males and females in their persistence experience. Those that stand out are highlighted in the tables.

Still using the hard copy of the transcripts and emails, I cut them apart, placing the highlighted and coded phrases into the appropriate categories according to research questions. During this process, themes, or “broader units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea,” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186) became clearer. I placed the cut out sections in piles and then manila folders, according to the emerging themes. This procedure is also supported by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008). “Others prefer cutting out quotes and placing these in manila envelopes marked with the category names” (p. 105). I also took their next suggestion of creating actual flip charts, on the walls, where I pasted the more poignant quotes. This helped me visualize the data.

Some pieces of information did not fit neatly into a category. I kept these in a miscellaneous file. I revisited these often to either determine where they should fit or to create another category.

After all of that, I began compiling the narrative. Again, using the research questions as the framework with a further division by recurring themes, I pieced together the data into a manuscript. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) called this reporting and interpreting the findings.
Trustworthiness

According to Creswell (2013), there are a myriad of perspectives in establishing validity or trustworthiness of qualitative research. Rather than employing quantitative terminology, however, qualitative researchers have developed procedures that they consider parallel to quantitative validation procedures. They seem to apply better to naturalistic research. For example, Lincoln and Guba, as noted by Creswell (2013), used the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They contended that these are “the naturalist’s equivalents for internal validation, external validation, reliability, and objectivity” (Creswell, 2013, p. 246). I will use their approach to this study.

Credibility

Credibility addresses “the issue of the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between respondents’ views of their life ways and the inquirer’s reconstruction and representation of the same” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). After transcribing the participants’ words verbatim, there are two other ways established credibility. First, I asked my dissertation chair to review my interpretations and compare to the texts. As Creswell (2013) explained, the peer reviewer is “the individual who keeps the researcher honest” (p. 251). Additionally I asked participants to review the synopsis of their narrative. Although none of them disagreed, I was open to altering conclusions to better meet their interpretation. According to Schwandt (2007), Lincoln and Guba listed member checking and peer review as the most appropriate undertaking for establishing credibility.

Transferability

Creswell (2013) posited that transferability is accomplished through the rich, thick description of the study. Here, the researcher “describes in detail the participants or setting
under study” (p. 252). By doing so, “the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and determine whether the findings can be transferred ‘because of shared characteristics’” (p. 252).

Patton (2002) argued that rich description is the foundation of good qualitative study. It “open(s) up the world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete description of people and places” (Patton, 2002, p. 438). He added that description is separate from interpretation. “Interpretation involves explaining the findings, answering ‘why’ questions, attaching significance to particular results, and putting patterns into an analytic framework” (p. 438). Although tempting to embark on interpretation, description must come first (Patton, 2002). Thus, I provided rich descriptions, albeit short, of each of the participants and the setting without compromising confidentiality.

**Dependability**

The logical, traceable, and documented process of the research determines its dependability (Schwandt, 2007). The clear and specific methods described in this methodology section are logical and traceable. Furthermore, throughout the research process, I worked closely with my dissertation chair. She was a source of accountability and advice. Lastly, I used a clear auditing system. “An audit trail includes decisions and their rationale at each step in the study—raw data, field notes, data summaries, theoretical notes, and analysis. The audit trail helps to assist the reader in evaluating the soundness of the study” (p. 56). I kept an organized documentation system of all procedures, data, and notes. This audit trail was accessible to a third party examiner, such as the dissertation chair to “attest to the use of dependable procedures and the generation of confirmable findings” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 13).
Confirmability

Similar to objectivity, confirmability establishes that the researcher’s conclusions were not figments of the imagination (Schwandt, 2007). By incorporating numerous direct quotations to support conclusions, I enhanced the study’s confirmability. Also, as stated above, the audit trail buttressed confirmability (Schwandt, 2007). Clarifying my biases at the outset of the study and my maintaining a reflexive journal, noting biases as they arise, also strengthened this validation procedure. Lastly, I was open to negative case analysis. I reported on evidence that does not fit a pattern of codes or themes (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Thinking about possible ethical issues prior to starting a study is prudent. Creswell (2013) suggested doing so at every phase of the research process: data collection, data analysis, and data representation. Carey and Asbury (2012) noted “A researcher’s primary ethical obligation is to the people whose lives are involved in the studies” (p. 56). With my holding to a firm set of personal convictions, I aimed to conduct this study with the highest ethical excellence. Both Patton (2002) and Creswell (2013) provided an ethical guideline. These framed my research plan.

Prior to initiating any contact with possible participants, I presented my research to the IRB of the college where I conducted the research. After its approval, I submitted the proposal to the Liberty University IRB. There was not a conflict of interest; I did not work at the college nor did I have any connection to its student body.

Informed Consent

Once approved by Liberty IRB, I worked closely with the college where I conducted the research in recruiting students according to its own standards of ethical research. Students who
agreed to participate were given an informed consent form (Appendix D). The participants signed this either at the beginning of the focus group or the beginning of the individual interviews. Carey and Asbury (2012) observed that signing this form at the beginning of a session is acceptable.

This form explained the purpose of the study, its methodology, its risks, its duration, its confidentiality, and its potential rewards. Additionally, the form explained that the participant has the right to withdraw at any time which is an important facet of informed consent according to Schwandt (2007) and Creswell (2013). The information in this form was be verbally explained at the outset of each focus group and interview as suggested by Patton (2002).

Confidentiality/anonymity

As suggested by Patton (2002), to maintain confidentiality, I gave each participant a pseudonym. Because the student body is not very big, the names had a neutral, non-identifying tone in order to protect the identity of the participants. All identifying information was removed from all data.

During the focus groups, I stressed that the meetings and the participants were to remain confidential. I did not share their pseudonyms to the group. I transcribed verbatim the interviews. This protected their identity as no one else had access to the recordings. After the transcription, the interviews were erased from the recording device. All emails were transferred to a word document using only pseudonyms, and the original emails were deleted. All hard data was kept in a locked file, in my home, during the research. I will remain there for three years after the completion of the study. The informed consent forms have been stored in a separate locked file in my home. The computer storing the transcribed data was password protected as was the online contact information form.
Incentives

At the conclusion of the focus groups and individual interviews, I gave each participant a $10.00 7-11 gift card. I valued the time these students gave me for my research because they were graciously offering me insight into their lives. As Fontana and Frey (2000) challenged, researchers need to demonstrate that they do not see participants as mere objects of research. Therefore, to show my appreciation, I offered this incentive. Krueger and Casey (2000) stressed the value of such incentives. “Focus groups are unique from other data-gathering processes in terms of the investment that must be made by the individual. It is therefore no surprise that a tradition has been established to provide an incentive for participants” (p. 90). Other researchers (Creswell, 2013; Janesick, 2004) relayed that compensation, even in small amounts, demonstrates respect to participants.

Chapter Summary

Wanting to explore the meaning behind quantitative statistics (Zabloski & Milacci, 2012), I chose a qualitative phenomenological research design. My interest was in the differences, by gender, in persistence factors that lead to graduation from college. Rather than a mere quantitative treatise, I sought the actual experiences of traditional-age college seniors. This understanding came through focus groups, individual interviews, and email exchanges. I also obtained the participants’ basic demographic information through a data collection instrument.

The research questions driving the research were:

- How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence?
- How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence?
• How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this persistence?
• How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence?
• What are the persistence differences, by gender, in the persistence experience?

I conducted the research at a private, co-educational, four year liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region. Through professor permission, I recruited the participants through presenting a power point to senior classes. Eventually, a diverse group of 33 students (F=20; M=13) chose to participate to whom I gave a pseudonym. The audio-recorded meetings occurred on campus either in a classroom, public place, or their residence. The meeting place was chosen by the students.

After listening to the interviews twice, I personally transcribed them. Using hard copies of the recordings and emails, I read through them two times. From there, I coded them, framing the codes according to the research questions. Throughout the process, I maintained an audit trail where I kept notes on my thoughts, progress, and methods of analysis.

I arranged the codes into themes. I eventually cut up the hard copy quotes and taped them to flip chart papers that were on the walls. Each page corresponded to a theme, either a priori, or pre-existing, or emerging themes. From there, I pieced together the narrative, using the students’ quotes as the main source of my data.

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This occurred through using copious verbatim quotes from the participants, asking the participants to review the transcripts of the interviews as well as the final narrative, working with a rich description of the participants and the setting, maintaining an audit trail, working closely with my dissertation chair, and reporting on evidence that did not fit the pattern
of codes or themes. I was also fiercely committed to a high personal ethical standard throughout the process.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Through conversations and interviews, we become acquainted with people and glean information about their experiences. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) described the process as an inter-view. They considered the interview an interchange between two people about a particular topic. “It is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inner-action between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 9). Another explanation was given by Forrest (2013): “The researcher enters the life of the participant in order to view his or her experiences” (p. 70). Seidman (1998) added: “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 3).

Seidman (1998) argued that using interviews to gain knowledge in social science research surpasses natural inquiry because “the subjects of inquiry in the social sciences can talk and think” (p. 2). Unlike a planet or rock, human beings have a sense of what is happening and are often willing to converse on these matters (Seidman, 1998). In spite of ubiquitous research in education, it is a rare study that unveils the perspectives of students, teachers, or administrators (Seidman, 1998).

The goal of this particular inquiry was to fill this gap in educational research; I had a keen interest in uncovering perspectives of college students. Through focus group interviews, individual interviews, and follow-up emails, I was able to construct knowledge about student perspectives toward, and experiences with, the phenomenon, persistence-to-graduation. Using that data, I extracted notable differences, by gender, in the persistence experience. This section explores those findings. Needless to say, as one participant observed, “There are so many lurking variables when it comes to why we succeed or why we don’t.” In spite of the individual variances, however, common themes clearly emerged.
It is important to interject the glaring reality that the analysis of qualitative data flows through the “lens of the researcher” (Zabloski, 2010, p. 78). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) added, “Because understanding is the primary goal of qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 12). Although the intent of every qualitative researcher is to remain free of bias, pure objectivity is impossible (Moustakis, 1994). Groenewald (2004) described this balancing act: “The researcher is required to make a substantial amount of judgment calls while consciously bracketing her/his own presuppositions in order to void inappropriate subjective judgments” (p. 18-19).

Piantanida and Garman (2009) eloquently described the often “prolonged, disorienting, and discouraging . . . task of crafting richly descriptive and evocative experiential text” (p. 187) from the raw data. They explained further:

Coming to this decision is not a linear process. Rather it entails going back and forth between the details [of the raw information] and the larger meaning that might be drawn from the details. . . . The profound [and often disquieting] answer is simply this—it is the researcher’s right and obligation to decide what major message she or he believes is important to put forward (p. 189-190).

When the study is conducted with rigor and care; when the researcher is committed to integrity; when the researcher is driven by carefulness and thoroughness, there is high probability that the researcher’s discernment is accurate (Piantanida & Garman, 2009). Patton (2002) summed up my version of analyzing and then reporting the results: “Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data revealed, given the purpose of the study” (p. 433). I was driven by a desire for rigor, thoroughness, and integrity.
When reporting on qualitative data, Patton (2002) pointed out that there is not one specific format. What drives the reporting depends upon the goal of the research (Patton, 2002). The research questions guided the data collection. It seemed logical that they also guide the reporting of the results. First, however, I will present the participants.

This study relied upon the overall experiences of persistence of a group of individuals. To obtain an overview of the whole before breaking it into parts, I will first provide a group snap-shot. Next I will break the whole into its individual parts. In this case, the individual parts are the participants whom I will describe via a table and individual participant portraits. Within each story are quotes that begin to answer the first research question: How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence? They also delve into parts of the second research question: How do traditional-age college students describe beliefs that contribute to their persistence?

After presenting the participants, I will explore the themes that emerged. Because the emerging themes seemed to fit into the theoretical framework and current persistence research literature, I relied on a priori, or preexisting, themes (Creswell, 2013). However, I also discovered themes not found in the literature. According to Creswell (2013), analysis is often a continuum between preexisting and emerging ideas. Both the a priori and emerging themes addressed the remaining research questions.

For example, the themes addressing the second research question about experiences and beliefs that contributed to persistence were goal/inner drive, family, social integration, academic integration, and institutional factors. Addressing the next research question, about possible hindrances to persistence, the themes included a difficult event, mental health issues, finances, academic difficulties, and negative impression of the institution. Next, how the students overcame these potential hindrances were the themes of wake-up call, asking for help, and right
perspective. The themes for the last research question, which involved the persistence differences by gender, were categorized under the persistence themes of social integration, academic integration, and institutional context.

**Group Snap-Shot**

The most striking quality of the group was the participants’ eagerness to share their stories. Each of them, whether in a focus group, individual interview, and even the email responses, was open and enthusiastic. They appeared relaxed and authentic. They were chatty. Their responses were rich and seemingly honest. I had to cut many of the meetings short due to a schedule conflict, not because the students were at a loss for stories.

The other noteworthy observation was the commonality of their experience. I engaged with a group of extraordinarily diverse individuals. They were athletes, dancers, actresses, horse lovers, musicians, writers, nutritionists, and aspiring doctors and researchers. They were rich and poor, urban and country, majority and minority, strong students and weak students, introverts and extroverts, drinkers and non-drinkers, religious and non-religious, those from very broken families and those from very intact families. In spite of their stark differences, however, there were common denominators.

One of the most poignant commonalities was the impact of family on their persistence. Whether it was a first-generation (a student whose parents did not graduate from college) minority student from a poor, urban area, or a second and even third-generation Caucasian student from an affluent suburb, the story was the same: A family member—most usually a parent—instilled the need for a college education. Only one student did not indirectly or directly reflect on the influence of his parents. Still, for him, it was his sister who had attended college who encouraged him to graduate from college.
The other mutually shared persistence factor was their acute, inner drive. The college tenure was not easy for some in this company of students. Many shared painful and difficult anecdotes that would have caused most to give up. Not with this group. They pressed through the insurmountable odds. Their “never-say-die” attitude, supported by their parents’ encouragement, had kept them on pace. The interaction of the two—inner drive and parents—was almost synergistic in scaffolding their persistence.

**Participant Portraits**

A summary of the participants’ demographic background data, using their pseudonyms, is presented in Table 3. Following this is a brief vignette, describing each of the participants. These are not auto-biographies written by the participants. Instead, they are my own tapestry, woven together using various pieces of information from their demographic information along with quotes from their interviews or emails.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) stated, “One way to present your findings is to develop and craft profiles or vignettes of individual participants” (p. 108). Needless to say, without the participants’ willingness to share their stories, there would be no data. “In a very real sense, they are collaborators and co-workers. . . . Some degree of familiarity or acquaintance with the collaborators is required” (Milacci, 2003, p. 75). Thus, a brief introduction of each of these collaborators seems fitting.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
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*High SES is over $100k; Low SES is under $50k – self-reported

**Abby**

Abby is a 21-year-old Caucasian female from an upper middle-class family. Both her parents, who are still married, have post-graduate degrees. As a business major with a GPA of 3.4, Abby’s post-graduation plans are fuzzy. “I have not figured out that far yet. I know that I’m going to get a job.” Abby invested her extra-curricular efforts in one club and one intramural
team. However, her social life has been full. Parental pressure for a college degree spawned Abby’s position that quitting college “is like bringing shame and dishonor on the family. You’re not going to drop out. You can transfer if you have to but you’re not going to drop out.” When offered the opportunity to transfer, after experiencing a traumatic event during her sophomore year, Abby was steadfast: “I didn’t want to leave my friends and I didn’t want to let [those who hurt me] win. So I stayed here and came back and faced my demons” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Adam

From a small town and a middle-class, two-parent family, Adam is a 22-year-old, Caucasian male. Neither of his parents attended college. In fact, except for a distant relative, Adam will be the first of his relatives to graduate from college. Being able to play a varsity sport was one impetus for his coming to college. He has a 3.0 GPA and is a business major with a concentration in marketing and finance. Not only has Adam played a varsity sport for four years, he has also been involved in intramurals, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), and an on-campus internship. After graduation, he wants to work and then start graduate school within a couple years. When asked what propelled him through difficult times to persist, Adam answered: “I would say if it wasn’t for my parents and like my family in general but also my inner drive. . . . In my inner drive was like ‘You start something, you’re gonna finish it’” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Alexis

A 22-year-old Caucasian female, Alexis is from a small town, middle-class family. Her dad, who died in a tragic accident when Alexis was a teenager, had a high school diploma. Her mom holds a master’s degree. While in college, Alexis hosted a radio show, wrote a column for
the school newspaper, and developed an online weblog. Alexis currently has a 2.7 GPA which is significant considering her freshman year GPA was a 0.1. Alexis’ disdain for the school, coupled with her undisciplined lifestyle, led to academic suspension after freshman year. When asked, in an email, what propelled her to appeal the suspension, Alexis explained:

I did not want to fail. . . . I wanted to prove it to people that I wasn’t someone who would give up, and also people thought I was stupid because of my grades, which wasn’t the case at all. . . . I felt like I had let a lot of people down. . . . It was not easy not easy at all. I felt like I had to climb out of this never ending pit. . . . I still do not feel as if I am out yet (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Amelia**

Amelia is a 22-year-old Caucasian female who grew up in a middle-class family in the suburbs of a major city. As a double-major in biology and French, on a tuition free scholarship, she plans to enter medical school upon graduation. Amelia carries an impressive 3.8 GPA. Her junior year spent in Germany and Japan broadened her horizons and self-understanding. Growing up in a large military family, with two officer parents with master’s degrees, Amelia solidified her goals early in life. She summed it up: “I’ve wanted to do medical school before I got here. I planned out my four years. So I had a plan and then I followed it. . . . You have to have some sort of clear idea or be a strong enough student to be able to survive the first semester or two” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). While in college, this very well-rounded young woman was heavily involved in the Honor Council, Theatre, Martial Arts Club, campus radio, tutoring and being a teacher’s assistant.
Andrea

Andrea, a 21-year-old Caucasian female, is from a small town. An only child, she comes from a middle-class family. Her parents recently divorced. Andrea has a 3.3 GPA and is a biology major with a psychology minor. With her both parents having master’s degrees, education has always been important. After graduation, she plans to attend graduate school to pursue research in neuro-development and autism. While in college, Andrea was involved in Concert Choir, Bell Choir, and Alpha Phi Omega (APO)—a service organization. With an optimistic outlook, Andrea eschews negativity. She illustrated one such example while describing her classroom peers:

All they did was complain about it. They didn’t want to do anything. And, I was just. I wasn’t. I’ve never been that kind of person. . . . So I try to take advantage of that and enjoy what I could. And not just sit there and complain about it constantly.

As a result of such optimism, she never considered quitting. “I mean obviously some days are super hard and, like I say, ‘I just want to quit.’ But that’s not true” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Ashley

Ashley, a family and consumer science major, is a 22-year-old Caucasian female. Her middle-class, two-parent family resides in a mid-sized city. Her mom has a bachelor’s degree while her dad has a high school diploma. With a remarkable GPA of 3.8, Ashley’s post-graduation plans are to teach at the secondary level. While in college, Ashley has been heavily involved in her major through Family Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA). She was also part of the yearbook staff. During her freshman year, the college considered
eliminating the major that drew her to this college. The tenuous situation caused Ashley a great deal of stress:

I went home every weekend so it wasn’t like I had to really deal with anything on campus except for five days out of the week. I would go home as soon as I could on Fridays and be with my family and that’s literally how I got through my freshman year (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Ultimately, the college kept her major which reinforced her decision to remain at this college.

Austin

Austin is a 22 year-old Caucasian male from a small town. His two-parent family is middle-class. As a business major with goals to get a job after graduation, Austin has a 3.4 GPA. While in college, he played a varsity sport until an injury his sophomore year ended his career. He has also been involved in intramurals, SHRM, academic tutoring, and academic coaching. According to Austin, his freshman year involved a lot of partying and video games until his mid-term wake-up call. He described the events: “I remember I got my mid-term grades back and they were all C’s.” After seeing his grades, his parents challenged him to improve. He responded, “At that point I was like ‘Well, I’d better start.’ . . . Ever since that fall freshman year. . . . I just realized the work I needed to do. . . . It’s about priorities” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Ben

Ben is a 22-year-old Caucasian male. This homeschooled student is from an upper-class family in a suburb of a large city. Both his parents have college degrees with his dad having a master’s degree. As a communications studies major, Ben would like to get a job in communications and eventually go to graduate school in the same field. His GPA is an
extraordinary 3.8. While on campus, Ben has been very involved in various extra-curricular activities in the Communications Department as well as Campus Crusade for Christ (CRU). Furthermore, his internship was with the Convocation program at the college. In spite of some rough spells, freshman year, quitting was never an option. To keep his mind off the struggles, he became engrossed deciding on a major through exploring various general education courses.

I really enjoyed most of the classes that I was taking and I feel like really getting buried in what I was doing class-wise . . . really helped me get through it as well as I went home a lot during freshman year. Probably every other weekend I was going home (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Chelsea

Chelsea is a 21-year-old Caucasian female from a large metropolitan area. Coming from a middle-class family, she was raised by her dad who has a master’s degree. Chelsea is a communications studies major, with a 3.6 GPA. She would love to work in event planning after graduation. While on campus, she was heavily involved in planning student activities, the Communications Club, Relay for Life, and the school newspaper. Facing pressures from her estranged mom to quit school and become a house-wife, Chelsea was confused. In an email, she described the angst:

I began to think about it—what was I doing at school? I began to think I was wasting money and considered dropping out. . . . I actually sat and tried to figure out a plan for leaving college and what I would do. After thinking on it for a while, I realized I was going to college for something. I am going to school because I want to do something great. Being a mother and wife is great. . . . I also want to wake up one day and be able to say I did not quit (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
Chris

A 22-year-old African-American male, Chris is an athletic training major with a 3.3 GPA. With plans to immediately attend graduate school, Chris described his goals: “I would like to pursue my doctorate degree like my mother did and get into athletic training and work in Division I athletics. . . . I would like to teach eventually.” Chris was raised in a two-parent, upper-middle class family, in a suburb of a large city. When asked who inspired him to succeed, Chris credited his family:

My family had a very good jump start into careers and education. . . . My grandmother tells me every day when I leave, like from break, “Do not be a statistic. Don’t be that kid. Be better. Be better than the rest.” And so I’ve taken that mind-frame all through my high school career. . . . Plus I see how successful my family is, and I want to continue to be successful (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). While on campus, he was involved in Gospel Choir and Equestrian Club. Additionally, he was the athletic trainer for a varsity team for four years.

Courtney

In spite of growing up in a small blue-collar town where few attend college, Courtney, a 22-year-old Caucasian female, had ambitions to be a doctor since she was a toddler. Ultimately, she wants to work in pediatrics. She is a biology major and psychology minor with a 2.9 GPA. Her mom has a college degree; her dad, who did not go to college, is self-employed. She received a full tuition scholarship as a result of her stellar high school career. Over her four years in college, she has been involved in a myriad of clubs and organizations, often serving as an officer: Civil War Club, APO, Student Alumni Network, and Resident Assistant. When asked why she did not drop out after a bout with depression, Courtney was emphatic: “For starters, I
just didn’t think that was me. I mean, also if I dropped out at that time, I would never want to come back to college and I would have nothing to do for the rest of my life” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

David

David is a 23-year-old bi-racial male from a lower middle-income family in a metropolitan area. His separated parents had some college experience. During David’s childhood, his military dad was often absent. During that period, his mom encouraged him academically. Once David entered high school, his dad became more involved. David has a 3.0 GPA. As a family and consumer science major and fifth year senior, his goal is to attend graduate school. He wants to be a Cooperative Extension Agent. Tempted to drop out freshman year, David finally connected with a group of friends. He explained:

I was lucky to find them because adapting to this school environment and all the work I had to do was difficult at first. But when I finally met them, I was finally able to find time to relax and de-stress with them. . . . I felt better and I didn’t drop out because I was planning on it (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

His heavy involvement in In-Step Ballroom Dancing was another boost to his persistence along with his trying to give back to the community through self-effacing acts of compassion.

Destiny

Destiny is a bi-racial 22-year-old female. She was raised in an urban area in a single parent/grandparent middle-class home. As a communications major with a theatre minor, Destiny has a 3.1 GPA. An independent study, at an international theme park, required time away from campus; thus she is a fifth year senior. After graduation, she hopes to either return for a career at the theme park or work in management at a lingerie retailer. While on campus,
Destiny has been involved in Black Student Association, Theatre, Communications Club, Multicultural Services, Resident Assistant, and Orientation Leader. Desiring to avoid the dead-end cycle of those around her, Destiny enrolled in college. After a car accident sophomore year that left Destiny with a severe concussion, many encouraged her to take time off from college. She explained:

I actually did go home for 4 days and had time to think about this. . . “That’s the place [the college] where I get my work done. That’s the place where I shine. That’s the place where not only my peers believe in me but my professors believe in me” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Eric

A 22-year-old African-American male, Eric is a business administration major and computer information systems minor with a 2.5 GPA. He plans to get a job after graduation. As a first-generation college student, Eric was raised by his parents in a lower middle-class family in the suburbs close to a large city. Initially, college was not in Eric’s plans. He described that season:

When I graduated from high school, I didn’t even want to go to college. I didn’t see the importance of it. But my mom – she pushed. . . . Honestly, I think the reason I’m even in college is cuz of my mom (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Being recruited to play a varsity sport, and then starting for four years, certainly bolstered Eric’s drive to remain in school. Eric unabashedly admitted he faced numerous temptations to quit. What got him through those times? “Definitely mom” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Remaining an active part of the team also helped.
Hannah

Hannah, a 22-year-old Caucasian female, comes from a small town and an upper middle-class family. Her mom has an associate’s degree and her dad graduated from high school. Hannah has a 3.6 GPA and is a biology major with a minor in environmental science. Her goal, ever since she was in 5th grade, was to be a public school teacher. Thus, her immediate plans are to teach while also obtaining an online master’s degree in education. As a college student, Hannah was involved in intramurals, CRU, and a science honor society. She also worked two campus jobs. Along with her on-campus support system, which encouraged her through bad times, Hannah’s tenacious spirit was obviously a driving force in her persistence:

I wish I understood people who give up. How they choose that. . . . I just don’t understand how you do that. I chose this. You can’t just stop, and there have been plenty of times where maybe I didn’t want to keep going. . . . I made a commitment. I don’t quit
(Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Heather

A 21-year-old Caucasian female, Heather is from an upper-class, two-parent family in a metropolitan area. Her parents have some college education. As a health and human sciences major with a 3.3 GPA, Heather hopes to attend nursing school after graduation. Heather came to this college to play a varsity sport. Sadly, her dreams were crushed after a career ending injury. Heather noted the painful transition:

I was actually depressed so I went on a whole bunch of medications. . . . My parents and friends kind of pushed me through it and told me that it would eventually resolve itself. . . . I was angry. So I just had to work through it. I went to counseling and just tried to find my new life in a way.
Although it’s still hard, she explained, “I have adapted well and certainly have started the healing process . . . mentally and emotionally I’m so much better than 2 years ago” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Jacob**

Jacob is a 22-year-old African American male who was raised by his dad in a lower middle-class urban environment. He is a business major with a 2.1 GPA. He plans to enter the work force. Although he came to college primarily to play a sport, Jacob has other goals:

My goals are to literally graduate college and get a degree and make something out of myself to get away from all the foolishness in the city. . . . I had good friends but I mean a lot of them died. So I just didn’t want to end up like that. . . . I wanted to be the one that said, “I got out. I made it.”

He attributed much of his success to his dad. When asked about temptations to quit, Jacob was emphatic: “All this hard work getting me here would have been for nothing. You know. It’s not only about me. It’s about what he sacrificed and stuff. My dad’s a hard working man. He added, “You have to finish. Whatever you do, just finish. . . . Like you have to keep going. You can’t stop” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Jennifer**

A 22-year-old Caucasian female, Jennifer has a 3.7 GPA. The double major—communications and sociology—plans to get a job after graduation. She admitted needing a break before considering graduate school. Socially, after two painful roommate scenarios, she confessed, “I haven’t really been close with anyone on campus. Jennifer acknowledged that her boyfriend was her main source of on-campus support. Her involvement included the student newspaper, radio station, and academic coaching. Born and raised in a rural area, Jennifer
excelled academically. Her middle-class parents, who regret not attending college, always pushed Jennifer. At an emotional crisis point in her junior year, Jennifer had doubts:

“Why am I doing this?” And I actually remember talking to my mom. . . . “I’m just so stressed out. Is there any way that I could take next semester off and just have time to figure things out?” And she’s like, “No. If you quit now, you’re not going to finish. So you’re gonna finish. There’s no doubt about it.” I guess that’s like part of the reason I’m still here (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Jennifer courageously pressed through the relentless anxiety to graduate in four years.

**Josh**

A math and computer science major, Josh is a 22-year-old Caucasian male with an inspiring 3.8 GPA. He plans to get a job in computer science after graduating. Josh was raised in a small town in a middle-class, two-parent family. His father has a Master’s degree and his mom graduated from high school. While in college, Josh has been involved in varsity sports and CRU. For Josh, attending college was “just something that you do next. Like my brother had gone from high school to college. And it was always sort of like that thing that it was kind of expected but it wasn’t really pressure.” Quitting never crossed his mind. “There wasn’t really anything that made me doubt that I wanted to finish” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Katie**

Katie is a 22-year-old Caucasian female. She comes from a small town and an upper middle-class family. After two years at a community college, this first-generation college student became an information systems management major with a 3.5 GPA. Her ultimate career goal is to work for a large corporation like Microsoft or Google. Having commuted for her two
years at this school, Katie had little time to get involved on campus. On the other hand, academically she has done well. Overall, though, in regards to her being a transfer and a commuter, she expressed regret:

It definitely affects my overall college experience and my out-look on the school in a negative way. . . . Even now looking back, I totally regret transferring. I would have definitely gone to a 4 year university straight up and lived on campus. . . . I think if I would have just taken that big step, and lived on campus, freshman year, my experience would be totally different (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Lauren

A biology major from a rural county, middle-class family, Lauren is a 22-year-old Caucasian female. Her dad has a professional degree, and her mom is a high school graduate. Lauren has a 3.0 GPA and has been very active, both on and off campus, during her college tenure, Dialogue Club, Civil War Club, 4-H Leader, fair department, and Girl Scout leader. She plans to go to graduate school after graduation as the next step in fulfilling her life-long goal of becoming a veterinarian. After a roommate fiasco her freshman year, coupled with concerns back at home, Lauren struggled. She battled temptations to leave:

It was just the right combination of my family, my friends, my faith, and my own determination to be a vet . . . kept me here even though there were so many times, freshman year, that I wanted to leave (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Marcus

A 23-year-old African American male from an urban area, Marcus is a fifth year senior. He is an information systems management major with a 2.4 GPA with plans to work as an IT
consultant. A first-generation college student, Marcus described his childhood, “We grew up; I would say I guess lower class . . . growing up without like hot water, running water, something like that like a few weeks at a time just because my parents were struggling with bills.” His childhood situations “motivated me to not live in the city once I'm able to. I needed to be able to afford the cost of living outside of the city so it in turn motivates me to finish school and get a degree.” For Marcus, college is “not an option. It hasn’t been an option since senior year of high school. I was gonna finish college” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). His fiancé has been his back bone in his pursuit of a college degree.

Maria

Maria, a 21-year-old Caucasian female, is from a small city and a middle-class, two-parent family. Her mom has a professional degree while her dad has a master’s degree. She was homeschooled for her k-12 education and currently has a 3.7 GPA. This business major, equine studies minor landed a job in the marketing department at an equine company right after her December graduation. Her on campus involvement included officer positions in two organizations. Maria’s desire to work in an equine environment was the driving force to persist through college. Alongside parental high expectations, the self-proclaimed overachiever reflected on college ambitions. “I’ve always been really like goal oriented. . . . It wasn’t really an option to drop off” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Matt

Matt is a 22-year-old biology major with a 2.5 GPA. His post-graduation plans are uncertain. He may invest in two years of volunteer work. He was raised in the suburbs of a large city in a middle-class family with parents who had some post-secondary schooling. His primary involvement was with the cross country and track teams. He credited running for his
coming to college: “It was like running had a big part of my coming to college but that’s because running is such a big part of my development. Running cross country was the primary motivator to attend college.” He also attributed his persistence-to-graduation to the devotion required in running:

You’re constantly reinforced through running like “I’ve got to do it.” For me, it’s been like I gotta at least finish. Like stopping isn’t an option even if I fail. . . . It’s just something that’s ingrained in me like even though you’re not doing well you can at least finish it (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

As a testament to his unmitigated devotion, Matt continued to run and compete in spite of his being plagued with injury.

Megan

Megan is a 22-year-old Caucasian female from a small town. Her parents divorced two years ago. Her mom had some college experience, and her dad has two bachelor’s degrees. As a business administration major, Megan’s post-graduation goal is to get a job. Graduate school is a possibility after she works for a while. Her shyness and reticence to talk in class is surpassed by a tenacity to excellence as demonstrated by her 3.8 GPA. Coming from an upper middle-class family of educationally successful siblings, Megan modeled hard work in the classroom. Regarding persistence, she stated, “I grew up in a family where you were expected to do it. You just did it. And you didn’t say it’s too hard or complain about it. You just do what you have to do to do it” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Her involvement on campus included a school publication, two honor’s groups, and intramural softball.
Melissa

Melissa, with a 3.1 GPA, is a 22-year-old Caucasian female from an upper middle-class family in a suburb of a large city. Her mom has some college experience, while her dad holds a master’s degree. She anticipates that her liberal studies major will yield an elementary teaching job after graduation. While in college, Melissa was active in some of the spiritual clubs on campus such as CRU. Her senior year she took on a leadership role on the campus-wide Spiritual Life Board. Describing her frustrating freshman year, compounded by a difficult roommate situation, Melissa explained, “I thought in my head nothing could get worse than that cuz that was like losing like a best friend. That was the biggest dramatic thing that ever happened to me.” When asked why she did not leave, she responded, “I didn’t really ever see transferring [or quitting] as an option. I never looked at that” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Patrick

A business major with a concentration in marketing, Patrick is a 22-year-old Caucasian male. He has a 2.9 GPA. After graduating, he wants to work. He also plans to commence graduate school within a couple years. Both his parents and grandparents graduated from college, and his mother is completing a doctoral degree. His upper middle-class family is from a small town not far from a large metropolitan area. While a student, Patrick was involved in Student Senate, SHRM, and Student Ambassadors. Originally, he came to this particular institution to play a college sport. He quit after his freshman year due to a coaching change. With a family lineage of college graduates, Patrick never considered quitting college in spite of his struggles with dyslexia.

I’ve never really thought about quitting school. I’ve just always been like “I wanna go
through school,” and I knew it was gonna be tough for me. . . When I came in I’m like “I’m gonna graduate. I know I’m gonna graduate.” So it’s just self-motivation (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Ross

Ross is a 22-year-old Caucasian male. Carrying an impressive 3.9 GPA, he is an environmental science major who transferred into this institution for his sophomore year. He was raised in a small city in a middle-class, two-parent family. Both his parents have college degrees. While in school, Ross has been involved with varsity sports, intramurals, and CRU. His post-graduation plans are to work for a year and then attend graduate school. For Ross, attending college is “the next step that was always gonna happen. You go from elementary to middle, middle to high school, high school to college.” The underlying theme for Ross is “learning for the sake of learning and so education was always kind of like the goal of continuing, and college is where you can keep learning for the sake of learning.” During his difficult transition semester, as he was between the two schools in the transfer process, Ross never contemplated quitting. “It was never a question of, ‘Would I finish?’” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Sarah

A first-generation college student, Sarah was raised in a middle-class farm family. The 22-year-old Caucasian female graduated valedictorian of her private high school class. To avoid college debt, Sarah commuted from home all four years. Sarah attributed some of her academic success to commuting:
I have friends who live on campus, and I have stayed with them over night. . . . When I’ve stayed here, my school work gets on the back burner, and I want to like hang out with them. . . . When I’m home, school work comes first.

Commuting had its drawbacks, however. For many reasons, both academically and socially, Sarah’s fall term, freshman year, “was extremely hard.” Commuting compounded her difficulties. She elaborated on her experience:

Driving back and forth 40 minutes every single day is really frustrating. . . . Some mornings I get up at 6 and I’m like “Why am I doing this?” . . . But I think about in the long run how I don’t want to be stuck on a farm working and that makes me get out of bed and go (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Stephanie

A first-generation college student from a small city and a middle-class, two-parent family, Stephanie is a 21-year-old Caucasian female. With a 3.5 GPA, she is a communications and a Spanish minor. She came to this college to play a varsity sport. After a year, however, she quit. Her other involvement on campus has been the Communications Club, intramurals, and two honor societies. After college, she wants to get a job in public relations for an international relief organization. Stephanie described the vulnerability of her freshman year: “My high school was never hard . . . and then I came here and I took bio and I like got a C. I had never gotten a C in my life.” She changed her major and quit the varsity sport to improve her grades. During that period, she battled the temptation to transfer. Ultimately, she persisted. “At this point, I can’t even believe I thought about transferring, I was in a dark place for myself at that time and now I look back and am so glad I didn't transfer” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Finding a solid group of friends was key in her decision.
**Sydney**

Sydney, a small-town girl from a lower middle-class family, is a 22-year-old African American female. While in high school, she moved out of her divorced parents’ home. “It was just really hard to live there. . . . I wasn’t going to get what I wanted to get out of life being there. I always knew that I wanted to further my education.” She moved in with her best friend’s family. Sydney was recruited to this college to play a sport. However, after two seasons, she quit for personal reasons. After that, this admitted loner noted that her campus involvement was limited to intramurals. A Biology major, with a 2.3 GPA, she wants to enroll in a graduate dental program. When asked what sets her apart from those with similar backgrounds who fail to rise above the challenges, Sydney confessed:

That’s a good question. I think that I just want it. I don’t know. Like I’m not the best student but I have persevered through so much that it’s just like, you know, it’s kind of hard to just not want it any more. It’s been a long road (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

The doctor’s diagnosis of clinical depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) confirm the long road she has traveled.

**Whitney**

Whitney is a 21-year-old Caucasian female from a middle-class family in a metropolitan area. With a 2.8 GPA, this psychology major hopes to attend graduate school for social work after she graduates. Her involvement on campus included Student Ambassadors, Orientation Leader, intramurals, and Equestrian Club. Although her married parents never attended college, Whitney explained this was not a deterrent to her persistence. “I wouldn't say that being a first-generation college student had any real impact on my persistence. . . . My parents are making a
comfortable living without degrees which makes me proud to see.” Besides her sister, who is currently in graduate school, Whitney pointed to the seemingly wasted potential in her magnet school classmates for her higher education ambitions:

I saw the things that were happening around me at the school. . . . Maybe I’m just one of the lucky ones. My parents pushed me a lot. The teachers pushed you. But a lot of kids were too cool for school and were content at having babies and getting married at 21 (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Zach

A 22-year-old Caucasian male from a rural, middle-class family, Zach is a first-generation college student. Observing the negative lifestyles of uneducated family members, Zach’s parents encouraged college. “My mom and dad did not want that for us. . . . It was like, ‘You guys (you and your brother) are going to go to school. . . . My dad is very very adamant about me getting a good education.” He is a biology major and a nutrition and wellness minor with a 3.4 GPA. He is also a certified personal trainer and would like to become a certified nutritionist. Zach’s campus involvement has included Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) along with time spent body building. Zach’s freshman year was a time of extensive partying until another student invited him to FCA. Zach described the soul searching that ensued. “I just made a conscious decision, ‘Ok, you’re here for an education. Your mom and dad are paying your way. And you’re going behind their back and doing all this stuff. That’s not right. You need to grow up’” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). He renounced the party scene and regained focus.
**Setting**

The college where I completed the research has some unique features. It is a small (1800 students), rural, liberal-arts, private college with a loose affiliation to a Protestant religious denomination. It is a residential institution. Students are required to live on campus unless they are living with their parents. In 2014-15, for the first time, because of space considerations in the residence halls, seniors were permitted to live off-campus. However, according to some of the research participants, the requirements were so rigid that it seemed difficult to meet the criteria.

The college offers single-gender and co-ed residence halls for the freshmen. There are also honors housing and apartment-like structures for upper classmen. Freshman residence halls have specific visitation hours for the opposite sex while there are no limitations in the upper-class residences. It is also a dry campus. Alcohol is prohibited on campus. This applies equally to under-age drinkers as well as those over 21.

Regarding its academics, the institution takes great pride in its liberal arts curriculum. The Princeton Review seems to agree. It consistently names this particular institution as one of the best private liberal arts colleges. As part of the liberal arts curriculum, all students are required to take a number of general education courses. According to the college web-site, the general education program consists of four distinct areas of study. These are master core skills, engagement in a global society, engagement of ideas across the disciplines, and the integration of skills and ideas. The program consists of between 33–54 semester credit hours, depending on placement scores, courses taken, and potential overlap between categories.

One component of the liberal arts education is the convocation requirement. The convocation program includes a variety of programs, including films, speakers, presentations,
campus worship, and performances in the arts. The college website boasts at offering over 60 programs a semester. Students are required to attend at least seven per semester. For the student who meets the convocation attendance requirements at the end of each semester, a grade of Satisfactory (S) is entered on the student’s permanent record; for the student who does not, a grade of Unsatisfactory (U) is entered.

Another unique piece of the liberal arts thrust is its personal development program. It starts freshman year when students are assigned to small groups that are led by a faculty member. The goal of the program is to build community as well as to help students reflect on their development as a whole person—intellectually, emotionally, physically, ethically, and spiritually. It continues throughout the students’ college tenure. The program culminates in a senior e-portfolio. Here, the students look back on the personal growth achieved as a result of their college experience. In fact, during my recruitment presentations to the seniors, many faculty members reminded them that participating in this research study was a perfect segue into preparing for their senior portfolio.

Recurring Themes

I elucidate the themes about persistence-to-graduation that emerged through analysis. These themes, by answering the research questions, piece together the different parts of the phenomenon, persistence-to-graduation. The remaining questions are: How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence? What are the persistence differences, by gender?
The persistence themes in this section are goal/inner drive, family, social integration, academic integration, and institutional factors. I will also explore the themes that represent the possible hindrances to persistence. Included are the themes on overcoming. In all the cases, their overcoming involved realigning with most of the persistence factors. For instance, those struggling to persist relied on their familial support, who reminded them of their goals as the struggling students realigned socially and academically. Often, this involved asking for help, especially for the females.

In spite of the diversity of the group, there was a common thread in their enrollment and persistence. This thread was composed of two interdependent background themes which were family and goal/inner drive. Every student claimed that the interweaving of these conditions was rudimentary to their persistence story. As Abby stated, “I think some of it [persistence] is internal and some of it is external” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). The internal was the inner drive while the external, most often, was parental encouragement or expectation toward a college degree. There was also the student’s integrating with institutional factors that supplemented the original and sustaining factors of parental support and goal/inner drive.

**Goal/Inner Drive**

Driving each student was the ultimate goal of a college degree. The degree either stood alone, as a goal unto itself, or it was perceived as a stepping stone to the next phase of life. Amelia expressed succinctly what the rest of the group described: “When it comes to persistence, have a goal in mind and then make your college experience a tool to get that goal” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Supporting each student’s goal was a
formidable internal drive. The goal of a college education was often viewed differently by first-generation and second-generation college students.

First-generation college students’ goals. For some of the first-generation students, the college degree was an escape from difficult background experiences. For others, it was the avenue to improve on the circumstances observed in uneducated family members and peers. Their first-generation college student status, instead of being a hindrance, was a major motivator to persist to graduate.

Marcus was a prime example of the goal trumping life experience. An African-American young man, raised in self-reported poverty, and held up at gun point when he was 12, Marcus decided he wanted out of the city. He knew that a college degree would be his exodus: “I needed to be able to afford the cost of living outside of the city so it in turn motivates me to finish school and get a degree” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Jacob, like Marcus, was compelled to escape the violence and precarious life-style of his high school peers. Destiny and Whitney had similar attitudes. Destiny explained:

I wanted to be something. I wanted to be someone better than some of the women in my family, particularly my sister and my cousin who have kids. They like straight out of high school, less than a year, they got pregnant. And in my area, within my generation pretty much people graduate. Some go to college. Some don’t. The ones that don’t get sucked into that life of having sex and having babies (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Whitney displayed a similar resolve:

I think a lot of it, for me, had to do with the people that I went to school with. The high school I went to is in a Magnet Program. And so the actual school that housed the
academy was right on the city line. So like kids—inner city school kids and crazy kids—would come to our school. People who had so much potential. Like you could see the potential they had. Weren’t doing anything with it. Um. It’s like…for me…teen pregnancy is a norm. My class president just had a baby. Everyone at my school is having kids and I’m like “I’m the same age as you and there’s no way in hell that I would want to have a child right now.” And like a lot of them—not that there’s anything wrong with working at a fast food place—they get up, they go work their job at the fast food place, they don’t go to school. They don’t do anything like that. And it sucks because they were in the same classes I was in and then there’s potential there but a lot of people weren’t taking the opportunity that was handed to them. Everyone was handed the same resources. I think from the academy I think there were 24 graduates my senior year and I think there are five of us who are full time college students (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Zach observed the lack of education of extended family and realized he wanted more. Katie did not want to be dependent on a man like her high-school-educated mom is on her step-dad. Matt loathed the thought of working in a grocery store like his dad. He also wanted to surpass the restlessness of his older brother:

My older brother goes to a community college and I remember like—well he sort of goes. He takes one or two classes. And like I might not be doing great but like I’m still getting by . . . He has a job at an ice rink. Like more power to him. . . Like when I look at my brother, I just kind of like—I don’t know where he’s going. Like I mean he’s a nice guy and all. I love him but I don’t know what he’s trying to do (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
Other goals. For many of the participants, both first and second-generation, a college degree was simply the logical next step. Megan stated, “College was always something that you did. Like that is just what you did was go to college.” Ben reiterated her sentiment: “It was just what was expected after high school.” Ross added, “It was just the next step that was always gonna happen. You go from elementary to middle, middle to high school, high school to college” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Others saw the college degree as the stepping-stone to the next phase of their career or educational ambitions. For example, both Courtney and Amelia wanted to be doctors since they were children. Therefore, a bachelor’s degree was their necessary next step. Amelia pointed out, “My bachelor’s degree means that I’m one step closer to accomplishing my goal” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Maria discussed similar rationale for a bachelor’s degree:

It was more like the stepping-stone to the career that I wanted. . . . I knew that I wanted to have a job that I would love. For my entire life, my passions have always been with horses. So this had a really good opportunity to like you know get a degree associated with horses and so that’s the main reason why I came here and that’s been a really big driving force too up to this point because I wanted a degree in something I wanted to pursue after college (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Hannah’s thoughts resonated with Maria’s: “I just knew like you gotta get a degree. . . . Because I knew I’m good at teaching. It’s what I want to do. I’m going to get a degree for it. So college was just the normal idea” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Many of the students did not have specific career goals. However, for them, the college degree would open the door for a successful career. In turn, it would support a good life. For
Eric, “I think it just kind of separates you apart from other people in the work force. And I think it also gives you the opportunity to better your life.” Austin’s views were similar: “I knew I had to stay with it if I wanted to get a better job than what I would have if I just stopped at that point” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Sydney expressed parallel thoughts:

If I didn’t have a college degree, I couldn’t get a good job, provide for myself, you know?

Provide for my eventual family if I decide to go that route. So I think it’s just a key into a door of just like happiness and hope, you know what I mean? (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Austin, Patrick, and Adam saw their degrees as the gateway to more money. Patrick explained, with a chuckle, “Money is…it’s awesome. Like have you ever seen someone frowning on a jet ski?” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Internal drive.** Undergirding these ambitious goals, however, seemed to be a strong internal drive. For most of these students, college was challenging either academically, socially, or emotionally. Their inner passion to graduate kept them going when the goal, alone, may not have felt like it was enough. There seemed to be seasons, during their college years, where the actual degree appeared too far in the future. The goal for a college degree simply was not enough to sustain their persistence. Thus, they had to press into something deeper—an inner drive—until the goal became more tangible.

One of the focus groups discussed the intangibility of goals freshman and sophomore years: “They weren’t as like foreseeable. Once junior and senior year . . . it started hitting me like very soon. This is like real” (Hannah). “It’s [the goal of a degree] not tangible to them [freshman who withdraw]” (Hannah, Maria, Whitney). (Personal communication with
participants, November, 2014). It appeared that something more powerful than their goal emboldened those who persisted until that goal became more tangible.

As Abby explained, “Persistence, to me, isn’t like one moment in time. It’s just like ‘keep on keeping on.’” Jennifer demonstrated similar resolve: “It means pushing through no matter what. I mean that’s pretty much what I’m doing now. Just trying to push through it and just get it done.” Sarah added, “I know at times I’ve thought about quitting but I would never quit” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Heather was emphatic when explaining the role of motivation and perseverance:

I don’t think they tell you it’s going to be as hard as it really is. I think a lot of people tell you, “Oh it’s the best 4 years of your life.” What college did these people go to, because it’s not my college? . . . It’s a struggle to find that inner motivation to get to the end and you see that light at the end of the tunnel and you’re not sure if it’s a train or actually the end. But then when you get to like now…it makes it so much worth it (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Part of that, for many, was that quitting simply was never an option. Like Megan said, “I’ve never thought about dropping out of school.” Many others echoed similar resolve. Matt compared his persistence, through difficulty, to his dogged determination in cross country training: “You’re constantly reinforced, through running like ‘I’ve got to do it.’ For me, it’s been like I gotta at least finish. Like stopping isn’t an option even if I fail.” For Josh, “It’s just been like a commitment. From day one, I’m making this commitment and I’m going to see it through to the end.” Zach summed up the common thread in these persistence stories. “I think some people just have deep inside; they just have a will power that other people don’t have” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).
Family

The goals and inner drive notwithstanding, participants also affirmed the power of their family’s support, expectations, and encouragement. All of the students, directly or indirectly, referred to a combination of the goal/inner drive and family support and encouragement. In general, Chris’ sentiments were shared by the group:

If their home life is terrible or they don’t have goals and they’re not being encouraged and stuff like that—like everything stems from home. . . . Coming from a family that has the means, the drive, and the support can help a student graduate (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

In the cases of some of these students, the home lives may have not been economically or educationally stellar. Nonetheless, even those students had at least one family member or adopted family member (Sydney) who encouraged college attendance and then firmly supported them during their college tenure. When asked, “If it were not for [fill in the blank], I would not be graduating from college,” many of the participants directly referred to their parents. Heather was one example:

My parents. I definitely wouldn’t be here. . . . If it wasn’t for my parents. . . . My parents know how to push my buttons and keep me going. . . . My parents care to push me because they know the life I want. . . . My parents were the driving force for me and my motivation. . . . Even if it’s just a little note in the mail that says, “Keep going” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Katie added, “Same with me. My parents. They never had a college education so growing up it was always like, ‘You need to go to college.’” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Austin concurred:
My parents. . . . If my parents weren’t so, “You gotta go to college”. . . Like if they were more laid back: “You don’t have to go to college if you don’t want to” then I don’t know . . . cuz I would have a totally different mind-set than “I had to do that. I had to graduate” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

The parental encouragement came in a variety of forms. For some of the students, their parents’ having college degrees clearly set the tone. College was first modeled by their parents and then expected from the participants. Abby pointed to the fact that “Both my parents, obviously, have college degrees. . . . It’s almost weird because as soon as you’re in high school, even in middle school, they start talking to you about college.” Patrick’s educational story was similar: “My mom is actually working on her doctorate. . . . She always pressed school and my dad went to school. . . . My grandparents went to school” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

The role of the parent’s having degrees was more oblique in some situations. For instance, Ross and Josh never mentioned their parents’ influence in their persistence. However, it still appeared parental expectation and model was a significant component in their persistence. This observation was supported by their parents’ level of education. It was also buttressed by the life-long expectations for a college degree carried by both Ross and Josh. Three of their parents had college degrees (Josh’s mom had a high school degree). In fact, Josh’s dad had a master’s degree. Furthermore, both Josh and Ross expressed that, during their formative years, college was the expected next step. “It [going to college] was always sort of like that thing that it was kind of expected but it wasn’t really pressure” (Josh). “It was the next step that was always gonna happen” (Ross) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).
Others alluded to the direct support and encouragement of their parents as a driving force in their college careers. Chelsea, who battled fears that her college degree was a waste of time, was strongly encouraged by her father: “He was the one who encouraged me to go off to college when I thought I would waste my time” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Eric could not say enough about his mom’s inspiration:

A lot of it is just my mom keeping me. . . . Like she sends me honestly almost like every day she sends me prayers . . . just like little things. You know. Telling me she loves me. Telling me she’s proud of me. Just “Hang in there. You’re almost done.” . . . My mom would always like nag me, “You need to turn in your homework.” . . . As much as I hate to say it, nagging actually makes me do it cuz it’s annoying (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

David also valued the encouragement from his father. “My dad always texts me every now and then to see how I’m doing with classes” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Destiny said that her mother told her she had no choice but to go to college: “She’ll say, ‘You know you can do it. You need to stay there.’ . . . Or she’ll force me to like ‘You’re going to do your homework. You’re gonna write your play.’ Like without her, I wouldn’t be here.” Courtney shed some tears in reflecting on the support of her parents: “My dad . . . even though he didn’t go to college, I think that’s why he’s like pushing my brother and I so much for college.” Regarding her parents’ support, in an email, Lauren was emphatic: “They [parents] are a huge reason why I stayed” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Another form of parental involvement was in the way of making their parents proud. Jennifer said she wanted to make “my parents proud just because they didn’t have the
opportunity to do that [go to college].” Stephanie talked about her mother’s pride: “I’m gonna be really good at school and give her something to brag about. . . . Having her be so proud enough to feel the need to brag about me to my family members and stuff? Kind of got me through” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

There were also the students who feared disappointing their parents or making them angry. Adam mentioned, “My parents will kill me,” and Eric said, “My mom – I mean she’d kick my butt” when discussing poor grades or an out-of-control party lifestyle. Jacob’s dad reminded him, “If you don’t finish, you ain’t comin’ back here. You’re going to the military.” Abby stated that dropping out of college would bring “shame and dishonor on the family” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Some of the students also mentioned the monetary support of their parents. For Abby, the tuition had strings attached. “My parents pay for my tuition so . . . no failing out. No low grades.” Austin quipped, “My parents are helping pay for a lot of this so I can’t just come here and do poorly in classes” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). With Katie’s parents agreeing to pay for college, on top of their encouragement to go, she had even more reason to attend.

The only exceptions to parental encouragement were Marcus, and Sydney, although family was still the main influence. Marcus attributed his success to his much older half-sister who had attended college and to his fiancé. Sydney’s persistence was reinforced by a friend’s mother, with whom Sydney had been living since her sophomore year of high school. To Sydney, this woman was clearly a mother figure.

In addition to parental encouragement, some of the students were inspired in a more “negative” way. This form of encouragement came through their siblings who exhorted the
participants not to follow their lead. Eric’s brother told him, “I shoulda went to college cuz like just having like no degree just makes it so much harder to just even get by in the world.” Zach’s brother, who was charged with a DUI that thwarted some of his dreams, voiced the same encouragement, “Look, I mean, you saw what happened to me.” Seeing the depravity and economic hardships of the majority of Marcus’ relatives, his half-sister chided, “You have so many examples of what not to do. . . . You know you see where some actions lead to” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Social integration**

Students attributed choices, once they arrived on campus, which augmented goals/inner drive and family support in their persistence. One extremely vital persistence factor, according to the students, was becoming involved on campus. Although the students did not employ the phrase “social integration,” I will use it here because the phrase is consistent with higher education research. The students’ experiences certainly paralleled the prevailing definition of social integration which involves,

- both levels of integration and degrees of congruency between the individual and his social environment. In this instance, social integration occurs primarily through *informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel within the college* (Tinto, 1975, p. 107) (italics mine).

The seniors’ experiences reflected the elements of social integration which were friends, faculty and staff, and involvement in extracurricular activities.
Retention research calls it social integration (Tinto, 1975). Ross and Josh, on the other hand, used the phrase “being plugged in” when asked what propels a student to persist. Ross defined being plugged in:

When something is plugged in, it’s not going too far away from that plug-in and also it’s the source of energy and power. I think that’s kind of like what getting involved on campus does—give you a source of energy and power to keep going (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Being a transfer from an institution that did not encourage student involvement, Ross praised this institution and the opportunities to be plugged in.

Others defined their social integration as a support network. Courtney explained that the support network can be parents but also “your friends on campus. Like when you’re having a bad day and you just need to vent and let everything out. . . . I think it would be terrifying to go at this alone.” Heather pointed out, “I think that people don’t give enough credit to the people who support them. . . . If you don’t have that, you’re not going to persist” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Hannah also stressed the necessity of being involved:

When I committed to going here, I basically committed myself to being an extrovert. Cuz I’m not. . . . I could sit in my room by myself and be fine. When I first came to school, I made myself leave. I forced myself to go to things. And I’m glad I did. . . .

From my experience, it’s the introverts who don’t make it here (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

David arrived at a similar conclusion when reflecting on his friends who left: “I’ve seen friends who have left. . . . It seems like they’ve always been disconnected.” Noticing related patterns,
Destiny explained, “Enrolled students definitely made more attempts to be involved with campus life” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

According to many of the research participants, the earlier one gets involved, freshman year, the more likely one will persist. Patrick observed,

I believe like some kids just don’t take advantage of what’s here... They don’t get motivated to join one of these clubs... Cuz I reached out freshman year and made a lot of friends and people... If you don’t associate yourself with an immediate friend group freshman year, it’s like... “What the hell? Who am I gonna sit with in the lunch room?” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Jennifer admitted that her immediate involvement protected her from some of the difficulties of her freshman peers: “I never quite went through that because my freshman year I automatically got involved [in the radio station] here on campus. I met people through that” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Not all the students, however, felt a connection on campus. Katie was one example. Being a commuter and a transfer, she found it difficult to get involved: “I have no social life. I don’t know anyone here.” Although her lack of involvement had little effect on her academic progress, she regretted transferring and not living on campus. Marcus also felt little affinity to the campus. He had some minimal involvement with groups on campus, but his connections and support came mainly from his fiancé: “Nobody’s been pushing me harder than myself or my fiancé” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Sydney and Jennifer were involved their freshman year. However, after painful experiences with trust, they found support elsewhere. Sydney said, “I don’t have a strong support system here on campus... Just because I’ve experienced a lot... I don’t tell them a lot
about me.” Jennifer added, “Since my second roommate moved out, I haven’t been really close with anyone on campus” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Friends.** Most of the students animatedly talked about their friends. The caveat was that the friend group had to have similar values. Alexis described it well:

I definitely think surrounding yourself with a friend group is how you kind of get through college. Whether that’s because you get through because you party all the time… Or whether you get through because you are studying together (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Many others referred to the necessity of peers’ uniform values. In fact, some students left the less academically inclined friend group in order to align themselves with those who prioritized academics. For example, after socializing with a more party-oriented group, Stephanie realized, “They were not advancing me. They weren’t really my real friends if they were encouraging drinking over doing homework.” Her solution came in finding her “niche,” or a “group of friends that really supported me and were able to help me through” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). For Stephanie, this decision was a momentum change. Without it, she admitted she probably would have transferred.

Many shared fond memories involving their friend group. For Matt and Josh, it was the thrill of athletic championships and the ensuing travel. Whitney described an alcohol violation during a snow storm: “I was just having so much fun with my friends that it didn’t really matter” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Courtney chronicled the roly-chair races in the hallway during the absence of the Resident Assistant, and Ben reminisced on his overseas travel with his best friend. Austin, Patrick, and Adam, during their focus group, recapped freshman antics: “We had a lot of fun throwing baseball in the hallways, played putt
putt in the hall ways, tennis. Went out together a lot. We would always be hanging out. It was a lot of fun” (Patrick; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Faculty/Staff. Almost all of the students voiced appreciation for a personal connection with faculty or staff. In fact, most of them, when asked what the strength of the college in promoting persistence, mentioned faculty. Zach summed up others’ experiences. “Here, you really connect with the professors. Relationships are really really close with professors.” Even Katie, who had no peer group, noted her strong relationship with a professor. For Hannah, faculty were her respite after revolving through roommates and friends: “There have been many a day where I laid on the floor of their offices and just talked to any of them” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Like with friends, not all students felt a connection with faculty, however. Jennifer described her reticence in reaching out to professors:

I’ve never been the type to really connect to teachers like some students will. I know a girl. . . . She would go to one of our professors and just sit in his office and vent to him and tell him everything that was going on. . . . I’ve never been that type of person.

Marcus also did not feel connected to faculty: “I have asked faculty for questions but I haven’t got much luck” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

The support network was wider than faculty. Courtney praised the campus police chief: “His office is always open, and if you’re having a bad day, you can go talk to him” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Eric and Jacob valued their coaches’ role in their persistence:

Coaches, they’re always on your side as far as your academics. . . . They always push you. . . . Making sure you’re going to class. Making sure you’re handing in work. They
will be like, “Hey, what are you doing? Step it up a little bit” (Eric; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

One thing that Austin pointed out, however, is that the onus is on the student: “I think it depends on how hard you want to try and make a connection with them. . . . If you make a connection with them, like, you can have a good relationship” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

At this particular campus, the professors show interest in the students. Even Jennifer admitted the strength of faculty involvement: “Even though I don’t go up to the professors and vent to them and like cry in their office or anything, like I’ll see the professors on campus and they’ll be like ‘Hey! How’s it going? How are you doing?’” A few of the professors even initiated personal contact with her in encouraging various academic pursuits. “She just went on and she was pushing me towards that and I’m grateful for it” (Jennifer; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Still, it depends on the student to take some initiative. In Jennifer’s case, for the most part, she resisted their overtures.

**Extra-curricular activities.** Being involved in extra-curricular activities played a key role in student persistence. It seemed that extra-curricular activities were of two different categories. One was varsity athletics. The other was involvement in clubs and organizations.

**Varsity athletics.** At some point in their college career, three females (Heather, Stephanie, and Sydney) and nine males (Adam, Austin, Eric, Jacob, Josh, Matt, Patrick, Ross, and Zach) participated in a varsity sport. Chris and Zach were indirectly involved as an athletic trainer and body builder respectively. At the time of the research, none of the females were still participating and six of the males (Adam, Eric, Jacob, Josh, Matt, and Ross) were still directly involved (Reasons for leaving the sport will be discussed in the possible hindrance section).
Sydney, Eric, Jacob, and Matt were adamant that their involvement in their respective sports was the impetus for their enrolling in college and, in turn, persisting. Although Sydney had quit by the time of the research, she admitted, “It is very safe to say if I wasn’t playing basketball my first two years. . . . I doubt I would be sitting here having this conversation with you.” Eric added, “I think the reason I’m still here is mainly just because of football, for one” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

The positive ramifications in athletic involvement for promoting persistence were numerous. Socially, “You automatically have 14 friends” (Sidney; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

You have like those 30 or so guys that you like see almost every day and like you start associating with them. . . . All my best friends here are pretty much baseball players even though I don’t play any more (Austin; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Adam said it was “like a fraternity” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Playing a varsity sport was scaffolding to academic pursuits. Most sports had mandatory study halls. Jacob admitted this helped him: “There was no way I couldn’t do any work. I had to bring work here.” Heather appreciated the structure in regards to time management. The tight schedule that included five hours a day of practice and weight training caused her to have “time management down to a science.” In fact, when she left, her GPA plummeted because “I just didn’t know what to do with myself. . . . I have all this free time so who cares?” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).
Clubs and organizations. Most of the participants, even the athletes, were involved in at least one club or organization. Having been heavily involved in a variety of organizations, Amelia reflected positively about the effects of her involvement: “Working on theatre productions. Participating in clubs. Just hanging out outside. Just relaxing with friends talking about nothing. It’s been a very very enjoyable four years” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Courtney also attested to the positive results of her involvement: I met so many people through Alpha Phi Omega or Civil War Club or Student Alumni Network that I wouldn’t normally meet because we’re separate majors or separate years, and our paths just never would have crossed. So I’ve made like some awesome friendships because of that (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Josh summed up the impact his involvement had on his persistence: I have been involved . . . since freshman year. That right there gave the opportunity to plug into the other people on campus and just feel a sense of belonging, and just gives you one more reason to kind of feel at home and to feel like you don’t want to leave because you have all these good people here (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Akin to the athletes’ thoughts on the impact of involvement on time management, those involved in clubs had shared their impressions: “They tell you to get involved not because they want you to be on campus but because it’s important for time management. . . . I have to do it in order to keep me on a schedule” (Heather). Stephanie, with her focus group nodding in agreement, echoed the thought: “Having clubs helps your time management.” She went on to explain that a student without a tight schedule is tempted to put things off. However, being busy with clubs and organizations provides a “small amount of time to get this done and it needs to get
done now or it’s not going to get done” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Academic integration**

Like the term “social integration,” the students did not use the phrase “academic integration.” However, many of their academic experiences, which contributed to their persistence, fell in line with the definition of academic integration. The prevailing understanding of academic integration deals with how well the student integrates into the academic structure of the institution (Tinto, 1993). This is often measured by grades; however, intellectual development, which is more difficult to measure, is one more characteristic of solid academic integration (Tinto, 1993).

For this study, it was a given that the students had the necessary grades. Most of them were graduating with a GPA well above the required 2.0. Other sub-themes of academic integration emerged, however. One was the priority given to academics through-out the students’ tenure, and the other was the intrinsic value of learning. The third, that seemed to emerge, was the role of the students’ choosing a major and its various nuances in strengthening a student’s goal to graduate.

**Academic priorities.** Many of the participants were effusively vocal when discussing balancing an active social/party life with their academics. It was not that these students never struggled with maintaining their priorities. For example, Alexis admitted that, during her freshman year, her frequent pattern was, “I got drunk on a Tuesday night and skipped all my classes on Wednesday.” Patrick laughed when recollecting his freshman year study habits: “Freshman year was awful. I just didn’t do anything freshman year” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). In spite of some struggles, these students were obviously
poised to graduate four years later, however. Even Alexis, with a .1 freshman GPA, was going to graduate.

Most of the students in the study were very active in all aspects of college life. What separated them from their freshman peers who were no longer enrolled? Their answers were, basically, the same. “They go overboard” (Chris). “Most of the people who are no longer enrolled didn’t go to classes, skipped out on labs, and missed test days. They stayed locked up in their rooms sleeping during the day and then went out at night” (Destiny). Ross pointed out that the question, “What did you come to college for?” needs to be asked. “I know a lot of people think you just party and don’t put a lot of effort.” Admittedly, some of those people still graduate but, in general, those who persist discover the healthy balance. “I’ve had to have enough self-control to not let those experiences hinder my academic success” (Katie) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Other participants noticed that playing a varsity sport was sometimes more of a priority than academics. Ben was an academic coach for a freshman football player: “He hardly ever did his homework. . . . The guy I coached was here to play football.” Matt acknowledged that his athletic involvement trumped academics. “Unfortunately, like, looking back, it [academics] definitely did take a back seat” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Adam reflected on the struggle to maintain academic priorities while still playing a varsity sport:

I was over loaded with a varsity sport. It’s not a JV team. Either you play baseball or you don’t. When I came in, it got rough because you play in the fall; you play in the spring. You’re expected to go to all these off-season work outs. And if you sit back and don’t do anything, you’re not going to be playing and still having a respectable GPA (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
Chris summed up the successful student’s view of academic priorities: “You’re going to college and you’re going to have fun and being reckless, but, at the same time, you have to go to class. You have to do well. You have to pass” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Many of the students agreed with his assessment that class attendance is a top priority.

**Class attendance.** Some of the students struggled with time management. Others had diffused priorities. Those problems notwithstanding, there was a common thread for the participants: Class attendance was not an option. It was either an unspoken assumption or a verbalized commitment. For example, Matt admitted that his sports were his top priority and that he is “not really the best student;” however, he noted, “I go to class. I’m there every time I can be unless I’m on a trip or whatever.” Sydney and Eric voiced similar attitudes. “I’m not the best student. . . . I always go to class” (Eric). “I’m not a big studier. I try to go to class all the time unless I just feel like I can’t. I think that just showing up is important” (Sydney) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Others had similar attitudes about the importance of class attendance. Whitney worked with freshmen as an Orientation Leader:

> Class attendance is something that I stress heavily to my orientation students during Welcome Week. It’s easy to fall into a pattern of skipping class especially with a lenient professor. . . . I usually go to class unless I am potentially dying of illness (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Sarah valued the attendance policies of some professors. It bolstered her resolve on those days she did not want to make the 40 minute drive to school. She added, “I also think about attendance playing a factor in your grade so that also makes me get up and go to class” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
**Intrinsic value of learning.** Although it was not a predominant theme, a few of the participants mentioned the intrinsic value of learning. Ross was the most vocal. In reflecting on his college career, he valued,

Learning for the sake of learning . . . and then tying in what you’re learning to be able to apply it to greater problems. Like getting what you learned from other classes, bringing it all together into one argument. . . . It just always like, “That’s interesting. I want to learn more,” and then the next thing you know the semester is over. “Well here’s this class. That’s interesting” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Others expressed parallel thoughts. “I love to learn. I always like to read and learn as much as I can about something” (Sarah). “I’ve enjoyed all my classes. . . . It’s nice to get an overall perspective and be well-rounded” (Jennifer). “I’m just learning a lot right now. I’m hoping I can soak it up” (Jacob). “You just learn cool stuff that you probably wouldn’t learn anywhere else” (Zach) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Major.** Finding a major, and then becoming involved in major-related opportunities, was a vital component in the students’ persistence. Zach pointed out, “I came in undecided. And I know a lot of people that are undecided toward the end of their sophomore year which is dangerous” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Ben spent his entire freshman year trying to find a major. Once he settled on communications, doors of opportunity burst open:

Well, picking the major was really big factor. Now I know a whole bunch of people in the communications department and I really got plugged into all of those different—I’ve talked about all of the different clubs that I’m in in the communications department now. I was like “Oh sure, I’ll go and do radio. Oh sure, I’ll go be in Comm Club.” Just things
like that. That was a real big factor (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Austin admitted that finally entering his major classes may have saved his college career. While hating most of the general education classes, he relished his business classes: “In the major I’ve loved every class I had” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

For Ashley, the rumor that the college was going to remove her major caused a great deal of angst. The main reason she came to this college was the strength of this particular program. She had always dreamed of being a Family and Consumer Science (FCS) teacher. “Having the fact that my major was going to be disappearing my freshman year was really really difficult to deal with” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

The college kept the major. As a result, Ashley created life-long bonds with the other majors: “The FCS major, because we are a smaller major, we are so close-knit. We call each other family” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Many others referred to the strength of the friendships among their major peers.

All the seniors are all really close and it’s because we have had so many classes. They’re not necessarily people I would be great friends with outside but the fact that I’ve had so many classes with them and I’ve learned about them through the classes and through the course work and through the stress and everything like I think that’s what binds us and makes us work together to get to this ultimate goal (Stephanie; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Internships.** Some of the research participants remarked on the value of their internships or the hands-on opportunities afforded by their majors. Chris, an athletic training major, praised his myriad of opportunities: “I get so much hands-on here. I get to go to every game with my
team. I’m there for every injury. You can touch the athlete. First hand to touch the athlete. I enjoy that.” Patrick noted that his summer internship, after his freshman year, as a manager trainee was his wake-up call in altering his priorities: “After I got a taste of that, and he exposed me to a lot of different channels of what they had to offer . . . and I was like, ‘Wow. I really want that’.” Sarah’s internship in advertising, at a local hospital, “redirected my career path” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Katie lamented, however, that the hands-on of internships comes too late:

I’m in an internship right now, and I just started last week, but I’m learning so much and I’m finally relating what I’m learning in my classes to what I’m physically doing there. I believe if the college did that, there would be more persistence in people finishing their college education. I know my mind-set, sometimes sitting in class, I’m thinking “When am I ever going to use this?” It’s just useless (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

David concurred. Coming in as an education major, he realized he did not want to teach during his first practicum. Due to the delay in the decision, he had to enroll for a fifth year. He wished he had recognized that sooner:

I just wish I had a better idea of actually being more involved with my major—like knowing how—let’s say like I was going for education if I was early on put into the school system somehow, to see how an everyday classroom would be then I would know early on “Let’s not go this route” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
Institutional factors

There were a myriad of institutional factors fortifying the students’ persistence. Indirectly and directly, the students acknowledged their value. These factors were the quality of the education and the faculty, the sense of community, the opportunities for involvement, the academic and personal support, and the liberal arts curriculum.

**Quality of the education and the faculty.** Jacob and Eric esteemed the quality reputation of the college and its position on some national rankings. When asked about the strengths of the institution, Patrick answered, “The professors. . . . I think it’s the education you get from here. . . . I know my money’s well spent with the education I got from here. . . . I got a really good education” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Megan said the same: “We have really dedicated teachers. . . . I think one of the college’s greatest strengths is their professors.” Sarah, like many others, also praised her professors and the quality of their classes:

They are really passionate about what they are teaching. . . . They have very high standards and that’s okay with me because if they got up there and they had high standards and they didn’t care about what they were doing, or they didn’t put interest in the students, I would not enjoy the class and I would be kind of offended. But they have set really high standards but they get in front of the class and they always come energetic and they teach about like stuff that’s interesting and they’re passionate about and you can tell that they enjoy what they are doing. It’s easy to meet their high standards (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Destiny opined that the expectations and encouragement was campus-wide: “Everyone that I came in contact with, they do push me. . . . They do expect a lot of you. They are not going to
baby you. But your professors and your administrators do care that you succeed.” Maria attested to the unique brand of this particular institution’s challenges: “There’s other things that come along like convocation . . . whatever else this school requires that’s different from other schools that sets it apart as a private liberal arts school are challenging and demanding” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

One notable quality of the professors was their taking initiative in reaching out to students. More than one of the participants recalled a situation where a professor reached out. Eric talked about the time a professor contacted him when he was falling behind on his homework. Sydney described the professor who emailed her when she was concerned about Sydney’s academic progress: “They hold you accountable. You really have to be accountable for your actions. Doing your work and actually being a student.” Others had similar stories of professors initiating personal support and encouragement. “Their job is to teach and to connect with students. . . . That’s something I don’t necessarily expect but it’s great to have” (Andrea). (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

A few of the same students, admitted, however, that not every professor was of high caliber nor did they demonstrate personal interest in the students. “We are all going to have the people you don’t feel like are looking out for your best interests” (Sydney). “It [the pushing you] has not been absolutely everybody that I’ve come in contact with” (Destiny) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Sense of community.** The vast majority of the students relished in the small size of the institution and the community feel. Amelia explained, “[This college] is very unique. . . . It’s small and it’s very tight knit.” With a huge grin, Ben quipped, “I feel like I’m going to be one of those propaganda ads or something like that that ‘Oh at [name of college], you’re not a number.
You’re a person.” Others were as vehement that this was the selling point of the institution. “It’s so cheesy but I think everyone has said it... ‘It’s like a community. It’s like a family” (Whitney). “It’s such a different atmosphere and environment [when compared to a large school] when you are here and involved” (Maria). “The size of the institution holds you accountable. Your professors know you. Your professor knows if you are not in class” (Sarah) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Even as a minority, Eric felt accepted:

I think it’s [the college experience] has been pleasant... I mean the community... I’ve been at other places where you could just feel that you are a minority but here I just feel like I’m accepted” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Some of the students attributed the strength of the community to the college residential requirement (Students are required to live on campus unless they are living with a parent or guardian.). After being miserable at a campus with no sense of community, Ross compared it to his current experience: “It [the sense of community] has a lot to do with being able to stay on campus.” Courtney added, “I like how it’s [the college] residential or mostly residential. . . I feel like that forces you to be involved” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Opportunities for involvement.** The college web site boasts at having over 60 clubs and organizations. This is in addition to nine varsity sports for men and 11 varsity sports for women. It also provides an active intramural sports program and a vibrant student activities council that provides regular student entertainment. This institution seems to be an environment replete with opportunities for involvement. Most of the students, in the study, took advantage of the myriad of opportunities. As they reflected on their persistence story, they readily acknowledged that involvement was key to their persistence. Their involvement fortified their
college experience in a number of ways. For one, as mentioned earlier, it strengthened their social integration.

Furthermore, many of the participants reflected on the skills they learned and the memories formed through their various extra-curricular activities. Amelia excitedly described the radio drama she created; Destiny reflected on her budding leadership skills; David thrived in the opportunities to give back to his beloved campus community. Megan also appreciated the opportunities for involvement and the lessons gleaned as a result:

I think one of the advantages of [the college] is that you can get a lot of good things on your resume. Like you can be part of the school newspaper and you can be in honor societies, and I know it sounds kind of bad but there’s not as much competition as there is in larger schools…so you have a greater opportunity to be part of those things that look good on your resume (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Three of the participants referred to their opportunity to travel as being the highlight of their college tenure. Amelia studied abroad for a year; Ben went to London and Paris during the three week interterm in January. Melissa exclaimed, “I got to go to London and Paris as part of my college experience. That was eye-opening” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Academic and personal support.** The college offers free tutoring, academic coaching, and personal counseling to all its students. The faculty are also readily available to help students. Megan noted, “Our professors will let you call them at home or text them if you have questions” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). It is up to the students to take advantage of this opportunity. Hannah was emphatic:

The college has a lot of stuff to help you. I tell people all the time never be ashamed to
get a tutor. Never be ashamed if you need an academic coach. Because if that’s what gonna make you stay here, oh my gosh, get a tutor for everything. It’s worth it if it makes you feel like someone has your back (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Some of the participants took advantage of these programs. Melissa had an academic coach her freshman year. Hannah, Alexis, and Ashley accessed tutoring services on a number of occasions. Others (Abby, Alexis, Andrea, Courtney, Heather, and Sydney) reached out to counseling services.

**Liberal arts curriculum.** The college also boasts in its liberal arts curriculum. For some of the students, this was another reason for persisting. They loved the opportunities to integrate the knowledge gleaned through the various classes. “The idea of education at [this college] is to integrate a lot of things into one. . . . You tend to learn a lot more . . . to make more connections between some of the non-major classes and . . . your major” (Amelia). “Gen eds have their place because you learn. You can take something away from each one of them that helps you out in your own major” (Zach). For Zach, the general education requirement introduced him to his major, biology. In Sydney’s case, her history general education class opened the door to a minor. In reference to this discovery, Sydney admitted, “I think that’s something that definitely has been something that’s beneficial” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Potential hindrances**

For many of these students, the freshman year experience was a difficult transition. Words like “shocking” (Sarah), “rough” (Ben), “difficult” or “hard” (Ashley, Eric, Heather, Melissa, Stephanie) and “confusing” (Sydney) were used to describe their freshman year
experience. “I cried to my mother almost every single night” (Alexis) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Almost half of the participants battled temptations to quit or transfer (Abby, Alexis, Ashley, Austin, Chelsea, Chris, David, Eric, Jennifer, Matt, Sydney, Lauren, Stephanie, and Sydney).

Many of the problems stemmed from a failure to integrate socially or academically. For example, David had a difficult time connecting with a group of friends. In his loneliness, he called his dad expressing a desire to quit. However, once he found a friend group, or once he socially integrated, he was fine. Some of the others (Adam, Alexis, Austin, Eric, Jacob, and Patrick) admitted that either playing too many video games or excessive partying had a negative effect on their first year grades. By academically integrating and reestablishing their priorities, they were able to salvage their college education. In other words, many of the students’ hindrances arose out of a void in one of the persistence factors previously mentioned.

Instead of returning to the information regarding social and academic integration, I will explore the other possible hindrances to persistence that emerged. They were a difficult event, mental health issues, finances, academic difficulties, and a negative impression of the institution. Following the possible hindrances, I will describe how these students overcame the experiences that could have caused them to drop out or transfer.

**Difficult event.** There was a dark and painful event threaded into many of the students’ persistence stories. For some, it involved giving up athletic dreams. Heather, a vivacious athlete who chose this college over nine others in order to play basketball, suffered a career ending back injury. She spiraled into a deep depression. Austin also left the baseball team as the result of an injury. He seriously contemplated transferring. Sydney and Stephanie both quit the sports they
had been playing since they were children. Subsequently, they both battled temptations to transfer or quit.

For others, the event may not have involved leaving a team but was equally as painful. Abby was raped. Her nightmarish experience led to panic attacks and flashbacks. Jacob was falsely accused of rape. For the first time in years, he cried. Destiny faced an unwanted pregnancy after rebounding from a seven year physically and emotionally abusive relationship. Andrea’s and Megan’s parents divorced while they were in college. Needless to say, these were life-changing events that could have caused weaker students to contemplate leaving.

The most common difficult event was with a roommate, particularly during the freshman year. The “evil roommate” stories were ubiquitous, especially among the females. For some of the students, like Jennifer, the experience was traumatic. It resulted in painful issues with trust. Lauren’s two roommates abruptly abandoned her with no explanation. Melissa’s roommate, who was a friend from home, also suddenly moved out during their freshman year. Hannah slogged through two difficult roommate splits that were “doubly devastating.” Abby declared that the three of her suitemates who turned on her were “awful, awful people” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Ashley’s encounter was not much better:

I had a roommate for about two weeks, and then she moved out. And then nobody on my hall associated with me. There was a bubble around my door. I had one girl who wouldn’t even be in the bathroom with me. Like she would leave the bathroom when I would walk in because she didn’t want to be in there with me because of my roommate. So I really didn’t have any friends my freshman year (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
For most of the students working through the difficult event, there were points where they questioned transferring or quitting.

**Mental health issues.** Some of the participants admitted to struggling with a mental health issue. Zach came to college with a diagnosis of depression. Sydney had thought she was depressed for the major portion of her life. Talking to the campus counselor confirmed her suspicions. Abby also sought counseling upon arriving on campus to deal with emotional and relational issues she had faced as a teenager. After struggling through stressors with roommates and class-related stress, Jennifer started having panic attacks and was put on medication. Andrea experienced panic attacks her freshman year, as did Ashley who also admitted to hyper-ventilating on a daily basis. Courtney fell into a depression her sophomore year after she quit sleeping because of over-involvement. Although not necessarily mental health related, Eric, Stephanie, and Ashley admitted to being homesick at various junctures.

The emotional upheavals were difficult. For some students, it could have led to withdrawal. Courtney, when asked why she did not quit during her depressive episode, said, “If I dropped out at that time, I would never want to come back to college and I would have nothing to do for the rest of my life except, like, be a bank teller and nobody really wants to do that” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Like the others, Courtney’s higher goals drove her to persist through the difficult episodes.

**Finances.** Although not a frequently mentioned issue, for some students, lack of finances did raise cause for concern. Matt, Jacob, and Eric all contemplated leaving because of the financial burden on their families. Many of the students, like Amelia, Courtney, and Sarah were grateful for their academic scholarships. “If I had to pay the full amount every year, this would never happen” (Courtney). Others, when faced with rising tuition rates, merely took on more
When asked if that is a concern, most answered similar to David: “Not initially right now, until I’m out of school. I bet it’s gonna hit me. Like, ‘How am I gonna pay for this?’” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Academic difficulties.** Although a few of the students, like Ben and Jennifer, felt as though they were well prepared for the rigor of collegiate academics, the majority of them “just didn’t realize the amount of reading that I actually had to do” (Austin). Or, as Alexis bemoaned, “I didn’t expect it to be as hard as it was.” Even Sarah, who never struggled in high school, admitted, “The fall of my freshman year was extremely hard. . . . The work load was intense. . . . I was really stressed out that first semester.” Adam was also disillusioned: “I started taking all these classes, and they were like trying to make you think . . . outside the box kind of thing and I was just lost” (Personal communication with participants, November 2014). Stephanie’s story was also rather common:

> My high school was never hard. I just understood things. I guess it was just easy, and then I came here and I took bio and I like got a C. I had never gotten a C in my life

(Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

When asked why some people may quit, Maria responded, “I mean it’s demanding, especially at this school” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Negative impression of the institution.** As mentioned earlier, the student participants affirmed the strengths of the institution. The majority of them positively reflected on the institution. However, others also outlined some negatives that could have hindered their persistence. There seemed to be a weak institutional commitment among some of the participants. Megan admitted, “I think if I could do it over again I would definitely look into different schools.” Alexis added, “I just dislike this school to be honest” (Personal
communication with participants, November, 2014). According to one of the girl’s focus groups, campus morale seemed low. They group pointed to the low attendance at football games as proof. In many of the conversations, the weaknesses of the campus were discussed because a lack of campus pride could lead to student departure. According to these students, some of the institutional issues contributing to student departure were the liberal arts curriculum, freshman year advising, and the old fashioned campus policies.

**Liberal arts curriculum.** Although some of the students recognized the value of the liberal arts curriculum and the general education requirements, others loathed their existence. For example, when asked about the weaknesses of the institution in promoting persistence, without hesitation, Chris blurted, while laughing, “Gen eds. Terrible. . . . They make you take all these unnecessary classes.” Interestingly, though, in the same breath he added,

I know that being at a liberal arts college makes you better-rounded. . . . That means I am a critical thinker. . . . I have a sense of cultural engagement and cultural awareness that I feel like if I was at a state school I would not have attained (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Others voiced similar mixed reviews. Sarah noted, “The gen eds were a little painful. . . . Of course you have to take gen eds. That’s kind of the bad part. . . . I’ve taken a couple of gen eds I really enjoyed.” On one level, they were frustrated with some of the general education requirements; however, at another level they recognized their value. “Some of the gen eds I think we really need. . . . But like there are some things that I just don’t see where I’m ever gonna use it again” (Courtney) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Others were more adamant that the general education requirements were troublesome. Austin said, “The gen eds are like a pain in the butt.” Adam agreed. “They’re more of a pain
than anything.” Austin added, when asked why some people leave, “It’s a dry campus. It’s a liberal arts school” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). This group of guys (Adam, Austin, and Patrick) felt that some of their peers actually left the school because of the general education requirements.

*Freshman year advising.* In the previous section, I documented the effusive praise for the participants’ relationships with faculty. These acclaims were also for their academic advisors. However, as the interviews continued, it became clear that the strong relationships were more likely formed in their junior and senior years. In comparison, some of the students complained about the lack of solid advising during their freshman year. “I would say it’s [advising] pretty weak freshman year. . . . He [the advisor] didn’t feel like he had time to sit and like teach me because he was preoccupied with all these other kids” (Adam; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

While I liked him [advisor], he really did not give me any advice or help in picking my classes for the spring. . . . I had to come into his office expecting help just to be told, “Take whatever you want.” Well, thanks. . . . That was helpful (Ben; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Alexis recapped a painful encounter with her freshman advisor:

My advisor was horrible, which was one of the reasons I switched out of business. I remember I didn’t know how to sign up for classes. I thought it was like high school—they pick your classes. You got a schedule. I didn’t know you had to go in at a certain time or something. So I remember going to his office and being like “Ok, so what classes am I taking?” And he said, “Well, you have a list and I’m just going to approve them.” And I said, “A list? I don’t know what that is.” And he kicked me out of his office. “I
don’t have time to deal with you” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

_Campus policies._ The college is a dry campus. Being a residential college, all students are required to live on campus. Thus, a 21 year old is prohibited from drinking alcohol in the residence. A number of them complained that this situation forced students to go off campus to drink. In turn, those drinking would drink and drive in order to return to campus. Additionally, some of them felt that this inhibited a rich social life on campus. Furthermore, in the underclassmen residence halls, there are limited visitation hours when students of the opposite sex can be in each other’s rooms. A few of the student complained about the “old white guys on the Board of Trustees” who control many of the school’s policies (Destiny, Whitney; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Many of them had negative impressions about the seemingly draconian policies. When asked about the weaknesses of the institution in helping students persist, Marcus complained, “Student Life needs some rethinking.” Whitney added, “[This college] is just a traditional place. Like you don’t drink alcohol” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). They perceived that many of their friends had left due to the policies.

Not all complained about the policies, however. Lauren had a dissenting opinion: “I appreciate [the college] being a dry campus. That was one of the drawing points for me to come here” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

The policies were merely the tip of the iceberg for some. Austin observed “how unfairly they treat some students. . . . They definitely pinpoint certain students.” Patrick added, “I’d say just the general fact, when you get caught for alcohol or anything that’s breaking the rules, it’s like you go in and you get your pants pulled down and whooped.” Adam explained, “I know
kids who are like ‘If I’m gonna deal with this, I’m leaving.’ So they just left to a different school or they just didn’t go to school” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Destiny had negative impressions about the college’s openness to minorities. When presenting her desire to bring a national chapter for minority students to the campus, she met administrative resistance:

But when it comes to African American culture or another minority culture, wanting to show something on a white campus, it’s a problem. That’s one of those strongest weaknesses of this campus . . . the Board of Trustees are set in their mind-set post 1990. That’s been the topic of the year so far (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Overcoming

After hearing some painful and difficult stories, I asked, “So why are you still here while many of your peers, freshman year, left under similar situations?” The specifics were varied; however, as mentioned previously, the underlying theme was parent/family support interwoven with a goal which, in turn, was buttressed by an inner drive that refused to quit. So many of the students simply stated, “I am just not a quitter.” However, there were other factors in their overcoming the possible hindrances. Some were as simple as just finally plugging in, or a faculty/staff person encouraging them to persist. There were other factors, however, that can be summed up in the sub-themes of wake-up call, asking for help, and developing the right perspective.

Wake-up call. The wake-up call was a “moment in time” that involved a choice to prioritize academically. After being suspended because of her 0.1 freshman GPA, Alexis described her wake-up call:
I kind of had a “coming to God” moment at the end of my freshman year saying like “I’m going to get through this. This is my life. I’m only screwing it up for myself.” I kind of reflected on everything that happened that freshman year. . . . So I kind of really dug deep in myself and that sophomore year I pushed really hard. So I guess my persistence was that I didn’t want to be seen as that person that just didn’t care about anything.

(Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

After realizing his first two years of grades were weak, Austin finally “started buckling down. I just knew I had to like buckle down and do what I needed to do to get the good grades” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Patrick’s “ah-ha” moment came during his internship. He compared the lifestyles of the employees who did not have a college degree and those in management who had a college degree: “I came back with a whole new look on school. . . . I gotta do better. I see these people and I want to do better.” His parents “straightening me up a little bit” didn’t hurt (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Eric also described his eureka moment when his lifestyle of “being caught up in being a freshman” was not yielding success in the classroom. “Just little things that helped me pop on the light bulb.” Eric attributed his wake-up call to coaches and his mom encouraging him in his academics. However, he admitted that his own growing maturity helped. Stephanie explained that it’s a process. “You either learn how to prioritize or you learn how to give up, or you learn how to get it done” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

** Asking for help. ** “You have to put yourself out there and take the initiative to be vulnerable and say you need help” (Maria; Personal communication with participant, November,
2014). Many of the students, particularly the females, did just that when they faced difficulty. They availed themselves of the myriad of on-campus resources.

Alexis talked to the counselor, received tutoring, and had an academic coach. Melissa also had an academic coach. After getting a 47 on her first biology test, Hannah went to his [professor’s] office and asked him if I should quit the major. . . . He told me it was the dumbest idea he had ever heard. . . . I just didn’t know how to study. So he taught me how to study (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Megan also frequented her professors’ offices when she needed help.

In the personal realm, Heather “was going to turn to drugs because I was really angry [about her career ending injury], and I thought, ‘Well, I don’t do drugs.’ So I needed something. . . . So I was like, ‘I’m gonna get help’.” Sydney “got on meds at the end of my sophomore year” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014) for depression. Courtney did the same.

**Right perspective.** Many of the students simply exhibited a positive and upbeat perspective when facing difficult circumstances. Abby had powerful insight regarding perspective:

In business we talk about an external vs an internal locus of control and I think that definitely plays a part there. . . . There are the kids who think everything happens to them and there are the kids who think the things that happen to me is because of me. And I think that probably plays a role. There is more persistence for those who take accountability. I think the people who are more controlling are the ones who have that internal locus but I think they’re also the ones who succeed (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
Sydney’s expressed related thoughts: “If I wanted to get something out of it, I had to put something into it. So if I’m doing poorly, it’s because I’m doing poorly. . . . It’s not the college’s fault.” When Andrea hit difficult times, she avoided negativity. She refused to “sit there and complain about it constantly.” David said something similar: “It [the college] had its ups and downs. But that’s gonna be the same where ever you go so that’s why I like this place” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Others, like Lauren, looked at life’s difficulties through the lens of faith:

> Everything happens for a reason and God has a plan for us even if we cannot see what He has in mind. . . . I truly believed that everything I was being tested with was making me a stronger person. . . . I would pray every night, “Please help me to understand.” I prayed upon Him to give me strength and patience (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

One aspect of perspective is learning how to cope. David noticed,

> I feel like most people don’t find a way to effectively cope sometimes. They don’t know what do to after they get into a stressful situation. . . . They feel isolated, alone, trapped, and they don’t know what to do (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

According to Abby, “College makes you feel like a boat in the waves. And you’re getting pushed around and sometimes you hit rocks” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). A good perspective accompanied, at times, with asking for help seemed to help mitigate the effects of these storms.

In looking back on their overcoming horrendous situations, the victorious students expressed joy:
It’s one of those things you don’t realize what you’re doing until you can reflect and so . . . now I’m having a chance to reflect. . . . I always have like, “What am I gonna do on graduation day?” How happy I’m going to be! That will be a special moment for me! (Sydney; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Jennifer was also happy: “I definitely agree with my mom that if I had quit and taken a semester off, that probably I wouldn’t have come back. So I’m definitely glad I listened to her and just pushed through it” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Persistence differences by gender**

After examining what they attributed to persistence, the students shared their observations regarding differences in persistence by gender. I also compared all the student persistence stories. Both of these data collection and analysis procedures were aimed at answering the final research question: What are the persistence differences, by gender, in the experience? Some of the differences can be quantified as shown in the Data Summary Table (Appendix M). However, many of the differences are not as clear-cut. They are based more on hunches and intuition. Riessman (1993) noted that often analysis is based on hunches. Rubin and Rubin (1995) observed, “Some themes are explicitly stated by conversation partners . . . where themes are not explicitly stated, you can often deduce them from several illustrations” (p. 234-235). In staying within the recurring themes, I will outline the perceived differences accordingly. They fell in the areas of social integration, academic integration, potential hindrances, and overcoming.

The caveat is that none of the differences apply to all males, nor do they apply to all females. As many students iterated, over a variety of issues, “It’s an individual thing.” Care must be taken, whenever comparing groups of people, to avoid across-the-board stereotyping.
The comparisons are definitely a broad-brushed observation. As I will show, however, there were exceptions to every conclusion.

**Social integration.** There were no obvious differences in the importance of integrating socially. Both genders enthusiastically discussed their involvement with friends, faculty, teams, clubs, and organizations. Both equally noted that those who did not engage were more likely to withdraw. Still, there seemed to one difference. The males were more likely to engage athletically either through varsity athletics or intramurals.

Of the 13 males, ten had been involved in a varsity sport at some point. Six were still directly participating in a sport. Additionally, Chris was still heavily integrated into the varsity scene through his athletic training, while Zach merely left his varsity sport to concentrate on body building. Austin left his sport due solely to injury, and Patrick quit because his recruiting coach had resigned. Most of the males indicated that they participated in intramurals.

The story was a little different for the females for both varsity and intramural athletics. None were currently involved in a varsity sport although five had played a sport early in their college career (Alexis, Heather, Stephanie, Sydney, and Whitney). Heather quit due to an injury; Stephanie left to concentrate on her academics; Sydney was disillusioned with the coaching staff; Alexis was forced to quit because of grades; Whitney did not indicate why she left.

Regarding intramurals, Sydney still admitted a love for athletics and enjoyed playing intramurals. Some of the others mentioned participating in intramurals. However, their involvement seemed more luke-warm and limited when compared to the males’ enthusiasm. Often, the females only played one intramural sport. For instance, Abby played soccer while Megan and Melissa played softball.
The males, overall, expressed more passion about athletic involvement. Thus, it seemed the athletics had a more profound effect on the persistence of males than females. Of course, this did not apply to all of the males. Ben, David, and Marcus expressed no involvement with athletics. Because it appeared to be the majority, however, it seemed worthy of mention.

**Academic integration.** As freshmen, it seemed that females were more academically mature than the males. More of the males admitted to struggling, particularly early on, in their academic integration. Their freshman focus was not on their classes, and their priorities were skewed. “All we would do is play a video game. All the time. And we would do it for hours. It [academics] just wasn’t a big priority” (Eric; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). As a result, there was a difference, by gender, in the reported mean GPA at the time of this research (F=3.32; M=3.08). It must be added, however, that the difference was not statistically significant (p>.01). Then again, more females than males reported having a GPA over a 3.0 (F=16; 80%; M=8; 61%).

A few males actually expressed regret over their GPAs. Matt appeared almost embarrassed. “I got a frickin’ 2.5. It’s so annoying” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Similarly, Jacob said, “I just realized this maybe 3 days ago—that I need to get these grades back up. You know?” He later added, That’s the only thing I would change—concentrating more on my grades. It’s gonna play a big part of my life, you know? They’re not just gonna look at diploma, “Oh he graduated.” They’re gonna look at the grades and the class. Who wants a guy who has a C in accounting or do you want the guy who had an A in accounting? It does make a difference (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
Adam also admitted, “I should have worked harder. I kept a solid 3.0 all four years.” When asked if a 3.0 is acceptable, he exclaimed, “I mean, not now” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Comparatively, few of the females expressed regrets. Furthermore, they seemed more focused at the outset of their college career. Although actively involved with various activities and a social life, they did not mention the pattern of excessive socializing that interfered with their academics. Even if they did find themselves in an academic slump, the females were quick to find a way out. For example, Abby, during her sophomore year, noticed, “The first semester I did not have a very good GPA but the second semester I started pulling it back up.” In other words, she did not let the pattern continue. The same thing happened with Stephanie: “I got a really bad grade in bio so that scared me to no end. From then on, I had all my stuff done a week before it’s due” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Josh observed, in comparing a freshman female and a male who get off track,

Maybe the female has a better transition into “Ok, I might need to put to the back seat some of the social expectations and raise the academic expectations,” whereas the same male doesn’t really make that transition so they fall behind. So really their only option is to drop out” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Some of the participants noted that girls seem to have their priorities in the proper order.

“Females might be better at staying organized and having their priorities. . . . They set goals and have their priorities straight” (Matt; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

I feel like I’ve seen more studious girls even when they’re not necessarily high GPA
girls. They will study for hours. Will work fairly hard at what they’re doing. And I know a lot of guys—it seems more kind of a relaxed kind of party mentality (Ross; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Ashley talked about a male friend of hers:

I’ll sit there and he’ll be on Facebook. He’s like, “Oh I have a test on Friday,” . . . and this is like Thursday night. He still has not like even looked over the material. More power to you. I wish it were that easy (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Eric added, “It’s not that they [males] don’t care but maybe they’re just not willing to put the work in for it to excel. I could even say that about myself.” Zach concurred: “I feel like there’s a lot of guys here that are just guys. . . . It’s a wonder they’re still here . . . how they made it this far” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Some of the males readily admitted that their sports took precedence over academics. Eric was honest: “My athletic job is more fun than my school job.” Jacob also admitted that football was more of a priority than academics. From his vantage point, Adam explained, “If you’re not good at athletics, then you’re not a man” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

The females seemed to possess a different attitude in establishing priorities. Their academics were more important than their athletics. For example, Stephanie was playing a varsity sport her freshman year. However, she quickly recognized her sport was requiring a lot of time and energy. As a result, her grades suffered. She was forced to make a decision:

I came here and I took Bio and I like got a C. I had never gotten a C in my life. I was always like decent at school. That’s what I did. I had a D on my midterm and that was
like horrifying for me. . . . I was always good at things. The same with soccer. I was good at it to an extent but I was like, “I can’t do soccer and school and be good at both of them. So I have to pick one or the other” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

She proceeded to quit soccer. For her, participating in a varsity sport was not worth jeopardizing her academic pursuits.

Again, the difference in academic priorities was not the pattern with every male and female. As an illustration, Ross, Josh, and Ben had stellar GPAs. It was obvious that academics were their priority in spite of being heavily involved in campus activities and athletics. Additionally, for the females, Alexis certainly did not fit the model of a studious female during her freshman year. In fact, most of the participants knew of females who did not prioritize academics. Still, it seemed that girls were more apt to maintain proper focus. As a result, they did not express academic regret.

**C’s get degrees.** Apparently, there is a phrase shared by many males on campus: “C’s get degrees.” In other words, they are satisfied with a C because a student only needs a 2.0 GPA, or C average, to graduate. “I’ve seen it first hand, especially with a lot of guys on the baseball team, and like they are like ‘C’s get degrees’ or whatever the saying is” (Austin; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Females shudder at the thought. “Girls are like, ‘A B? Ahhhh. Why isn’t that an A? What can I do to get it more? Is there extra credit?’” I think guys are probably more like, ‘A B is passing’” (Jennifer). Adam observed, “I feel like girls are perfectionists. You find more perfectionists among girls so it translates over to their studying and grades and that sort of thing.” Megan agreed with him: “I try to be the best in my classes. . . . If I like do poorly, I feel
really bad.” Patrick talked about his girlfriend who “has break down moments if she gets like a mid-B” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

Again, this is not true for everyone. Heather made that clear: “My roommate has a ‘C’s get degrees attitude.’ She already got a job” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Maria also voiced a contrary opinion:

My boyfriend is very academically driven. He wants to get a PhD and be a professor. He’s very serious about school, and I have other friends who are the same way. . . . I feel like there’s an equal amount. I wouldn’t say that there’s any kind of bias because I know girls who don’t care either (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Matt, after saying that girls are better at establishing goals and maintaining priorities, added, “Don’t get me wrong—there are plenty of females who want to experience the scene” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

**Major.** It seemed that the males, when compared to the females, were more unclear in their rationale for choosing their majors as well as in their future plans. There are some facts that support this observation. For example, none of the girls entered college as an undecided major. Two males (Ben and Zach) were undecided majors throughout their entire freshman year. Two females (10%) (Alexis and Stephanie) changed their majors, while three males (23%) (David, Eric, and Matt) changed their majors.

It also seemed the females, in general, had more solidified post-graduation goals. Eight (40%) of the females planned to attend a post-graduate school right after graduation. Four (20%) others had specific jobs either lined up or had specific career goals. On the other hand, only two (15%) (Chris and David) of the males were planning to attend graduate school. Both of them
had specific career goals. The rest of the males did not seem to have a specific career or job in mind.

When asked, “What’s after college for you?” Ben replied, “That’s where it gets scary. Suddenly you don’t know what’s going to happen after college. . . . I’m hoping to find a job somewhere in the Northern Virginia area.” Eric answered, “I’m not exactly sure.” Austin, in choosing his major, seemed a little vague: “I came in as a business major because I didn’t really know what else I wanted to do and I thought business was always going to be around so it would be a good place to start” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

**Potential hindrances.** Some of the hindrances were shared between the genders. There were equal number of stories of frustrations and struggles. However, within those stories, some occurred more for females than for males. The females had more painful roommate stories. They also discussed feeling stressed more frequently than did the males.

**Difficult event.** More of the females experienced almost debilitating roommate or relationship problems. As I conducted more interviews, it became a joke with the females: “You could not have had the roommate from hell because most of the previous females had that person.” They proceeded to laugh, only to also share their own “horrible” freshman and sophomore roommate sagas.

In comparison, for the males, the frustrating roommate stories were less intense. Although Ben and Marcus referred to “weird” roommates during their first year on campus, their stories were not emotionally charged. Both of the men were frustrated with their roommates; however, their descriptions felt more methodical and void of emotion.

The girls’ stories were vastly different. They often included more than a few “mean girl” episodes that had lasting emotional consequences. According to some of the girls, like Hannah,
Jennifer, and Sydney, the problematic relationship issues caused deep emotional scars and negatively affected their trust levels. As a result, Hannah retreated and only found support from faculty; Sydney and Jennifer did not refer to any on-campus personnel or friends when discussing their support network.

Many of these accounts are included above under the hindrance theme. The focus here is on their gender-related occurrence. Emotionally-charged roommate difficulties tended to happen between female roommates. The males either were more accepting of their roommates or simply did not become emotionally entangled in or hurt by conflict.

**Mental health issues.** It was interesting to notice the frequency of girls feeling stressed, anxious, panicked, or overwhelmed. The females used the word “stress” 38 times. They mentioned it in relation to their college experience in general, a particular class, freshman year, MCATS, etc. In comparison, if David’s frequent use of the word stress ($n=16$) is removed, the males used the word two times. Ironically, they applied the word “stress” when discussing the intensity and frequency of girls’ stress levels.

Other females described their anxiety: “I freak out about homework and I freak out about tests. I get really anxious about stuff even though I do fine, but I get really anxious. That’s just how I work” (Melissa). “I have like anxiety about failing” (Ashley) (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Males said nothing of the sort, even though their grades were sub-par in comparison to the females.

**Overcoming.** How students overcame is covered above. Nonetheless, there is a conspicuous difference by gender. None of the males admitted asking for help during any of their struggles. Then again, there is no proof that they did not ask for help. It was not a direct question. Still, there was not even an alluding to seeking any help from campus resources.
outside of professors and academic advisors. As a stark contrast, nine female participants admitted accessing campus resources outside of professors and academic advisors. They sought tutoring, academic coaching, and personal counseling.

**Summary of Results**

Data analysis and the preceding summary were organized and framed in the order of the research questions: How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence? What are the persistence differences, by gender, in the experience?

Two predominant themes emerged in answering the first two research questions exploring persistence factors. All the students referred to a family member as indirect or direct support and encouragement. In addition to their parents, they also described a formidable goal for a college degree that was buttressed by an unwavering inner drive. There seemed to be a synergistic relationship between parental encouragement and the student’s inner drive/goal. Both seemed equally vital. One could conclude that without either one, a student would more than likely not persist to graduation.

In addition to the predominant themes of parent and inner drive and goal, three other themes emerged in regards to persistence factors. These played out once the student arrived on campus. They were social integration, academic integration, and institutional factors. The students equated social integration with plugging into the campus community. Most of them acknowledged this as a key on-campus component to persistence-to-graduation. Social integration was accomplished through formation of a supportive peer group, involvement in
either athletics or campus clubs and organizations, and informal relationships with faculty and staff.

Academic integration involved being involved academically which, in turn, yielded grades that met the institution’s requirement for graduation. Academic integration was supported through maintaining academic priorities, possessing an intrinsic value of learning, and connecting to a major. Part of maintaining academic priorities was class attendance. Most of the students, even those who admitted to being academically weak, stated that class attendance was a priority. Others valued learning for the sake of learning. They recognized the unique opportunity presented through the liberal arts curriculum, as they were introduced to subjects they may not otherwise pursue. Many of the students also acknowledged the role of having a major they enjoyed and becoming more involved with the faculty and peers in the major as they entered more of their major classes.

In regards to institutional factors and their role in buttressing student persistence, there were a few themes. They were the quality of the education and faculty, the campus-wide sense of community, the myriad opportunities for involvement, the free academic and personal support, and the liberal arts curriculum. Repeatedly, the students acknowledged that the strength of the institution lay in its faculty. The students valued not only the faculty’s personal concern for each student but also the faculty’s passion for excellence. Additionally, the students noted the plethora of opportunities to connect to the unique campus community. The participants also admitted that the college offered many avenues of support. This came through academic support services and personal counseling. Many of the females took advantage of these services. Lastly, even though some complained about the liberal arts curriculum, many of the students valued being exposed to a variety of subjects. They valued their broadening horizons.
The next grouping of themes addressed the third research question regarding possible hindrances to persistence-to-graduation. These consisted of a difficult event, mental health issues, finances, academic difficulties, and negative impression of the institution. Many of the students described a painful experience that occurred during their college tenure. One student was raped; another was accused of rape. One of the participants had an unwanted pregnancy. Some quit a sport they had played their entire lives while many of the females endured stressful roommate departures. Some of the same students described bouts with depression and anxiety while others pressed through financial stressors. For others, their potential hindrance to persistence was academic difficulties in adjusting to the college work load. Finally, some of the students complained about frustrating aspects of the institution such as its alcohol and residence requirement. Admittedly, these could have resulted in their transferring or quitting. But they bravely persisted.

How they persisted fell into themes that, generally, involved engaging with or leaning into the previously explored persistence factors. This included students’ leaning heavily into their inner motivation and parental support. Their leaning into these reserves was often accompanied by integrating socially and academically on campus. The integrating was often prompted by a wake-up call that poignantly reminded them that, without changes, they would not graduate from college. Following their wake-up call, they joined groups. They found their niche and they started studying more, connected with faculty, and asked for help. They also possessed a right perspective.

The final emerging theme addressed the last research question regarding differences in persistence factors by gender. The differences that arose were academic priorities, mental health issues, major, and asking for help. Females appeared more likely to maintain academic priorities
even as freshmen. In comparison, many of the males described academic regret: They wished they had made academics more of a priority. For some of these males, varsity athletics were their main priority.

Another difference was in regards to stress and seeking help. Females mentioned feeling stressed or anxious more often than males, and females were more likely to seek help either academically or personally. In comparison, only one male talked about feeling stressed, and none of the males admitted asking for help from either tutors or personal counselors. Lastly, although it was not as significant a difference as some of the others, more of the females had specific career goals in mind and their majors were directly related to those goals. More of the males appeared to be vague in their career and major goals.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Using a qualitative research design, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine differences, according to gender, in persistence factors in post-secondary education. As it is now, the problem is that many admit that there is a growing gender gap in higher education. Currently, it overwhelmingly favors females in both enrollment and persistence. Although most recognize the issue, few are exploring the causes.

Retention and persistence are the most heavily researched topics in higher education. Most research designs in this area are quantitative. Furthermore, those same investigators have been more apt to study drop-outs than to study those who persist to graduation. This study filled a gap in both areas. It relied on data from those who persisted in order to determine if there are differences, by gender, in persistence factors.

The research questions were: How do traditional-age college seniors describe persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that contributed to their persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors describe experiences or beliefs that could have hindered this persistence? How do traditional-age college seniors overcome hindrances to their persistence? What are persistence differences, by gender, in the experience?

The intent of the study was, first, to understand the interlocking components that built the participants’ persistence story. Second, the aim was to compare the differences in persistence factors, through the lens of gender: Were there differences, by gender, in the persistence beliefs and experiences of these students?

I gathered this information through a demographic data collection instrument, individual interviews, focus group interviews, and email exchanges with a diverse group of 33 traditional-
age college seniors (F=20; M=13) at a small, private, Mid-Atlantic, four-year institution. Their participation was garnered mainly through recruiting. I gave a power point presentation to 15 senior classes, averaging 20 students, over a two week period. Prior to the presentation, I solicited professors’ permission.

I transcribed the interviews. This was also a step in the analysis process. As suggested by Saldaña (2013), I took notes and tentatively coded during the transcription process. Once the interviews were transcribed, I made hard copies. Using these, I developed further codes and themes, writing them in the margins. The initial organizing structure for the codes was the research questions. I used different colored highlighters and highlighted the parts of the participants’ stories according to their relevancy to each question. Through that process, more codes emerged. All the codes were eventually arranged into themes. After that, I cut up the transcripts and filed the sub-sections in manila folders according to themes. I proceeded to tape the individually highlighted quotes on the walls, on flip-chart papers, according to themes.

I presented the results in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I will interpret those results. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) explained the role of this portion of the research process:

You scrutinize what you have found in the hope of discovering what it means, or, more precisely, what meaning you can make of it. You are seeking ways to understand what you have found by comparing your findings both within and across groups and by comparing your study’s findings with those of other studies (p. 127).

In this chapter, I summarize the findings and then discuss their implication in light of the relevant literature and the theoretical framework that guided the study. I also explore limitations, implications for college campuses, and suggestions for future research.
Summary of the Findings

What was most clear in this study was the complexity of persistence-to-graduation. There was not one particular belief or experience that the students attributed to their persistence. Instead, their persistence was the result an interweaving of various factors. These factors could be summarized in five interlocking themes: family, goal/inner drive, academic integration, social integration, and institutional factors. A diagram depicting the persistence experience can be found in Figure 6.

Figure 6. The persistence process represents the continual influence of family along with a goal that was ensconced in an inner drive. These factors supported the on-campus factors of academic and social integration. The diagram also reflects the student’s interaction with all persistence factors when facing possible hindrance to persistence. Graphic representation adapted by the author.
The most influential factors, in their frequency, length of influence, and intensity, were family influence and goal/inner drive. There seemed to be a synergistic working between the two that started long before the students enrolled in college. Most of the time, it was at least one parent who encouraged or expected their student to obtain a college degree. In some cases, this expectation involved direct comments while in others it was an understanding; the parents had a college degree and children should do the same. In only one case was the family encouragement not a parent or parental figure. It was still a family member, however—an older sister.

It is not that others—such a high school teachers or coaches—did not have an influence, particularly in encouraging college enrollment. In some circumstances, they at least augmented the parental support of a college education. The difference was that parental involvement not only encouraged the student to attend, but it was an ongoing support for the duration. Many of the students readily admitted that without this parental encouragement they would not be graduating from college. Frequently, these same students had been influenced by high school teachers and coaches. The parent factor was the essential ingredient, however.

Working in almost a symbiotic fashion with the parental influence was the students’ goal for a college degree. In turn, the goal was firmly entrenched in an inner drive. At times, the goal was not strong enough or too far in the future to maintain momentum. Often, the students described the necessity of digging into this unquantifiable, yet unwavering, inner drive. Jacob’s attitude, when asked why he did not quit during an extremely difficult time, was just one example of this inner drive: “You have to finish. . . . Finishing something that’s gonna help beyond the future is not gonna kill you. It just takes persistence. Like you have to keep going. You can’t stop” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). In many situations, it appeared that the inner drive was holding together the goal.
Although parental encouragement was a vital component in persistence, it was not enough. However, it was also apparent that the goal and inner drive, standing alone, were not adequate either. This synergy was true for all participants regardless of gender, SES, ethnicity, major, or GPA. With this in mind, one can possibly conclude that a student’s chance of persistence is low without the support of at least one family member, preferably a parent, accompanied by a goal for a college degree that is firmly nested in an inner drive.

Once the student enrolled in college, the on-campus persistence factors were set in motion. These were not inconsequential. Throughout the college experience, they seemed to work in tandem with the foundational influences of parent and goal/inner drive. The on-campus influences were social integration, academic integration, and institutional factors.

According to the participants, social integration, or “plugging in”—a term generated by one focus group—played a key role in student persistence. Most of them were emphatic that students needed to get involved in clubs, organizations, or athletic teams immediately upon arriving on campus. For Patrick it was an absolute necessity: “I reached out freshman year and made a lot of friends and people. I just – they [people who drop out] just really don’t do that. When they transfer out, they’re like ‘This sucks’” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Stephanie called it, “Finding your niche.” And she reiterated Patrick’s sentiments:

Getting involved with different clubs and stuff on campus . . . and just like getting together with people that have similar interests and like having them as a support group cuz you realize that they go through the same kind of things. It’s not just you. It’s kind of like this—you sit with people and you talk and you vent and you talk about your days (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
The students valued their on-campus support system comprised of friends as well as faculty and staff. The majority of them lauded the faculty and their personal interest in, and availability to, the students. “The teachers know your name. They know what dorm you live in. And they know what your major is. You know. They know what sport you play” (Zach; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Social Integration was influential for all students. There was no distinction between the genders. They all fiercely recognized the value of being involved and making friends, or creating a support network. Where the difference arose, however, was in the primary source of social integration. Males tended to integrate more through athletics than did females. This was both on a varsity level and through intramural sports. More than one of the athletic males admitted that without their varsity sport they would not have enrolled in nor persisted through college.

Academic integration was one more on-campus factor. The participants recognized the necessity of maintaining academic priorities, which included class attendance. The other components of strong academic integration were intrinsic value of learning, and becoming connected to, and involved with, a major.

Although there were many similarities between males and females, there were also profound differences in the area of academic integration. Females seemed more intense and uptight about their grades. Also, more of the females had ambitions for graduate school.

According to many in the study, quite a few males on campus operated under the adage, “C’s get degrees.” It was not clear how tightly the participating males held to that axiom; however, for many of them, they admitted that their academic intentionality was weaker than that of most females. As a result, the participating females had an overall higher GPA, and none of
them expressed any regret over their GPAs. Some males, on the other hand, bemoaned their GPAs and their lack of priorities their freshman year.

One reason for the grade differential could be that more females plan to attend grad school. Patrick explained:

A lot of the girls I talk to are like, “Grad school. Grad school.” And guys are like, “Ok graduate in four years, . . . move into business, . . . work for 2, 3 years, . . . go to grad school, and they’ll pay for it.” The push of like “Oh crap. I have to get A’s. I have to get a 3.5 to get into grad school (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Lauren also equated needing high grades with getting accepted into grad school. For that reason, “There’s no difference between the genders of how we approach [our biology major]. We all want an A . . . because all of us want to be vets or doctors.” But she added, “My guy friends who are not in my major, like they have the attitude of, ‘I want to make sure I pass’” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

The females’ career goals also seemed more concrete. For many of them, they chose a major with a specific goal in mind such as being a veterinarian, a doctor, a teacher, or a researcher. The males, on the other hand, often chose a major because it seemed “fun” (Adam, Austin; Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Or they were undecided as freshman, and they chose a major that interested them. They still did not have a clear career goal. This observation was not across-the-board. Some of the females were very vague in their career aspirations, while some of the males were very clear about theirs.

Institutional factors also played into the students’ persistence. The students frequently referred to the quality of the education and faculty, the sense of community, the opportunities for
involved, the academic and personal support, and the liberal arts curriculum. To a certain degree, every student benefitted from each of these. They valued the professionalism and passion of their professors. They thrived in the small campus where students are a name and not a number. Courtney observed: “Here I feel like your advisor knows you and cares about you, and your professors know and care about you and they can tell when you are having a bad day” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

They took advantage of the copious opportunities for involvement in the way of clubs, organizations, and athletics. Some of them even recognized the value in the liberal arts curriculum.

I know a lot of people complain about our gen eds, but you really do get to see all those different aspects of . . . and like at some point you do start to see and in like one class how you’ve heard that in another class and why people may think this way. . . . It is kind of nice to have a liberal arts education. I do like the liberal arts education (Megan; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Many of the students faced situations that were possible hindrances to their persistence. For some, it was simply failing to socially or academically integrate. However, there were other experiences that seemed to fall outside the realm of simply needing to connect or study more.

One possible hindrance was a difficult event. This played out in a variety of ways. For some, it entailed leaving an athletic team; for others, it was a roommate fiasco; still, for others, it involved a traumatic situation such as unwanted pregnancy, rape, or being accused of rape. Along with a difficult event, there were other situations that were possible diversions to persistence. They were mental health issues, finances, academic difficulties, and negative impression of the institution. Those with financial pressures seemed to find more loan or
scholarship money or secure work over the summer. Academic difficulties represented the struggle in the transition to college level work in the classroom. Negative impression of the institution grew out of a disdain for the residential and alcohol policies, frustration with freshman year advising, and disliking the liberal arts requirements. As much as some of the participants valued the general education requirements, others viewed them as more of a nuisance.

The most pronounced difference by gender, in the area of possible hindrance, was the frequency and intensity of roommate conflicts for females. Two of the males claimed to have weird freshman roommates, but it was not a poignant event with lasting consequences. In comparison, many of the females described painful stories of rejection, disillusionment, and abandonment not only with roommates but with hall mates and suitemates. For some of these females, the scars remained.

The other difference in the hindrances, by gender, was the level of stress among the females. Compared to the males, the females mentioned feeling stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed profusely more than the males. Most of their worries revolved around classwork and grades, although disconcerting relationship issues certainly added to their stress levels.

When thinking about this comparison, Stephanie observed, “They [guys] don’t have the same stress for some reason. I don’t know if it’s biological or social factors but their stress level is diminished” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014). Alexis recounted her boyfriend’s reaction to her stress:

I think also my boyfriend actually went here and he was like “Why are you so stressed about school? Who cares? I got by fine. I never studied for tests.” He talked about his experience as just floating on a cloud through whatever (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).
How the students overcame these hindrances hinged upon reintegrating academically and socially. It also involved rich support from parents, friends, and faculty/staff. The overcoming was ultimately driven by three overlapping themes. The struggling students experienced a wake-up call. In turn, the females asked for help. Lastly, they embraced a right perspective. For many of them, their overcoming was a matter of maturing and recognizing what had to be done to survive.

The main difference in overcoming, according to gender, was in asking for help. With the exception of talking to faculty or their advisors, males never described a time when they sought help from tutors or a personal counselor. In comparison, almost half of the females mentioned talking to a counselor or leaning into a tutor and/or academic coach. For some, like Alexis, that made all the difference:

I still was a rebel and still did my things but he [the counselor] was kind of my outlet. I went to him two times a week, sometimes three times a week. I really talked to him about stuff . . . . I kind of talked with him through stuff. So he kind of got me through my first year (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Persistence-to-graduation is a complex phenomenon comprised of a variety of interconnecting factors. Most of the students, in this study, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or SES equally attributed their persistence to this interplay of factors. Still, there were some differences according to gender that could shed light into strategies for better supporting males in their pursuit of a college degree.

**Discussion**

This study took a different approach than most studies in retention. Most examine dropout characteristics. From those studies, researchers deduce what, probably, leads to students
staying in school. As Tinto (2012) observed, “Understanding the reasons for leaving doesn’t necessarily translate into helping students persist” (p. 4). In comparison, this particular study examined persisters—or those who remained in college until graduation. Although much of this study’s findings fall neatly in line with other retention research, there are unique findings that deviate from the norm.

The major impetus driving this particular study was comparing persistence factors by gender. However, in order to fully investigate this matter, it was imperative to unveil the persistence factors that supported the students in their college journey. Thus, a general discussion of the components of student persistence will occur prior to a discussion of gender differences in the persistence experience.

**Academic and Social Integration**

The original theories (Bean, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975) along with more modern research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Reason, 2009) found that persisting students are more likely to integrate academically and socially. The students in this study proved those axioms true. Each of them, regardless of ethnicity, gender, SES, and GPA, touted the role of their academic and social integration in their persistence-to-graduation story.

Like Milem and Berger (1997) attested, for many of these students, their social integration preceded their academic integration. Social integration, especially in connecting with friends, was the backbone of on-campus persistence factors; they relished their interactions with peers. At times, however, they became overinvolved with their social lives. Thus, some of the students in the study wavered in establishing academic priorities, whereas their social integration was in place almost immediately. However, as affirmed by Astin and Oseguer (2012),

eventually they had to prioritize their academics or they would not have persisted. They had a wake-up call and matured.

Within these broad categories were other notable factors. For example, the participants, as supported by the research of Pascarella & Terenzini, (1977), were emphatic that informal relationships with faculty were a vital component in their persistence. Additionally, class attendance was a top priority. This fact added to the research of Credé, Roch, and Kiesczynka (2010) who found class attendance more significantly correlated with grades than even study habits. Grades, in turn, are directly linked to persistence (Tinto, 2012). Also, none of the participants stopped out. Some of them even admitted that this would have caused them to not want to return. Stopping out has a negative effect on persistence (Ewert, 2012; Donhardt, 2013; Kuh et al., 2008).

**Family Support and Goal/Inner Drive**

Although researchers like Haynes (2008) argued that academic performance and social integration are the strongest predictors of persistence, this particular study revealed two factors that seemed even more potent: family support and goal/inner drive. The interweaving of these two qualities formed the bedrock for the students’ persistence. Again, this phenomenon was regardless of students’ ethnicity, gender, SES, and GPA. Academic and social integration notwithstanding, a student without family support and a strong goal, supported by an unwavering inner drive would, most likely, not persist.

According to some, past researchers erroneously emphasized academic ability as being the strongest factor in persistence (Alacorn & Edwards, 2013; Mattern & Shaw, 2010; Sparkman, Maulding & Roberts, 2012). More researchers are recognizing the role that goals have in
sustaining persistence. Habley et al. (2012) admitted that motivational theories, that include goal-setting, are becoming more prominent within retention research.

This study may be just one of those as its theoretical framework was built upon an interaction of goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham, 2009) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Even Tinto (1993), the most prominent retention theorist, admitted that students with specific goals, to which they are highly motivated, are more likely to persist than those without a specified goal. Others agreed that motivation and goals are key elements to student persistence (Alacorn & Edwards, 2013; Credé & Kuncel, 2008; Kim et al., 2010; Lord et al., 2013; Reason, 2009; Robbins et al., 2004; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1993; Wells et al., 2011).

A goal is something individuals desire to achieve (Locke and Latham, 2009). In this study, the goal was a college degree. According to the theorists, the more a person values a goal, and the more specific that goal, the greater will be the exerted effort. In this particular study, in spite of set-backs and frustrations, many of the students refused to quit. The long-term attainment of a college degree was more important than the short-term avoidance of discomfort and struggle.

Not only was the goal itself important, but Locke and Latham (1990) noted that determination drove the goal attainment. Individuals must be genuinely committed to the goal in order to perform at higher levels. For the participants in this study the goal, supported by an internal drive, sustained their persistence.

Locke and Latham (1990) also attributed goal attainment to positive feedback from external sources. Each of these students’ stories included strong parental and familial support and feedback. But the feedback went beyond simple encouragement. As explained by Bandura’s (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory, people learn behavior through modeling.
In this study, the second-generation students yearned for a college degree because their parents had a degree. The first-generation students, however, had a different model. They wanted to escape the negative life-style choices of their non-educated peers and/or family members. The college degree was their key to a more positive career and life. Thering (2012) found similar rationale for first-generation students’ pursuit of a college degree. As Bandura (1977) postulated, this anticipation of a positive outcome fostered behavior that would move toward the goal.

Bandura (1977, 1997) noted that perceived self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s ability to perform, is based upon four sources of information. One of these sources, which was prominent in this study, was the encouragement from others. Often, the students admitted struggling. They pointed to their parents’ belief in them as the sustaining presence. “It is easier to sustain a sense of efficacy, especially when struggling with difficulties, if significant others express faith in one’s capabilities than if they convey doubts” (Bandura, 1997, p. 101).

Goal-setting theory and self-efficacy theory postulated the interaction of motivation, goals, feedback, and behavior. These students modeled this interplay. Their persistence would not have occurred without family support and encouragement. The parental support was intertwined with a goal which, in turn, was supported by an unwavering inner drive. This was the case regardless of a student’s ethnicity, gender, SES, or GPA.

The benefit from parental encouragement was obvious in virtually every conversation. This seemed out of line with much of the research on retention. Tinto (1975) identified family encouragement as an important source of emotional support. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also noted the significance of parental influence; however, in these past studies, family influence did not seem as significant as what appeared in this particular study.
In some ways, the direct role of parents on persistence is a relatively new phenomenon in higher education. Previous generations of students did not have this ongoing relationship with parents once they entered college (ASHE, 2008). The tide has turned. A more recent study may also indicate this shift; a study by Kelly et al., (2012) found that family encouragement was one of the strongest predictors in persistence.

For some in higher education, parental involvement has been portrayed in a negative light. Seen as “helicopter parents,” or overinvolved and hovering, some parents have been intrusive in the eyes of administrators. However, Shoup, Gonyea, and Kuh (2009) found fault with applying this moniker to the majority of parents. Not all parents fit this description; they were not a pervasive negative influence. In most cases, the opposite was true. Students with involved parents excelled in many areas. This was definitely the case in this particular study.

**Institutional Factors**

The role of the institution in persistence is supported by research (Kuh et al., 2008; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2012) observed, and these students agreed, the excellence and high standards of the institution and the faculty were a definite boost in their persistence. Furthermore, the participants, regardless of ethnicity, gender, SES, or GPA, readily admitted that the institutional support system through faculty, advisors, along with academic and personal support, also buttressed their pursuit of a college degree. The majority of them availed themselves to tutoring, personal counseling, academic advising, and faculty support.

They also attested to the college’s personal care for each student which is also supported in the research (Braxton et al., 2014). Where the college seemed to fail, however, was in a lack
of more intrusive advising during the freshman year. Some have posited that this oversight could definitely hamper a weaker student’s persistence (ACT, 2010; Adelman, 2006).

One other strength of this institution was the myriad of opportunities for involvement and social integration. Research is replete with support for abundant opportunities for involvement (Astin, 1999; Terenzini & Reason, 2005; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 2012). In line with the research, the students’ overall satisfaction was directly related to their involvement with peers and faculty/staff through clubs, organizations, and athletic teams. Additionally, the research supports the residential community in enhancing student involvement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999).

One of the weaknesses, noted by some of the students, was its alcohol policy. Being a dry campus, it prohibits alcohol consumption even if a student is 21. For some, the policy itself was not as much of a problem. Instead, it was the manner in which students were treated. They often felt disrespected in the enforcement and discipline procedures. In turn, the disrespect led to some student departure. Braxton et al. (2014) noted that treating students with respect is a salient dimension in promoting student persistence.

**Gender Differences**

Overall, the most fundamental components of student persistence were similar for both males and females, particularly in the areas of social integration and institutional factors. However, with males persisting at a lower rate than females, it stands to reason that there are differences, in the experience, even if they are seemingly inconsequential. This was certainly found in this study; there were more similarities than differences but the differences were enough to warrant attention.
The most prominent difference was in the variance in academic priorities. Females, once arriving on campus, appeared to prioritize their academics much more efficiently than males. This is no surprise. Generally, females come to college having been more academically engaged during their k-12 education. They simply continue the pattern in college (Brouse et al., 2012; Conger & Long, 2010; DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Jacob, 2002; Kleinfeld, 2009; Ross et al., 2012; Sax, L. J., 2008). However, as shown in this study, and buttressed by research, both genders succeed academically when they are engaged at the outset of their college career (Sax, L.J., 2008). The males in this study who were academically engaged at the outset carried stellar GPAs. Unlike their less engaged male peers, they did not express any academic regrets.

Instead of studying, males with the lower GPAs admitted that their freshman year was a season of of partying, playing video games, and being involved in residence life antics. Leppel (2002) observed that more male than female students admitted to partying. Additionally, she affirmed that the most socially integrated males had lower grades (Leppel, 2002).

For the most part, the women in this study seemed to spend more time studying than men, even as freshmen. This was driven by their ardent desire for high grades. Females’ drive for high grades is supported by the research (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2014; Fletcher, 2002). Research has found that women have higher first year grades (Conger & Long, 2010; Allen et al., 2008). It could be attributed to their liking school related activities more than males. Or it may be the “stronger immediate gratification they get from better performance” (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2014, p. 114).

Another explanation could be their graduate school aspirations. More women than men, in this study, had plans to attend graduate or medical school. Being accepted into graduate school requires a solid GPA. Women, in general, are more likely to want careers that require a
DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) observed that the expectation for graduate school is 50% higher for women than for men.

Another explanation for lower academic priorities could be men’s seemingly less concrete career goals. Some have posited that males have a lower level of career maturity, or “readiness to make informed, age-appropriate career decisions” (Patton & Creed, 2001, p. 336), although the research is far from convincing (Patton & Creed, 2001). However, the differential in specific career aspirations was not one of the more significant findings in this study. It was weak at best, completely insignificant at worst.

One more distraction from academic priorities, for some of the men, was playing a varsity sport. Many of the males admitted that playing their sport was the impetus driving their enrollment and persistence. This pattern has been observed in the research (Ewert, 2012). “If it were not for men’s athletic participation in college, the gender gap in college graduation would be even wider than observed” (Ewert, 2012, p. 838). The drawback, however, was that their sport took precedence over their academics. For them, building one’s athletic identity, or being known as an athlete, as labeled by Lubker and Etzel (2007), was more vital than building one’s academics.

It seems that, for weaker students, this would explain some of the gender gap in persistence: Males who enroll in college primarily to play a sport may fail to integrate academically. This could result in academic dismissal. To mitigate this issue, Hyatt (2003) suggested working directly with athletes in long-term goal setting. This could spark a desire to be more intentional academically.
It also seems that a male student, whose priority is to play a sport, could struggle to remain in school should he stop playing. Lubker and Etzel (2007) contended that disengagement from a sport that played an important role in a student’s formative years could affect retention. In their study, the negative effect on persistence for a disengaged athlete was more pronounced for males than for females.

The difference, by gender, in intramural involvement is also supported by the research. College males participate in intramural sports at significantly higher rates than females (Deaner et al., 2012; Sturts & Ross, 2013). Of even more significance to this particular study is the research that showed a higher level of institutional satisfaction among males who participated in intramurals than their female counterparts (Sturts & Ross, 2013). Ewert (2012) also found that playing intramural sports was significantly related to men’s persistence to graduation.

In the theme of overcoming possible hindrances, there was a conspicuous difference between males and females. Males never admitted to asking for help outside of talking to professors. Where they did talk to professors, it was either initiated by the professor because the student was falling behind, or it was course or advising related. Unlike many of the females, the males never discussed their procuring a tutor or an academic coach. Moreover, they never sought a personal counselor.

Unfortunately, this reflects a pattern not only in higher education, but among males in general. Due to its negative social stigma, college men are more reticent to seek counseling. They are reluctant to admit failure and struggle (Davies et al., 2000; Davis, Shen-Miller, & Isacco 2010; Kruisselbrink-Flatt, 2013). This does not mean men do not need counseling (Davies et al., 2010). In fact, their resistance to counseling could explain some of the persistence
gap: Unlike women, who seek help when facing a crisis, men may withdraw rather than accept the presumed humiliation of seeking help.

Coincidentally, in the mental health area, the females in the study alluded to feeling stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed at a greater rate than males. Only one male talked about feeling stressed or anxious. This could be explained in two different ways. First, men, in general, are reluctant to discuss feelings that could appear weak. They have been socialized to be stoic and self-sufficient. It is not that they do not feel stress or worry; they simply do not freely discuss such matters (Davis, Shen-Miller, & Isacco, 2010).

Second, research also has shown that women are more prone to struggle with mental health issues (Kruisselbrink-Flatt, 2013). Linda Sax (2008) found that women students, more than males, tended to feel overwhelmed with all that they have to do. Broughham, Zail, Mendoza, and Miller (2009) had similar findings: College women reported higher levels of stress than did college men. Misra and McKean (2000) also noted that women indicated higher levels of academic stress and anxiety. However, they also recognized that females’ divulging their stress may reflect their willingness to admit to the feeling. It is quite possible that males experience the same levels of stress but are not as willing or able to admit it (Misra & McKean, 2000).

Besides academic stress, many of the female participants experienced relational stress. This was most prevalent with their roommates. The study by Benenson et al. (2009) shed light on this matter. They observed that females tended to be socially oriented while males were more task-oriented. According to the authors, these traits have been accepted across cultures and over time. In spite of females’ penchant for connectedness, however, they were less tolerant of same-sex peers. Admittedly, there were stressors in every relationship. The difference was that men
were more likely to overlook or move past them. As a result, males were more satisfied with their roommates, less bothered by idiosyncrasies, and less likely to switch roommates during their freshman year.

**Reason for gender differences.** The participants offered a variety of their own theories for the gender differences in persistence factors and the gender gap in higher education. Many pointed to the various opportunities for males that did not require a college education. Men can do laborer’s jobs while “girls are now starting to go higher up; they need a degree to go higher up and it’s not just in our biology to be a construction worker and build houses” (Alexis; Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Stephanie agreed: “Guys just have different options – doing laborer jobs.” Adam also agreed: “We can do a lot more with our hands,” and Patrick added, “You go to trade school . . . learning welding. Be an electrician. . . . Yeah, it’s true. I never thought about it, but there’s not much opportunity for girls that don’t go to college” (Personal communication with participants, November, 2014).

A focus group of women was adamant: “I don’t want to be a mom or a secretary or receptionist. . . . So it’s like either one or the other. . . . Either you be that or you be something where you need a bachelor’s degree” (Hannah, Maria, and Whitney; Personal communication with participants, November, 2014). Austin also reflected on the copious amount of opportunities for women than in past years. He referred to his mom:

Like her dad gave her three choices. . . . There were like three careers that women needed to do. . . . My mom—she never really wanted to be a teacher—but she went with that because that was one of the options she had. . . . With our generation, the moms are looking at all these opportunities for women. . . . They are pushing their daughters. . . .
‘Go out and get the job you want instead of just being a nurse or something you don’t want to do (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Their insights are certainly supported by the research. Flashman (2013), for example, suggested, “High-achieving women, who in the past did not attend college, are now attending and using these non-traditional paths to increase their rates of college attendance” (p. 545). King (2006) also attributed the gender gap to the simple fact that more women are going to college in order to increase their wages. Goldin et al. (2006) agreed that women are less inclined to follow traditional occupations, such as clerical, that do not require a college degree.

Other researchers argued that the myriad of opportunities for men that do not require a college degree discourages some males from college attendance (Jacob, 2009; Kleinfeld, 2009; Mortenson, 2006). However, the ubiquitous blue-collar job is becoming obsolete and therefore a college education is becoming more of a necessity, even for men (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013; Mortenson, 2006). Some have argued that we are now in a knowledge-based economy where a college degree is essential regardless of one’s gender (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; Sommers, 2013; Sum et al., 2003; Tuchtenhagen, 2008; White-House, 2013; Whitmire & Bailey, 2010).

As an interesting wrap-up of the entire research, Hannah offered perceptive insight into the situation:

Women are empowered. It’s an older movement considering our generation but it’s still being pushed—women can do everything. Women can do this. Women can do that. And it’s almost giving men less power cuz they’re . . .while they have every power we have, no one is telling them that right now. It’s all, “Women can do this. Women can do
anything.” But no one is saying, “But men can do it too!” (Personal communication with participant, November, 2014).

Her comment brings the argument full circle. It was the impetus driving this study: Men are falling behind and it would behoove society to take note and make changes. Others agreed (Fletcher, 2002; Gurian, 2001; Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Kleinfeld, 2009; Mortenson, 2006; Sax, L., 2008; Sommers, 2013; Sum et al., 2003; Tyre, 2008).

**Implications**

Persistence is a complex phenomenon. As shown in this study, much of it depends on the strength of factors outside of the purview of the institution. Still, this study affirmed institutional factors. For one, there are a myriad of benefits in encouraging and facilitating student engagement for both males and females, in an expansive extra-curricular program. One vital component of an extra-curricular program, especially in promoting male persistence, is a comprehensive intramural program. Both men and women participate in intramurals; however, it seems to more significantly affect males’ satisfaction. This, in turn, would embolden their persistence.

There are also tremendous paybacks in having a faculty committed to excellence and informal relationships with students. Both males and females referred frequently to the effect the relationships with professors had on their experience. The faculty who take the initiative in developing personal relationships with students received the highest praise. Institutions where the faculty makes strides to relate personally to all students, even freshman, will most likely improve their retention rates.

However, in the end, the students’ goals and inner drive, along with strong familial support, will have the final say in their persistence. There was no difference, by gender, in either
of these factors. Thus, anything a college can do to help the more vulnerable students establish concrete goals and value a college education could strengthen its retention rates. For example, when it becomes apparent that a student is academically at-risk, career counseling, with a goal-setting component, seems like a welcome addition to the typical academic help of tutoring, mandatory study halls, and remedial classes.

The most compelling implication is strengthening freshman advising particularly for academically weak males. Research is clear that advising is a core component of persistence (Tinto, 2012). Some studies have shown that intrusive advising is helpful for weaker students (ACT, 2010; Kuh et al., 2010). With males’ reluctance to seek help, it would behoove institutions to encourage their academic advisors to take more initiative, particularly early in the freshman year, when students are most vulnerable to attrition. Expecting male students to independently seek help seems problematic.

It would also seem beneficial for campus personnel, particularly coaches at the lower levels of NCAA athletics, to be practical. The chances are slim that their athletes will become professionals. Thus, being intentional in guiding their male athletes in goal-setting and career development could help them prioritize their positions as student-athletes and not just athletes.

**Limitations**

There are inherent limitations of all qualitative studies. For this particular study, the small sample size limits the scope of generalizability. Furthermore, the population is from a small, rural, private college with some very unique characteristics. Each type of post-secondary institution has its distinct blend of student populations, professors, opportunities, and experiences. Again, generalizing at too wide a range beyond the small, private college setting may not be prudent. Research is clear that institutional characteristics have an impact on
persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2012). Therefore, making too broad an assumption from one study, at a particular institution, with its unique characteristics, could appear presumptuous.

In their most recent pivotal work, *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted the limitations on persistence research. “Most of the research erroneously infers conditional effects from differences found between various subgroups [men versus women, Blacks versus Whites and so on] in the factors significantly associated with educational attainment” (p. 430). They added, “Simple chance sampling errors across independent samples can produce an artificial situation in which a variable has a statistically significant association with outcomes in one subsample but not another. More often than not, such differences are due to chance” (p. 430). For this particular study, admittedly, the findings may be circumstantial. They could merely be a window into a small group of participants at a select institution.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are few studies on persistence in higher education. Most retention research has focused on drop outs. With persistence being dissimilar from dropping out, it seems more research with students who have graduated, or will be graduating, would be helpful. Their insights and experiences are completely different than a second term freshman who is withdrawing. Because the research is so limited, both quantitative and qualitative designs, at a variety of institutions, would broaden our understanding of what helps students persist to graduation.

Some of the specific findings of this study warrant further research, particularly in male athletes and goal setting. With so much emphasis on college athletics, we are doing a disservice to our young men in not determining better practices in guiding their vocational futures apart
from athletics. With males’ persistence falling behind women, it is quite likely that some of this is attributed to athletes departing after they stop participating in their sport. More research on effective goal setting would possibly mitigate some of these effects.

A qualitative longitudinal study with a cohort of freshmen would also fit nicely. It could follow them through each semester, until they graduate. In the end, the researcher could compare differences in persistence factors between those who eventually graduate with those who departed during the duration of the study.

Additional research is needed in the area of roommate stress and how to better help women cope. With more women attending college, there will be less residential space. Females have no option but to learn how to better cope in a variety of living conditions.

Further study in the importance of freshman year advising seems appropriate. This study reaffirmed the abundant research on the importance of relationships with faculty in retaining students (Milem & Berger, 1997; Kuh et al., 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 2005; Tinto, 2012). The vast majority of the participants recognized the vital role of faculty in their persistence. However, admittedly, the faculty’s positive influence, for the most part, occurred during their junior and senior years. As a contrast, the freshman and even sophomore year relationship with faculty, according to the students, was weak. With informal relationships with faculty playing such a key role in persistence-to-graduation, it seems important to research the strength of these relationships during the very vulnerable freshman year. This is possibly a key component in strengthening retention in higher education.

**Summary**

This qualitative study unveiled important dynamics in the complex phenomenon of persistence-to-graduation. Although past research mentioned the positive influence of parental
encouragement, alongside goals and inner drive, it seemed to overlook the intensity of their roles in student persistence. The majority of these participants, regardless of race, SES, gender and GPA, were passionate in describing the combination of parental encouragement and their goals/inner drive for a college degree.

For the most part, in the more vital components of persistence, such as academic integration, social integration, and institutional factors, there was little difference according to gender. Both males and females attributed their persistence to a solid group of friends with similar values, involvement in extra-curricular activities, informal relationship with faculty, class attendance, and a balance between work and play. Most of them also admitted that the close relationships with faculty often did not arise until junior and senior years. The differences were more subtle yet important to note, none-the-less.

For example, more males tended to express academic regret over their freshman year academic endeavors. They readily acknowledge that playing video games, partying, or participating in varsity athletics were more of a priority than studying. Additionally, when possible hindrances to persistence arose, many of the women sought help either from tutors, academic coaches, or personal counselors. None of the men admitted to asking for help. One other difference, by gender, was the importance of athletics, either varsity or intramurals. More males than females attributed their persistence to playing a sport. Finally, males seemed less concrete in their career goals, while more of the females, with their specific career goals, had ambitions to go directly to graduate school or medical school.

In spite of seemingly small differences in persistence, by gender, there are implications for higher education. With freshman year being vulnerable, it seems it would be helpful for faculty and advisors to take more initiative in developing relationships with their students. This
is particularly true for academically weak males. In general, males will not seek help. Thus, a system that is more intrusive could salvage some of these male students’ academic careers. Also, assisting varsity athletic males to develop career goals could embolden their classroom endeavors. Too many athletic males, even in this study, put more emphasis in their sports that have no promise for a future rather than in the academics that are the pathway to a career.
References


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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Process

Initial recruitment notice on college website/student newspaper (Appendix B).

NO

Sufficient number of participants (at least 42)?

YES

STOP

Email (Appendix H) professors, coaches, and staff in order to make personal appeal to groups.

NO

Sufficient number of participants (at least 42)?

YES

STOP

Ask those who have agreed to participate for suggestions of potential participants.

NO

Email the students they suggest (Appendix I).

NO

Sufficient number of participants (at least 42)?

YES

STOP

Ask students that I know personally from my work at a local high school for suggestions

Email those students (Appendix I).

It is anticipated with a thorough navigating through all of these steps, there will be sufficient participation.
Appendix B

Information to Post on Institution Web Site.

**Subject Line** – Seeking Research Participants

Are you a senior in college? Are you between the ages 18 and 24? Would you like to receive at least one $10.00, 7-11 gift card while helping a doctoral student complete the research for her dissertation? You will also be adding your valuable insight into persistence in higher education. If you are interested, please read on!

My name is Karen Clark. I am a Bridgewater resident, and I am completing my doctorate at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. For my dissertation, I am studying differences, by gender, in persistence factors that lead to graduation from college. It is a qualitative study where participants will fill out a 5 minute demographic data collection instrument, participate in one, hour long, same-sex focus group and/or a 20-30 minute long individual interview. They will also be encouraged to respond to at least one follow-up email. All focus groups and individual interviews will be audio recorded. Your responses will be kept confidential and you can withdraw at any time. At the end of each focus group and individual interview, you will receive a $10.00, 7-11 gift card.

If you are interested, please go to: [https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/7MLQF6X](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/7MLQF6X) or contact me at karenclark1@verizon.net or (540)421-4476. Please contact me if you have any questions!

I look forward to hearing from you!

Karen Clark

Doctoral Student, Liberty University
Appendix C

Survey Monkey Contact Information Form

(https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/7MLQF6X)

**Directions:**

You are invited to take part in a study that is intended to identify differences, by gender, in persistence factors that lead to graduation from college. You were selected as a possible participant because you are poised to graduate this school year. Sharing insights from your college experience, through group and/or individual interviews, will be a great asset to the research. Additionally, you will be providing a significant and unique perspective for retention efforts in higher education.

As small thanks for your participation, all focus group participants and all individual interview participants will receive a $10.00, 7-11 gift card. Thus, if you participate in both a focus group and an individual interview, you will receive two gift cards.

Outside of knowledge of the primary researcher, who is unaffiliated with the college, your contributions will be confidential.

This study is being conducted by Karen L. Clark, a Bridgewater resident and a doctoral student at Liberty University’s School of Education in Lynchburg, VA.

If you are interested, please fill in the attached form. Also, feel free to forward this information to senior friends.
Please contact me if you have any questions: email: karenclark1@verizon.net or cell: (540)421-4476

Contact Form:

Basic Contact Information:
Name:
Email:
Cell:

Where do you reside?

On campus (which residence hall?)
Off campus (what town or city?)

What is the best way to contact you?
Email
Cell
Other (please specify)

Gender
Male
Female

**Anticipated month and year of college graduation:**

December 2014

May 2015

August 2015

After August 2015 (If you will graduate after August 2015, you are ineligible for this research)

**How old will you be when you graduate from college?** (If you are under the age of 18, you are ineligible for this study)

20

21

22

23

24

Over 24 (If you will be older than 24, you are ineligible for this research project)

**INFORMATION ON FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS**

In this section, you will list your preferred level of participation in this research.
The researcher will be conducting same-sex focus groups (2-3 groups of each gender) and individual interviews.

The one hour long focus groups will include 3-5 senior students.

You are welcome to form a group with 2-4 of your same gendered friends. It will help if each member fills out this form and indicates the plan for the group in the “other” category in the focus group section below. Please no less than 3 and no more than 5 in each group.

The current plan is to conduct focus groups over a two week span, beginning on Sunday, November 2, 2014 and ending on Sunday, November 9, 2014.

Individual interviews will begin at your earliest convenience.

You are welcome to participate in a focus group, an individual interview, or both.

Are you interested in participating in an audio-recorded, one hour long, focus group, on persistence-to-graduation from college, where your responses will be confidential? (You will be given a $10.00, 7-11 gift card at the conclusion of the group.)

Yes

No
If you are willing to participate in a focus group, what times are best for you, between Sunday, November 2, 2014 and Sunday, November 9, 2014? (Please check all that apply). (If you have formed your own group, indicate in the “other” section and “check” or add the times the whole group is available. Please encourage all group members to complete this form in similar fashion.)

Evenings after 8
  Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday

Afternoons between 3 and 5
  Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday

Other (please specify)

Are you interested in participating in an audio-recorded, 20-30 minute individual interview on persistence-to-graduation from college, where your responses will be confidential? (You will be given a $10.00, 7-11 gift card at the conclusion of the meeting.)

Yes
No

Thanks for your willingness to participate. I will be contacting you to schedule the meetings.

Feel free to inform your senior friends of this opportunity. You can direct them to this link:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/7MLQF6X

By all means, contact me if you have any questions!

If, after you state you are willing to participate, you change your mind, please contact me. I will immediately remove your responses in order to protect your confidentiality. There will be no negative consequences should you remove yourself.

Thanks again!!!

Karen Clark
Doctoral Student
Liberty University
karenclark1@verizon.net
(540)421-4476
Appendix D
Directions and Informed Consent Form

Gender Differences in Post-Secondary Persistence: A Phenomenological Study
of Traditional College Students
Karen L. Clark
Liberty University School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that intends to identify differences, by gender, in persistence factors that lead to graduation from college. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a traditional-age college senior who is poised to graduate during December, May, or August of this school year. If you are under the age of 18, you are ineligible for this study.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This dissertation study is being conducted by Karen L. Clark, doctoral student at Liberty University’s School of Education in Lynchburg, VA.

Background Information:
The purpose of this qualitative research is to identify recurring themes regarding persistence of traditional-age college students. It will use demographic information, focus groups, face-to-face interviews, and follow-up email questions for data collection procedures. This will provide insight to policy makers, administrators, and faculty to improve retention efforts according to gender. With the current gender gap in higher education being approximately 57% female and 43% male, this is an issue of interest.

Procedures:
If you agree to be a part of this research, you will participate in an audio-recorded same-sex one hour focus group and/or an audio-recorded 20-30 minute individual interview. The groups will take place on campus while the interviews will take place at a location of your choosing. During the group and interviews, you will also fill out a 5 minute demographic data collection instrument. Within 48 hours of the conclusion of the group or interview, I will ask you to respond to no more than two emails with follow-up questions. Either, I or a person not affiliated with the institution, will transcribe verbatim the interviews. Participants will be given a copy of the transcript to confirm the contents.

I will also analyze and code the interview and email data. When the research is analyzed and written up, I will send each participant a copy in order to insure that my analysis and conclusions are accurate.

The data may be used for future research projects, but no identifying data will be used in any publication, product, or future research that may extend from this study. All data will be stripped of any identifying information. I will assign pseudonyms to all participants.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

There is little or no risk to this study. It involves no more than the risk typically associated with group interviews, face-to-face interviews, or answering somewhat personal questions about persistence in an email. The benefit of the study is the satisfaction of contributing your voice and perspectives to current research. This could be of future interest to higher education administrators and policy makers as they tackle retention and the gender gap in higher education.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and I am the only researcher who will have access to the records.
• Pseudonyms will be given to each participant.

• Data with non-identifying data/pseudonyms may be retained indefinitely.

Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the use of technology. Although online data will be in password protected online files, the security of data transmitted over the internet cannot be guaranteed. Thus, there is minimum risk that the information will not be secure. However, this risk is no greater than that taken every day when sending and/or receiving information over the internet. Additionally, confidentiality will be encouraged in the focus groups, but there is no guarantee that information discussed in the focus group will not be shared outside the group by individual participants.

**Compensation**

Focus group participants will receive a $10.00, 7-11 gift card. Individual interview participants will receive a $10.00, 7-11 gift card.

**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 Bridgewater College or with your present or future course instructors. 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**

The participant will inform the PI that he or she wishes to withdraw. All data collected at that point will be destroyed by shredding and deleted from digital sources. All comments on a transcript will be deleted. If it is an individual interview, the audio will be deleted. If a group interview, after the transcription of only the remaining participant comments, the audio will be deleted.
Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Karen L. Clark. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me: (540) 421-4476 or karenclark1@verizon.net.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502, or email at irb@liberty.edu. You can also contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Anita Fauber, afauber@liberty.edu.

Statement of Consent:
I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. By signing this, I agree that I have read and understood this information.

(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.

Name (printed):____________________________________________

Signature: __________________________________________ Date: __________________
Appendix E

Demographic Data Collection Instrument

Name: _______________________________ Pseudonym (PLEASE LEAVE BLANK): __________________

Race/Ethnicity: _____ African American _____ American Indian _____ Asian American _____ Caucasian
_____ Hispanic American _____ International _____ Other _____ Prefer not to answer.

Current GPA: ___________ Major: ________________________________

How many years have you been at this institution? ______ Are you a transfer student? Y N

In what extra-curricular activities have you been active? (e.g. varsity athletics, intramurals, music, theatre,
student government, religious groups etc.) ________________________________

_____________________________________

_____________________________________

At any point in time did you take a break from pursuing your college education? Y N

Plans after graduation: ________________________________

High School GPA: _____ High School Rank: _____ Top 10% _____ 11-25% _____ 25-50% _____ < 50%

Approximate total Math/Verbal SAT scores: ___________ ACT score: ______

Approximately how many college credits did you have from high school (AP/DE)? _____

Parents’ marital status: _____ Married _____ Divorced _____ Never married _____ One/Both Deceased _____ Other

Parents’ highest education level:

Mother: _____ Did not graduate high school _____ High school diploma or equivalent _____ Some college
_____ Associate’s degree _____ Bachelor’s degree _____ Master’s degree _____ Professional degree _____ Doctorate

Father: _____ Did not graduate high school _____ High school diploma or equivalent _____ Some college
_____ Associate’s degree _____ Bachelor’s degree _____ Master’s degree _____ Professional degree _____ Doctorate

Parents’ household income:

_____ Less than $50,000 _____ 50,001-75,000 _____ 75,001-100,000 _____ Over 100,000

Are you claimed as a dependent on your parents’ taxes? Yes No

Have you received need-based financial aid? Yes No
Appendix F

Focus Group Guide

(Ideas taken from Krueger and Casey, 2000)

Date of Group: _______________ Place of Group: ________________________

Gender Make up of Group: __________________

Time Group Began: _______ Time Group Ended: _______ Total Length: ______

Person Conducting the Group: Karen Clark, Principal Investigator

Group Members and Pseudonyms: ________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

Opening Remarks:

Welcome and Thanks.

Purpose of the Focus Group – I am interested in your experience with persistence, or reasons for staying in college.

Confidentiality Reminder – Everything that occurs here is considered confidential. Please do not discuss the names of other participants with anyone outside this room.

Format – I have a list of open ended questions for which I would like to hear your thoughts. I would like to hear from each of you as it will improve the richness and diversity in my study. I will be audio-taping this group in its entirety. Your responses will be confidential. I, or a transcriber unaffiliated with the institution, will be the only ones who will hear this recording.
The recording will be destroyed after transcription and I will keep the transcription for three years in a locked file box in my home. I anticipate the group will last approximately an hour. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. You can contact me later if you have any concerns – karenclark1@verizon.net or (540) 421-4476. At the end of this meeting, I will give you a $10.00, 7-11 gift card.

Do you have any questions?

Can we get started? (Record Time: ____________)

Turn on Recording Device

Opening Question

Introduce yourself to the group – for example: hometown, major, what you’ve been involved in here at school, plans after graduation. Please share only your first name.

Tell us about something memorable in your college experience.

Think back to your senior year of high school: What drove you to come to college?

What has happened to these incentives during your college experience? Changed, strengthened, weakened, etc.?
**Key Questions**

How would you describe your own persistence-to-graduation story?

What has been the main thing driving you to complete your college education?

What does a college degree mean to you?

Fill in the blank – It if weren’t for __________________________, I would never have been able to graduate from college. (You can name more than one thing.)

How involved have you been, on campus, and what impact did that have on your persistence?

Tell me about your study habits, time management, organization, and their effect on your college experience.

Based on your experience, what are the strengths of this institution in sustaining your persistence?

Weaknesses?

Outside of the institution, discuss any situations or people who stand out as a positive influence in your persistence. For example, parents, friends, a job opportunity, etc.
Outside of the institution, discuss any situations or people who stand out as potentially hindering your persistence – example, a break-up, death of someone close to you, an accident, etc.

In thinking about anything that could have hindered your persistence, how did you overcome?

If you are a first-generation college student, please share its impact on your persistence.

What has been the most difficult part of persisting to graduation?

**Merely for Opinions Sake:**

What differences, if any, have you noticed between guys and girls in their persistence to graduation? Their attitudes about a college degree?

**Ending Questions**

Of everything that has been discussed, what stands out the most to you?

Is there anything else that we should have talked about, in the area of persistence-to-graduation or gender differences in persistence to graduation?
Is it acceptable that I email you in a day or two as a follow-up? At that time, if anything else comes to mind, please put your thoughts in a return email. As with everything else you have contributed, all responses will be kept confidential.

Are any of you willing to help me further by participating in an individual interview?

Thank you so much for your time.

Ending time of Group: _________________________________

Post-Interview Thoughts:
Appendix G

Individual Interview Guide

(Some items were adapted from Zabloski, 2010).

Name of Participant: ________________________ Pseudonym: __________________

Date of Interview: _____________   Place of Interview: __________________

Time Interview Started: __________ Time ended: __________ Interview Length: ______

Person conducting Interview: Karen Clark, Principal Investigator

Opening Comments:

Welcome and Thanks.

Purpose of Interview – to gather information regarding persistence factors during your undergraduate experience.

Confidentiality Reminder

Explain format – I will ask you a few open-ended questions regarding your experience with persistence during your undergraduate years. I expect this will last less than 30 minutes. This will be audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Your responses will be confidential. Only I, or a transcriber unaffiliated with the institution, will have access to this recording. I will provide you a copy of the transcript to verify its accuracy. The recording will be destroyed after
transcription and I will keep the transcription for three years in a locked file box in my home. At any time, you can remove yourself from this study.

**Do you have any questions?**

**Are you ready to get started?** (Record time)____________________________

**Turn on recording device**

________________________________________________________________________

1. Tell me about yourself. (Prompts: family background, interests, relationships, goals).
2. Tell me about your involvement on campus. (Prompts: organizations, teams, work, etc).
3. Tell me what a college diploma means to you. (Prompts: vocational goals, financial goals, academic goals, etc.).
4. How would you describe your own persistence-to-graduation story?
5. What has been the main force driving you to graduate from college?
6. What has your college experience been like for you?
7. What has worked well for you in persisting to your degree? (Prompts: academic behaviors like studying, being organized, talking to professors; social behaviors of being involved etc.).
8. What has not worked well? What were potential hindrances? (Prompts: not studying, not seeking help, etc.).
9. Tell me about a time you almost quit.
   a. How did you persevere through that season?
b. How did it feel to overcome?

10. Tell me about other possible detractors from your persistence. (Prompts: partying, discipline issues, failing a class, poor study habits, etc.).

11. How did family affect your persistence?

12. How did friends affect your persistence?

13. How did faculty/staff/coaches affect your persistence?

14. What role have finances, financial aid, and tuition hikes had on your persistence?

15. Describe the effect your involvement or lack of involvement, on campus, had on your persistence.

16. Describe the strengths of this institution in sustaining your persistence.

17. Weaknesses?

18. Is there anything you would like to add?

19. Is there a question I missed in trying to determine what propels or hinders students in their persistence to graduation?

20. May I email you within a couple days to see if you thought of anything else?

Once I create a composite summary of your interview as well as data analysis, may I send you a copy for confirmation that my summary and analysis is correct?

Time Interview Ended: __________________
Post Interview thoughts:
Appendix H

Email to Professors

Subject Line – Doctoral Student Recruiting Research Participants

I am completing my doctorate at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. For my dissertation, I am studying differences, by gender, in persistence factors that lead to graduation from college. Both the Bridgewater College and Liberty University IRBs have approved this research and my recruitment methods.

It is a qualitative study where participants will fill out a short demographic instrument, participate in one same-sex focus group, and/or participate in an individual interview. I am offering a $10.00, 7-11 gift card to each participant.

The recruitment information is currently posted on the college website. As can be expected, the response has been virtually non-existent. For that reason, I am contacting you.

If it would work in your schedule, I would like to make a short (5 minutes or less) recruitment presentation to your class. My target group is traditional-age seniors. If you do not teach seniors then this appeal, I suppose, is null and void. However, if you do teach seniors or advise groups where seniors are involved, and you are willing to open your group to my short appeal, I would appreciate the help. If you could, just let me know a couple of time slots this week, or next, that will work for you.

For your information, the initial recruitment form, to which I will send students, is: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/7MLQF6X . Feel free to look at it.

Thanks for any help or direction you can provide.

I look forward to hearing from you!
Very Sincerely,

Karen Clark

Doctoral Student

Liberty University
Appendix I

Email to Students Who Were Suggested as Possible Participants by Another Student

**Subject Line:** Seeking Research Participants

The reason I am emailing you is because another member of the college community suggested that you may be interested in participating in research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation. I hope you will read further because you could be a valuable resource for my research! Additionally, all focus group participants and all individual interview participants will receive a $10.00, 7-11 gift card. Thus, if you participate in both, you will receive two $10.00, 7-11 gift cards.

My name is Karen Clark, and I am completing my doctorate at Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. For my dissertation, I am studying differences, by gender, in persistence factors that lead to graduation from college. It is a qualitative study where participants will fill out a 5 minute demographic instrument, participate in one hour long, same-sex, audio-recorded, focus group, and/or participate in a 20-30 minute long, audio-recorded, individual interview. I will also send a follow-up email at the conclusion of both the focus groups and the individual interviews. Your confidential opinions and experiences could provide helpful insights for the institution to improve its retention efforts!

If you are interested, please go to this link: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/7MLQF6X. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. Please feel free to forward this email to any other senior you believe would be interested. I look forward to hearing from you!

Karen Clark, Doctoral Student, Liberty University, karenclark1@verizon.net or (540) 421-4476.
Appendix J

Email to Students Who Express Interest in the Study

Thanks so much for your interest in participating in my dissertation research on persistence factors. Your opinions and experience are so important to my research, and I value them greatly! I would like to invite you to participate in a one-hour long focus group with between 3 and 7 other seniors. The time and place are listed below.

Remember the information shared in this research will be confidential. Additionally, all focus group participants and all individual interview participants will receive a $10.00, 7-11 gift card. Thus, if you participate in both, you will receive two $10.00, 7-11 gift cards. This is my way of showing you how much I appreciate your time!

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions. I look forward to hearing more about your college experience!

Karen Clark

Liberty University

Doctoral Candidate

karenclark1@verizon.net or (540) 421-4476.

TIMES OF MEETINGS LISTED HERE
Follow-up Email to Students after Focus Group and Individual Interview

Again, thank you so much for participating in the focus group/individual interview for my dissertation. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your taking the time out of your busy schedule to provide such useful insight! Without you, I have no dissertation!

I have truly enjoyed hearing about your undergraduate experiences.

Since our meeting, I am wondering if anything else came to mind regarding your own experience with persistence. If so, please respond to this email – even if you have only one thought! I value whatever you can provide. Remember, your email and name will be kept confidential.

Again, thank you for participating in my research! Because of you – and only because of you – I can complete my dissertation!

Very sincerely,

Karen L. Clark

Doctoral Candidate

Liberty University
Appendix L

Power Point Used When Addressing Classes

Differences in Persistence by Gender

First off, I am Karen Clark:
- Doctoral Student at Liberty University, writing my dissertation.
- Wife of a guy who has survived with me for over 20 years.
- A local Bridgewater mom of two JMU students.

Why Am I Here Today?
- If you are a senior, between the ages of 18 and 24, who is graduating this year (Dec, May, August)

Qualitative Research Study

Is there a gender difference in factors that contribute to persistence to graduation?

What is YOUR persistence story?
EVERYBODY HAS A STORY

I would like to hear yours!

If you are a senior who would like to share your story:

• Are you interested in participating?
  • A one hour long, audio recorded, focus group?
  • A 30 minute, audio recorded, individual interview?
  • One? The other? Or Both?

Details

• I will come to you – on campus, off campus apartment, etc.
• It’s on your time and at your place of convenience.
• Each participant will fill out a short demographic information form.
• Each participant will sign an Informed Consent Form.
• I will send each participant a follow-up email.
• Everything shared will be confidential.

What do you get out of it?

• An opportunity to share your college experience story.
• An opportunity to contribute to retention research in higher education.

But wait!!! That’s NOT all!
More importantly

- You will get a $10.00, T-shirt Excel.
- If you participate in the focus group - $10
- If you participate in the individual interview - $10
- Add it up - if you participate in both - $20.

So What's the Next Step?

- Information about the research is posted on MY RE search has been approved by IRB IRB.
- Or just come go:
  - https://www.eurekamoney.com/OMLFAQS
  - Or have more with the information

Conclusion

- My JMU pilot group story

Questions?
## Appendix M

### Data Summary Table

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APPENDIX N

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