A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF DIRECT AND SYMBOLIC INPUTS INFLUENCING SENSE OF IDENTITY

Jonathan Lyle Butler

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The research describes a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological investigation of students’ perceptions of the reflected appraisals they receive from the college community regarding their behaviors. The study includes 11 first-year college student participants from the School of Education at Higher Matters University, a pseudonym. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to protect privacy. Data collection utilized focus groups with the sample in two groups, and semi-structured interviews with each participant. Both efforts were accurately transcribed. Observations of the students in the classroom setting served as a third means to gather data, focusing on students’ body language, appearances of comfort, engagement, and participation. Data analysis operationalized Moustakas’ (1994) qualitative, phenomenological strategies to thematically cluster data across participant responses. The themes were reduced to the essential meaning constructs common across the sample. Member checking gave participants the opportunity to check the transcript for accuracy and to provide comments on the transcripts as they desired. Lastly, auditing of the derived text was accomplished by select colleagues to ensure the accuracy and the descriptive veracity of interpretations.

Keywords: identity theory, perceptions, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism
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List of Abbreviations

Grade Point Average (GPA)
Graduate Assistant (GA)
Identity control theory (ICT)
Identity theory (IT)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP)
Social identity theory (SIT)
Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)
Structural symbolic interactionism (SSI)
Symbolic interactionism (SI)
United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Student retention, attrition, and persistence is a significant focus in higher education with a wide array of research emerging in the last 60 years. Much of the current literature owes its foundational assumptions to Vincent Tinto (1975) who, in addition to promulgating the idea of integration as a fundamental necessity for strong persistence outcomes, has continued to publish what many consider to be leading research (Tinto, 1993; 1999; 2000; 2004; 2007). Nevertheless, despite years of scholarly research, retention, attrition, and persistence continue to challenge the higher education community as it seeks to find a means to aid student success. One area of inquiry into retention, attrition, and persistence previously underserved in the literature concerns the perceptual encounters students have with the institution and its various communities.

Background

The social project of higher education continues to fail at retaining students to graduation (NCES, 2014). As a theoretical perspective, retention is the positive outcome of processes associated with the intersection between an institution and its students. Taking a generalized view, this relationship culminates in students’ persistent engagement with the college community. Factors associated with the student, such as student identity, and the student experience within the larger institutional community, all contribute to the achievement of the retention goal. With few exceptions, retention research has focused on outcomes to intervention, and not on the perspective generated by the student in his or her lived experience in the role of student.

The current phenomenological study examined identity based processes of role construction (Stryker 1968; 1980; 2007; 2008) as they are employed by students to create and
maintain viable, persistent, role identities (Burke 1991; Stets, 2006; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982; 1994). Identity in the proposed study is derived, in part, from students’ behaviors and their perceptions of themselves as actors responding to, and receiving feedback from, the college environment. The study is informed by what Burke (1991) refers to as the “feedback loop” of identity control theory (p. 837), a construct which has been the impetus behind much related literature into identity processes over the past two decades. The feedback loop is an internal processual element explaining how persons understand the perceived congruence or incongruence between the meanings they associate with their role-based behaviors and the inputs they receive regarding those behaviors (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets, 2006; Stets & Burke, 2000). Identity control theory (ICT) is an operative aspect of identity theory (IT) (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1982; 1994), both of which reflect thinking promulgated by researchers in structural symbolic interactionism (SSI) (Stryker, 1968; 1980; 2007; 2008) and symbolic interactionism (SI) (Blumer, 1969), all of which are amplifications of Mead’s (1934) conclusions on the construction of the self.

Retention outcomes are thought to be influenced by exchanges between the role-based identities of the student, as Stryker (1968; 1980; 2007) conceptualizes enacted roles, and the cultural and organizational identities of the institution. The study contemplated how students perceived various feedbacks they received from the college community, and how feedback affected their sense of identity in the role of student, evidenced by self-reported intention to persist in studies. Intent to persist has been variously studied as a retention predictor with often competing results (Concannon & Barrow, 2010; Haussmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012). The lack of consensus in these efforts has added a level of complexity to understanding persistence from the student’s viewpoint.
Situation to Self

As the principal researcher, I have served as an educational administrator with greater than two decades of experience in higher education. My tenure in administration has provided insights to the issues, problems, contexts, and opportunities facing education from a social, cultural, political, and practical perspective. My experiences inform my worldview as a Christian educator. The students I serve are of mixed ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds, with attributes that suggest difficulty in their transition to higher education. Finding a means to address the challenges my students face in their quest for an education has been a professional goal for most of my time in higher education.

From a personal perspective, the study of identity reflects an attempt to make explicit the seasons of my own journey in academia and in life, even if only to myself. I am profoundly influenced by the narratives people share about their lives, their families, their culture, and with their struggles in understanding the contexts of sameness and difference which they confront. Their narratives tell me so much about each of them, and ultimately help me to realize much about me. The most inspiring, affective, feelings-based narratives are those that people share about their understandings of, and sometimes their arguments with God. These resonate deeply with me as I continue to answer the primordial questions of who I am, why I am here, and how I respond to God’s call for me.

Problem Statement

The problem of the proposed phenomenological study is that attrition continues to infect the educative process as students drop out at increasing rates (NCES, 2014). Despite targeted efforts by institutions to intervene in the attrition equation, it remains unclear how the college community influences students’ decisions to remain engaged, or to withdraw from college.
Developing an understanding of the perceptual dynamics of student identity in the crucial
movement from childhood to adulthood, which is typified by the transition to college, can inform
policies supportive of inclusion and the intent to persist within the college community.

The abilities of educational and administrative praxes within culturally and symbolically
construed institutions to engage with students’ perceptions of their personal intuitively challenge
the social, political, and cultural contexts in which students interact with schools. Promoting
overall student success is a common goal throughout higher education. Nevertheless, outcomes
which respond to interventions designed to strengthen retention, while necessary elements in a
comprehensive student success plan, have been less than acceptable overall. Continued and
increasingly disappointing results in retention are evidenced by the growing attrition within the
entire project (NCES, 2014). In answer to the problems within the project, research offers
perspectives which deepen understandings of identity as a fundamental factor in an individual's
ability to enact a role. However, the focus on quantifiable outcomes has consumed the larger
part of research in retention, diverting research attention from the challenges students face at
constructing a successful role identity. Questions persist regarding students' perceptions of
identity negotiation in the transition to college, and largely have not been considered in academic
research. As a foundation to this study, students were prompted to offer an articulation of their
perceptions, thoughts, and feelings regarding their experiences as students.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how participants reported
perceptions of direct and symbolic inputs received from the community at large, and how these
situated perceptions influenced their individual sense of identity as a support to the effective
negotiation of the student role. Secondarily, perceptions were considered as a basis on which
students evaluate and interpret meaning, and may link to their self-reported intent to persist at the host university. In this research, perceptions were narrowly defined as the meaning-making, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the self which are the means for the participant to evaluate the intent of inputs from others in the social system. Intent to persist was considered as a derivative of students’ perceptions.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for educators and administrators in higher education as they strive to positively influence student attrition. The goal of retaining students to graduation is a central focus for educators throughout higher education. Moreover, the significance of the study extends to the student, whose hopes, dreams, self-concept, and self-esteem are inextricably contextualized by their experiences in the higher education environment.

Studies of factors pertaining to student success, where the outcomes serve to strengthen an understanding of the student, of operational strategies used by an institution, and of the practical strategies faculty employ to carry out the primary purposes of the institution, are important to the institution, to faculty, and to students, all as primary stakeholders. Moreover, perspectives gained in research endeavors are ultimately important to society at large. Maintaining efficient and effective educative processes ensures a citizenry prepared, in some senses, to meet the social, cultural, economic, and political challenges students will face. This study, by developing a view towards perceptual aspects of student identity in relation to their interactions with the institution, and to the community, can aid providers with the task of preparing students for the future by raising a discussion about the influence self-perceptions have on role congruence and students’ intent to persist.
Research Questions

The following research questions concern the transition of new college students to the academic environment framed this study.

**RQ1.** How do student participants report perceived and evaluated inputs they receive from the college community regarding their behavioral outputs in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student? The first research question (RQ1) asks participants to share their views on the experience of integrating to the college community. Thus, the question was interested in gaining an understanding of how students initially conceptualized the institution, their involvement therein, their internal preview of how they would feel as a student before they arrived on campus, and the effect of the inputs they received once they arrived at campus on their previously constructed viewpoints (see also Danielak, Gupta, & Elby, 2014). Moreover, the question was intentionally constructed considering the parameters of the “identity standard” (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 196) as an appropriate benchmark against which students regard their personal (with friends), cultural (with the institution), social (with peers), and performative interactions (with the curriculum and faculty) in the context of the standards of the institution, as a means to explore the liminal reaches of the emerging agency which consumes their search for self as a new student.

**RQ2.** How do inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as a student? Unlike the first research question, which examines what students had anticipated their life in university would be once they arrived, the second research question (RQ2) asked students to respond to the actual feedback they received from various constituents in the campus community. This question anticipated self-reports of the affective influence of “reflected appraisals” (Carter, 2014, p. 255) on their enacted role as a student, and how students’
self-perceptions interacted with the “identity standard” (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 196) as a means of articulating their internalized aspirations. The issue of emotions, as a category of response, comes to the fore as students responded to the identity challenges which arose from their responses to the appraisals they received (Carter, 2014).

**RQ3.** How do received and evaluated inputs, as “reflected appraisals” (Carter, 2014, p. 255) from the community, influence students' self-reported intention to persist as a student?

Research question three (RQ3) invited students’ conclusions regarding the congruence between anticipated perceptions of life in the campus environment versus their then current perceptions based on the inputs they received from the environment. Responses to RQ3 provided evidence of participants’ reactions to feedback received, and whether they were positively or negatively situated against the identity standard. Furthermore, responses to the question are thought to inform how students viewed their own intent to persist in school resulting from the emotional responses students made to feedback.

**Definitions**

1. *Retention* – In the context of education, retention is the outcome of keeping students in school (Hagedorn, 2012)
2. *Attrition* – Following Hagedorn’s (2012) clarification “The diminution in numbers resulting from lower student retention” (p. 6).
4. *Self* – The self is the “sum total of all a man can call his own” (James, as cited in Stryker, 1980, p. 22).
5. *Identity* – The “set of meanings” which describes “who one is” (Burke 2004, p. 7).
6. **Identity standard** – The set of meanings that are overarching descriptors of the self in a context (Stets & Cast, 2007).

7. **Feedback loop** – (Burke & Stets, 2009). The feedback loop in the context of identity theory refers to a construct with which individuals can determine consistency between their behaviors, the identity standard, and the inputs received.

8. **Behavioral outputs** - (Stets & Carter, 2011). A construct within the feedback loop that refers to the out-going actions a person makes.

9. **Inputs** - (Stets & Carter, 2011). The received evaluations within the feedback loop with which a person evaluates their outputs against normative expectations.

10. **The Comparator** - (Stets & Carter, 2011). The process of matching the received and evaluated inputs against the identity standard.

11. **Role** – Stryker (1980) explains roles as “the relatively stable, morphological components of social structure” (p. 54). It is the way in which a person operationalizes expected behaviors.

12. **Identity Verification** - (Stets & Carter, 2011). A feedback result in which one’s self–perception is congruent with the input received of the actual operation of the expected behaviors of the identity standard.

**Summary**

The preceding chapter identifies the variables of retention, attrition, and persistence as salient measures of institutional effectiveness within higher education. The discussion of effectiveness makes the point that American higher education continues to experience a high degree of attrition. The link between retention, attrition, and identity indicates the impact of
drop-out behaviors on students, but also begins to identify the influence a student’s identity negotiations can have on these outcomes measures.

The background and related discussion proceeds to the identification of the problem statement, which considers the effect institutional initiatives have on the students’ perceptions, an understanding of which can inform institutional practice regarding interventional and other prophylactic measures to support student persistence. This evolved into an explanation that the purpose of the study was to understand how students reported their perceptions, and considers that perceptions play a unique role in identity negotiation for new students at a crucial moment of transition. The significance of the proposed study was presented and included considerations on the effects of attrition on both the institution and the student, understanding that an informed view of students’ readings of the social and institutional climate can aid practitioners in the task of developing and engaging a fruitful educational environment.

Finally, the chapter gives way to the research questions which consider students’ perceptions of the community against their own pre-assessment of what college life would be like. The research relies on phenomenology to contextualize the analysis of students’ self-reports of their experiences in the community. The study makes use of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups as means to gather insights to students’ conclusions through a multi-modal process.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

Chapter two is organized in a manner consistent with the desire to present the theoretical frame on which the study is conceptualized. This incorporates an introduction to identity as a theoretical construct, leading to a discussion of the theoretical frame. The study finds its footing in symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980), and identity theory (Burke, 1991), both of which are considered in the narrative. A synthesis of identity construction with the processes of phenomenology is undertaken to ground identity as a fundamental consideration of phenomenology. Thereafter, the chapter presents an overview of retention and attrition perspectives as they relate to the processes of identity construction and negotiation among first-year university students.

The wide range of research activity contained in the literature serves to extend understandings of the many factors and challenges facing both the student and the institution as they confront the reality of student retention and attrition. Despite this increased understanding, retention, student engagement, and student success continue to challenge institutional practice. Research on interactions between the institution and the student remains relevant for suggesting efficient areas of institutional practice that can impact student retention. However, while it is important to understand the range of initiatives and outcomes on retention which are attributable to institutional intervention based on past and continuing research, the fundamental limit to the range of theoretical efforts which measure outcomes is that they divorce the perspective of the student from the process. Thus, while much of the current research is adept at telling researchers what happens, that research often fails in providing an adequate understanding of why measured outcomes occur.
Retention of students is a fundamental goal of higher education institutional practice commonly referring to the persistence of new students through graduation. The inverse to retention is attrition, expressed as the rate at which students leave a program of study. Retention and attrition impact the institution in terms of revenue, both from earned tuition and from subsidies, and the effects of retention and attrition affect measures such as sense of belonging and community cohesiveness, quality, and market profile (Kalsbeek & Zucker, 2013; O’Keefe, 2013). Thus, high attrition is detrimental to institutional health. More troubling than the institutional consequences of high attrition are the negative impacts that leaving school has on students. Per the United States Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014), less than 60% of students entering the 2006 cohort of new, first-term freshmen completed their degree requirements within six years. Accordingly, based on NCES data, better than 40% of students leave school prior to completion, that is, they drop out.

The consequences of students dropping out of school include financial stress, particularly for those with student loan burdens, and a more difficult time finding employment (Schneider & Yin, 2011). Moreover, the cohort of students who began college in 2002 and failed to graduate their bachelor’s degree program within six years, lost, according to Schneider and Yin, an almost four billion dollars in earned income. Schneider and Yin note that these “losses are for one year and for one class of students” (p. 2). Over a lifetime of lost earnings and achievement, the result is unsustainable and, intuitively, the effect is negatively palpable for the student and for society in general.

**The Theoretical Framework**

A deeper understanding of how institutionally derived interventions to curb attrition are received by students is important in characterizing the affect interventional undertakings have on
student perceptions conducive to persistence, particularly the perceptions associated with identity. For example, recent research by Danielak, Gupta, and Elby (2014), studying engineering student retention, argues that retention theorists have largely ignored epistemic areas of identity as proximate causes of student departure. As students face problems between their personal sense of “knowing and learning and the epistemic practice valued within the course” their level of interest wanes (p. 15). Thus, perception, as an epistemic variable, arises as a fundamental factor in student identity. Thereafter, the differences between students’ considerations of what life will be like for them in the college environment versus their actual experiences rise in importance, and provides an example of how perception invigorates the processes of identity negotiation and student persistence. Think for illustration of a student whose dreams of life in college are annulled by the facticity of an experience on campus that is incongruent with his or her hopes. The negative consequences which attach to the student who leaves school can be well imagined, and the sense of personal impact alone casts retention as a proximate challenge for colleges.

Researchers in identity theories come from a variety of academic traditions. Social identity theories seek to explain the individual in terms of who they see themselves to be. A prominent version of identity theory is social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) which describes how a person integrates in the social surround, and parallels the sociological version of identity theory explicated by Burke and colleagues (Burke, 1991). A further interesting example of social identity perspectives derives from Markus and Nurius (1986) and their exposition of possible selves’ theory. Markus and Nurius understand possible selves to be “the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats” (p. 954). These, the researchers explain, are “specific, individually significant” roles that are “intimately connected” (p. 954). In
some sense, possible selves are comparisons between the present self and the selves’ others hope to, or expect to occupy in the future. Additionally, the range of possible selves derives from the variety of socially significant interactions. Possible selves’ theory is intuitively a self-concept theory of the self.

Social identity theory, as clarified by Henri Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel along with Turner (1986), and possible selves’ theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), are grounded in the psychological aspects of human behavior. Conversely, sociological theories of identity, characterized by the work of Burke (1991) in identity theory, are a derivative of Blumer’s (1969) explication of symbolic interactionism, a micro-sociological perspective, and Sheldon Stryker’s (1980) forays into the influences of social structure on individuals -- termed structural symbolic interactionism -- which is grounded in a macro-sociological perspective. The various traditions use language that is terminologically distinct, while similarly representative of identity processes. This variable adds complexity to the discussion of identity.

In response to this terminological confusion, Anderson and Mounts (2012) suggest that identity theory generally, and identity control theory particularly, may benefit from a refinement of terminology. As an example, Anderson and Mounts refer to the term process, which they recognize to be evocative of a variety of events: “identity exploration, identity defense, and identity change” (p. 107). Anderson and Mount’s thinking challenges the assumption that identity change is a process at all, suggesting that change is simply an “outcome” of interpersonal “processes of the identity control system” (p. 107). Accepting that Anderson and Mounts premise has validity, Field’s (2013) notion that identity reconstruction is a result of identity change suggests that further process areas should be under consideration to explain responses to inputs within identity operations. More precisely, identity reconstruction implies
that an identity change previously occurred. The processes of identity change and identity reconstruction may explain how persons move away from an enacted role, or conversely, towards a role previously abandoned. In terms of student persistence, this thinking begins to ground how students negotiate the role of student, and for a host of reasons during their academic careers, set the role aside, perhaps returning to that role after a time.

Institutional signaling, or the symbolic communication inherent to the institution because of culture and reflected beliefs and values, is conceptually an integral part of students’ exploration and defense of the role they conceive they are to play as students. The dynamic processes of identity exploration, defense, and change echoes what Aten, Howard-Greenville, and Ventresca (2012) characterize as “linkages” between the institution and various aspects of culture and anthropology which describe “people and activity rich” interactions (p. 80). These intersections explore the ongoing process of “interpretation, sense-making, and struggles over identity and meaning” which typify the interactions between student and institution (p. 80).

Identity, however, is researched from a variety of often incompatible perspectives. For example, Mabel Berezin (2010) provides an insightful view of the inherent dualism of identity as a concept that includes the notions of “identify as”, indicating a “categorical and epistemological” dimension, versus the contrasting dynamic of “identify with”, to indicate the “ontological and emotional” context (p. 221). The essential difference, argues Berezin, is that identify as perspectives derive from social structure and the identities which are defined by those structures. For example, citizenship is a categorical dimension that is “legally fixed”, differing from the “contingent” characteristics of the ontological, or identify with, dimensions of identity (p. 221).
In concert with Berezin’s (2010) observations of these dimensions, the concept of student, as derived from social structure, is culturally embedded in the developed world as a means of formation, and is thus a categorical dimension. Additionally, the individual’s confrontation with the culturally constructed role of student becomes the ontological aspect of self which ties to emotional and cognitive self-identity. When students are ontologically engaged their “whole personality exists in their learning” (Matusov, von Dyuke, & Han, 2013, p. 42). Thereafter, the student, operationalizing the ontological role of student, engaging with the social construct of student, joins with others who are in similar circumstances. Intuitively, one may have a variety of thoughts and feelings about the socially constructed role of student, and although an individual is socially placed as a student – for example obliged to attend K-12 classes – the student may not personally identify with the role. Future research would be helpful at exploring the dualism between the ontological and epistemological aspects of the self as they relate to the role of student, and to retention parameters. Clearly, however, for the student to compellingly answer descriptive questions of self, an implied relationship need exist within that duality, as Berezin (2010) describes, albeit, the intersection may well be fraught with tension. The implications of intersectional tension as a factor in retention and attrition prompt significant questions about the role student identity plays in a successful academic experience.

To contextualize processes of student identity, the proposed phenomenological study reflects theoretical perspectives of role taking and identity. The theoretical framework on which the study is grounded allows the voice of the student to be raised centrally to the discussion. For these purposes, structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980), and the theories of identity explicated by Burke (1991) and colleagues construct the theoretical perspective from which the study proceeds.
Structural Symbolic Interactionism to Identity Theory

Sheldon Stryker (1980) conceptualized and began to explain structural symbolic interactionism citing William James’ assertion that the self is the “sum total of all that a man can call his” (as cited in Stryker, 1980, p. 22). Moreover, according to the frame, the self is derived from an individual’s interactions with other people and is its own “social structure” (p. 36). This conclusion is a retrenching to Mead’s (1934) sense that the “self, which is reflexive . . . can be both subject and object” (pp. 136-137); and further, “the self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure” (p. 140).

The concept of the self as a social structure interacting with other social structures is a centerpiece of structural interactionism. Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, and Schultz, (2012), argue that the interaction of social structures of varying sizes explains social interaction overall. The individual represents a small social structure and subsequent interaction with other socially structured individuals creates “relatively small and specialized networks” (p. 151). These networks exist in and among other social structures, all of which are referred to as “large, intermediate, and proximate social structures” indicating the level of influence they extend across the domain (p. 152). A large social structure affects a small social structure in fundamental ways. Large social structures are those of “race, class, gender, or nation” (p. 152) which can be actively thought of as creating formative domain assumptions in individuals. The effect of large social structures on other social categories derive from the macro processes which contextualize, or “serve as social boundaries” and have much to do with the opportunities individuals may enjoy within their domains (p. 152). The concept of town, hospital, prison, school, and so forth, describe “intermediate social structures” that, like large social structures, are “important social boundaries” serving a “gatekeeping” function to social opportunities (p.
On a more individually accessible level, one’s classroom, church group, and so forth describe “proximate social structures” (p. 152). These are the everyday interactions that people share, per Stryker, Serpe, and Hunt (2005), and Serpe and Stryker (2011) “within which persons enact role identities” (as cited in Merolla et al., 2012, p. 152). Within the context of education, the individual student’s perceptions of education as an interaction of peers, or as an interaction with the classroom, also describes a proximate social structure. The manner in which interactions in the proximate field are perceived determines how individuals perceive the institution itself, as an intermediate structure, and the project of education as a large, context generating social structure.

Within Stryker’s (1980) elaboration, people adopt and enact multiple roles, arranged hierarchically, and including, per Stryker, the “shared behaviors” that “define the positions” towards which various roles respond (p. 58). Reminiscing on Mead, Stryker (1980) suggests that role-taking, or the “process through which the self is built,” results from “taking the standpoint of others” (p. 37). Role identity is operationalized through enacted behaviors reflective of a person’s core values in concert with internal meaning constructs which reflect expectations of the social, cognitive, and emotional effects of successfully deploying the role identity. The resulting social interchange is apparent in the reciprocal roles, or “counter-roles” employed in group and dyadic interactions (p. 58).

The concept of a counter-role, explained by Stryker (1980), is evident in the assertion that there can be “no employer without employee, no mother without child, no professor without student” (p. 58). Thus, counter-roles describe necessary reciprocal relationships. The enactment of reciprocal roles involves interaction with “role based others” (Walker & Lynn, 2013, p. 153) through behaviors reflective of the expected and shared meanings which attach to
role descriptions. Role behaviors signify a person’s “occupancy of a social role” and constitute a “role identity” (Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012, p. 151). Role identities are expressions of the self which Stryker (2007) defines as “internalized role expectations attached to positions in organized sets of social relationships” (p. 1085). Again, the character of a role identity is representative of the group’s expectations for the type and quality of behaviors in a role.

Identity Theory

A significant perspective in understanding the interactions of individuals within the social community lies in the identity control system approach of identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980). Identity control theory (Burke, 1991) is grounded in the historical flow of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980), and provides insight into the growing understanding of the identity processes involved in understanding the self. Stryker and Burke (2000) acknowledge that there are two competing avenues of inquiry within identity theory. These avenues include Burke’s articulations of the internal processes, and Stryker’s reflections on the effect of social structures on behavior. Stryker and Burke refer to these as “instantiations” of structural symbolic interactionism that are different in nuance rather than in type (p. 285). For example, the researchers observe the tendency of the structural orientation contained in the more traditional approach of structural symbolic interactionism to forego the “internal dynamics of self- processes”, while the processual orientation embraced by identity theory “neglects ways in which external social structures impinge on internal processes” (p. 285). Accordingly, confrontations between macro and micro-sociological perspectives continue their prominence in the conflation of both perspectives.
**Identity defined.** Fundamentally, identity theory describes the self as “reflexive,” as able to understand itself as a social “object” with a status that is confirmed “in relation to other social categories or classifications” just as structural symbolic interactionism explicates (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 224). This description highlights the building blocks of identity, and aligns with Meads’ (1934) articulations of both the constructivist and processual aspects of the self. That the self is defined socially is taken as a privileged position of sociology and related systems of thinking, but the various approaches often uncover perspectives of the self that can be understood in differing contexts. Schutz’s (1970) perspective that experiences become “built up by sedimentation” in consciousness helps to clarify the forming of the social self as interactive with and accommodating of the already defined cultural meanings of the social arena in which a person is thrust (p. 56). Schutz clarifies: A person is “born into a world that existed before” his or her birth (p. 79), and are thus endowed with “the ready-made scheme of the cultural pattern” that exists in that community, and which are given as an “unquestioned and unquestionable guide” to all manner of social interpretation for that individual (p. 81). While one might make the argument that not all cultural phenomena are taken as unquestioningly as Schutz describes, the influence on the self as derived from cultural shaping is intuitive. Schutz’s description points to the socially based influences on a person’s constructions of who they believe themselves to be.

Moustakas (1994), discussing Husserl’s views on phenomenology, elaborates on the thinking that persons can know and be known by each other, not in the way one “experiences and knows oneself, but in the sense of empathy and copresence” (p. 57), underscoring the social structural interplay inherent in social relations which work to create and define persons’ identities to themselves and to each other. Moustakas offers the perspective that “in the back and
forth of social interaction” one can unearth “what is really true of the phenomena of interpersonal knowledge and experience” (p. 57).

In the sense that these are all representations of the building blocks of the self, a definition of identity emerges, as Burke (2004) argues, that describes identity as “a set of meanings held by an individual that constitutes what it means to be who one is” (p. 7) channeling Stryker’s (1980) earlier embrace of William James’ view. As persons interact with the social world, they undergo a continuous process of identity construction, negotiation, and reconstruction. Moustakas (1994) suggests exactly this, remarking that persons practice a continual “alteration of validity” which is prompted by and prompts a “reciprocal correcting” of their interpersonal interactive self (p. 57). Persons view themselves in relation to other persons and in response to “social structures” with which they interact (Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012, pp. 149-150).

Withal, the individual begins to internalize a self-view that represents who they perceive themselves to be as a member of the social system. The means in which an individual self, described in various social situations, characterizes the accretion of meanings which they associate to themselves is at once uniquely representative and entirely constitutive of their beliefs. Thus, identity, in the identity theory qua structural symbolic interactionist camp, is a reference to the “group based self” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286). The implication is that a person’s responses to a current group are ordered by a system of role expectations which become normative reference points for individuals in those systems, and thus normative to the person who adopts them in role play. Stryker and Burke (2000) explain: “Social roles are expectations attached to positions occupied in networks of relationships” (p. 286). Thus, the beginnings of the “identity standard” are explicated as derived from the “set of culturally prescribed” yet
personally held meanings, beliefs, and aspirations which describe one’s “role identity” in a social context (p. 287).

**Person identities: The identity standard.** Granting that the individual’s system of meanings making, beliefs, and aspirations locates them in specific role contexts, it is still necessary to uncover how these variables become embedded in the expectations one has in a social context. This necessity gives rise to the identity standard. To understand more fully what the identity standard represents, and as an example of how the identity standard works to further contextualize identity itself, Stets and Carter (2011) researched the “moral identity” (p. 193). The moral identity is an iteration of the identity standard and contains a “continuum of meanings” essentially from “moral on one end of the continuum, to immoral” on the opposite pole (p. 193). Other identity standards exist, organized similarly on a continuum of meanings, and include for example standards related to courage (Koerner, 2014). Koerner clarifies that these general descriptions of self are also referred to as “person identities” (p. 204). Stets and Cast (2007) argue that person identities are “tied to and sustain the self as an individual rather than sustaining the self in a role” (p. 523). This interesting point suggests that a person identity can be conceived of as the individual’s fundamental, internal self-elaboration of who they are, but only in the context of the identity standard and in response to an affective social context. According to Burke (2004), person identities are “independent of roles or group memberships” (p. 9). Thus, person identities form a tripartite view of identity which includes in addition to the person identity, the role identity and the group identity, all of which can be simultaneously “activated” in a situation (Carter, 2014, p. 249).

**Social identities.** Carter (2013), clarifying an iteration of an identity standard, provides the example of an individual’s inclusion in a specific community, such as a community of faith.
The associated identity standard is put in play as a person of a particular faith enters a relevant place of worship. Inclusion to a relevant group creates a “social identity”, or group identity, and describes a person’s definitions of self because of membership in that group, evidenced for example by one’s inclusion in an associated prayer group (p. 204). Exactly how many identity standards (person identities) and social/group identities one may occupy is related to their social, cultural, and personal interactions. Additionally, a person “activates” a role-based identity in response to the norms associated with a group through their social identity, and in response to the identity standard amplified in the context of group expectations (Carter, 2013, p. 204).

**Role identities.** The means a person uses to display or “activate” the internal self-descriptive analogy is referred to as a “role identity” (Carter, 2013, p. 204). Role identities are shaped by the environment in which the role is enacted, and by the identity standard. Stets and Cast (2007) explain that role meanings are “partly derived from culture and the social structure” yet retain the influence of the individual’s perceptions of the meanings of the role (p. 523). Stryker and Serpe (1994) observe that identities are arranged in a “hierarchical” system that locates the most important identities towards the top of the hierarchy (p. 17). These identities are most likely to be activated as a function of their “identity salience” (p. 18), simply, because they are more important to the individual. For example, one’s behavior within the role of mother may be more easily activated when a child interacts with a mother, than another role that is not described by the interface of a mother and her, or even another’s child. When a role is selected from the hierarchy and put into play, that role is “activated” (Carter, 2014, p. 255). Carter explains that an identity is “activated when situational meanings match the meanings of an identity” (p. 255). As a person enacts the activated identity their perceptions of “reflected appraisals” -- responses from reciprocal relationships -- come to the fore as controlling elements
Identity Control Theory

The control system of identity control theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Burke, 1991; Stets & Carter, 2011) centers on a processual implementation of goal-directed activities by the individual. These processes are directed by the individual’s evaluative conclusions of responses from the community through the mechanisms of identity control theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). The primary functional construct in identity theory is the “feedback loop” (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 196), also called the “identity control loop” (Carter, 2014, p. 247). The function of the feedback loop is to determine if the meanings incorporated in the identity standard are consistent with the inputs one receives about their behavior in a certain situation (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The feedback loop incorporates five components that work together to provide a means for an actor to understand and respond to social inputs (Stets & Carter, 2011). These components include: “The identity standard” (containing the meanings of the identity), “output”, referring to one’s role based behaviors, the “perceptual input of meanings from the situation” received by the person from others, “including how persons think others see them, a comparison between the inputs one receives and the assumptions of the identity standard, known as “the comparator”, and the person’s response to the inputs which are generated in “the emotions that immediately result from the comparison process” (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 196).

The feedback loop in practice. Once an identity is activated, persons’ display behaviors that carry “meanings consistent with the identity standard meanings” (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 197). An “activated identity” is one in which a student operates in his or her interactions within a contextualized environment; in this case, the activated identity is apparent in the role of a
student (Carter, 2013, p. 249). The behaviors which respond to the identity should link to “wherever one’s identity meanings are situated on the continuum” of meanings contained in the identity standard (p. 198). If perceived inputs regarding behavior vary from stored identity meanings, a disequilibrium occurs, and this prompts an “error signal” indicating to the person that a “discrepancy” is present between the group’s expectations for behavior within a role, and the person’s execution of the role (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 199). A strong tendency exists for a person to remove discrepancies attached to inputs that diverge positively or negatively in either direction from the identity standard.

Alternately, when “reflected appraisals” (Carter, 2014, p. 255) match the expected behaviors of the identity standard, “identity verification” occurs (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 199). In student / institution dyads, behaviors can be “verified” based on their congruence with the criteria inherent to the institution, and the beliefs, values, and meanings contained in the person’s identity matrix (p. 196). Institutional criteria include behavioral standards implicit in the requirements of the various communities, as interdependent social structures, that make up the institution. Hence, Norton (2014) suggests that “social environments are structured by the performances of others” (p. 172), albeit, interactively contextualized by what are conceived to be often competing responses from varying social structures, including the individual, which comprise the institution. Practically, a student’s behaviors reflect his or her interpretation of the requirements of the social situation in concert with institutional measures, such as engagement standards, class attendance, and achievement measures, or grade point average (GPA), for example, or in the quality and types of responses the individual student receives from other students, faculty, and staff, which become the means to verify one’s identity. Once the student actor receives reflected appraisals from the community which suggest that behaviors are
congruent with the normative expectations of the institution and with their internalized identity standard, the behaviors in question are affirmed as meeting the group’s requirements.

An important perspective to consider, which was elaborated in Stets and Carter’s (2011), conclusion that identity standards exist on a continuum, is that a person occupies a point within the effective range of the identity standard which represents their relative position on the continuum of meanings for that identity standard. Using religion as an example, a person may be more or less religious than the normative social expectations for one’s enacted role behavior in a religious context or situation. A self-description of one’s religious self indicates the point occupied on the identity standard’s continuum of meaning, which ranges from not very religious to extremely religious. In other words, one defines his or her religious self within certain individualized parameters. These parameters may or may not be consistent with those of the group within which that person exists. Thus, behaviors may engender responses from the community which can be positive or negative. Positive responses indicate that my behavioral outputs are normative and expected, and negative responses indicate that the output behaviors are divergent in either direction on the continuum from the point occupied on the identity standards range of meanings.

Identity control theory argues that negative responses to role behaviors, which indicate imbalance in an embraced identity standard, serve to move the actor back to the stasis of the identity standard, and generally refrain from engaging in scenarios wherein future responses are negative (Burke, 1991; Stets & Carter, 2011). Accepting that a person has the normative tendency to remove dissonance by complying with role expectations, consider that, in some cases, the opposite may occur, and a person’s response to the lack of social acceptance inherent in negative feedback can result in role and/ or identity abandonment.
Burke (1991) characterizes identity abandonment as an identity interruption which derives from a break in the feedback loop. The feedback loop can be broken at the “point where the output (behavior) enters the environment” (p. 840), after which role behaviors fail to produce inputs either verifying or failing to verify the identity standard. In these cases, an individual’s behaviors may have little or no effect on how others “behave towards, label, or treat him or her” (p. 841). When the individual’s negotiation of role behaviors does not produce adequate feedback the person is likely to experience low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and a change to the identity because the identity standard is “no longer applicable” (p. 841). One iteration of this construct is discussed by Musolf (2009), who notes that the “meanings of objects emerge and change” as we engage with social objects (p. 317). Thus, all social reality is in a state of redefinition, of transformation (see also Moustakas, 1994). With Musolf’s (2009) perspective, a student that receives negative feedback -- in terms of the identity standard, non-verifiable feedback -- may adjust behavior towards the accepted norm, redefining the parameters of the operationalized role, or alternately give up, or transform, the role identity.

**Emotions within the feedback loop.** Emotions, as a category affecting identity, have surfaced repeatedly in theories of identity, both because of processes affecting the individual and as operationalized responses to interaction (Stets & Tshushima, 2001; Conway, DiFazio, Mayman, 1991; Thoits, 1984, 1990). Stets and Tshushima (2001) observe that “negative emotion reflects a general incongruence of input” as those inputs relate to the point a person occupies on the continuum of meanings associated with the identity standard (p. 284). More recent work by Coleman and Williams (2013), speaking from the social identity camp, proposes that “discreet emotions can be internal to the knowledge structure of a social identity” breaking from the traditional position that emotions exist outside of these self-descriptive knowledge
structures (p. 204). Concluding that, while emotions typically have been thought to affect the
“identity performance feedback loop”, it is likely that the identities themselves are directly
“associated with what-to-feel emotion profiles” (p. 216). This suggests that specific emotions
are an intrinsic part of operationalizing any specific identity. The proposition that identities are
associated with discreet emotions – perhaps socially acceptable versus unacceptable emotional
behavior – is an interesting idea worthy of further study.

Carter, (2014) argues that emotions are the primary means of behavioral control. When
an individual behaves in ways that are incongruent with their internal identity standard, they
experience negative emotion. Carter refers to this as a “disruption in the control loop” (p. 256).
Thus, the feedback loop results in a dissonance between behavior and an individual’s perceptions
of reflected appraisals against their identity standard. The decision to transform a role is thought
to be based in part on the emotions associated with continuing the role (Stets & Burke, 2014).
When inputs referring to a persons’ behaviors in a role remain consistent with self-evaluations,
they will generally “feel good” when evaluations are positive, however, generally negative
feelings will occur “following negative evaluations” (p. 388). Notwithstanding, it intuitively
seems that persons have the capacity to absorb both positive and negative reflected appraisals in
some senses. The decision to “trust and accept” evaluations rather than “distrust and refute
evaluations” seems to occur when these evaluations are in a person’s generally acceptable range
for positive and critical evaluation (p. 388), and when “situational meanings are relevant” for the
continued elaboration of the role (p. 389).

Stets and Burke (2014) look further at this range, questioning when overly positive
evaluations cause a person to devalue the received feedback. The researchers concluded that
overly positive evaluations, while helpful in moderation, cause negative emotional responses in
the individual (p. 401). Thus, when characterizing positive reflected appraisals, “a positive discrepancy” occurs when reflected appraisals exceed relevance for the context, and the discrepancy “will be distressing” (p. 406). Considering these findings, when responses received by an individual to their output behaviors are not consistent with self-views of the relevancy of their behaviors, positive or negative emotions occur. Further, these discrepancies are distressing and may lead to role transformation. In the current study, an outcome of negative emotional response to overly positive or negative feedback may very well attach to a diminishment of a student’s confidence in his or her capacity to integrate to the community. As Stets and Burke (2014) observe, “discrepancy effects can only take place when people retrieve from memory information about who they are and then compare the perceived feedback to that information” (p. 407). Emotions come forward as a proximate variable in forming a student’s perceptions of their abilities to sustain the role, and thus contextualize their intention to persist.

One iteration of an identity standard which retains interest in the current study is that of an aspirational identity standard. Little empirical research addresses the concept of an aspirational identity construct, either in social identity theory, or in identity theory. Aspirations have been raised to prominence in the literature involving cultures of poverty (Camfield, Masae, McGregor & Promphaking, 2013). Many of these perspectives arise from Oscar Lewis’ (1988/1966) treatment of poverty and concern the discontinuity of aspirations between those who experience plenty and those who are in persistent poverty, with many researchers agreeing about the negative effects of poverty on aspirations. Elster explains that people have “psychological mechanisms” that allow them to “reduce the dissonance between their aspirations and their reality by reducing their aspirations” (as cited in Camfield et al, 2013, p. 1054). The observation suggests but does not name the existence of an aspirational identity standard. The aspirational
identity is conceptualized herein to contain meanings, values, and beliefs existing on a continuum, as Stets and Carter (2011) argue for other principle identities. Realizing that people adjust their aspirations based on their realities infers an aspirational identity standard that is both directive and reflexively adjustable based on positive or negative inputs which arise from their interactions within the reciprocal role of student. In this conceptualization, aspirations are resource dependent, and as psychological resources – such as positive reflected appraisals – diminish, aspirational identities intuitively suffer as well if not in the fact of the aspiration, at least in the capacity of the individual to achieve those goals. As an aligned example, negative impacts to aspirations are apparent in the struggle middle-class families’ face as they attempt to send their children to college. Napolitano, Pacholok, and Furstenberg (2014) suggest that upper and upper-middle-class families are better able to craft the transition from secondary school to post-secondary school, but “working- and lower-class families” with like aspirational goals for their families “lacked the knowledge to navigate the passage from secondary to tertiary education”, clearly indicating a link between economic resources and aspirational capacity (p. 1203). While the reality of both psychological and economic resources on aspirations may clearly be apparent, however, the link between aspirations and self-reports of an intent to persist in the college community is not as apparent a variable in retention and attrition.

It is understandable that individual identities are influenced by emotions, but what of the accepted emotional matrices of larger social structures? Kuppens, Yzerbyt, Dandache, Fisher and van der Schalk (2014) indicate that group emotions are related to “an open-ended measure of group-based appraisals” rather than on individual emotional response (p. 1375). The theorists observe that while most models predict emotions to occur following appraisals, they found that emotions at the group level preceded appraisals. This interesting result adds context to questions
of the effect of identity structures on emotions. In the context of a student community, it is possible to suggest that membership in the group contextualizes acceptable emotional response. Thereafter if an individual within the group exhibits emotional responses to appraisals which lie outside the expected and accepted normative emotional range, that person is in danger of moving away from or being removed from the group. This assumption adds an interesting context to the question of intent to persist. Moreover, the notion that group-based emotions precede both appraisals from the community and the individual’s emotional response to those appraisals adds credence both to the role of social structures on individual identity, as Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, and Schultz, (2012) explain, and to Coleman and Williams (2013) suggestion – both cited earlier – that emotions are an intrinsic part of the very structure of a social identity.

**Related Literature**

An impressive array of academic literature has been devoted to the study of retention (Astin, 1975; Bean, 1980; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Berger & Lyon, 2005; Lehr, 2004; Longden, 2006; Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009; Panos & Astin, 1968; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Spady, 1971,), with much of the research in the last 40 years evoking perspectives derived from the thinking of Vincent Tinto (2007; 2004; 2000; 1999; 1993; 1975). Tinto is a foundational figure in retention studies, basing his approach on student integration to the college community. Nevertheless, Tinto’s thinking has changed over the past 40 years, reflexively responding to the changing environment in which current student populations exist. Tinto (2007) remarks that the early years of retention studies focused on attributes of the student, but “shifted to take account of the role of the environment, particularly the institution” as a reason for the student to persist or discontinue their participation (p. 2). The shift includes a move away from “blaming the
student” (p. 2) to the view that integration and interaction are proximate to successful retention, acknowledging that the effort to engage students includes targeted initiatives by the institution.

A fundamental issue raised by Hagedorn (2012), suggests that a part of the problem of managing retention begins with an inability to accurately define retention. Defining retention continues to be difficult for researchers; despite the clear implication that keeping a student in school until graduation is the preeminent institutional goal. A large part of that difficulty, argues Hagedorn, lies in the varied trajectories students follow towards their educational goals. Hence, a student who drops out may not remain out of school, even though they are counted in the inverse measure of retention, that of attrition. The same student may return, transfer, or select a different program in his or her quest for an education. When thinking about retention and attrition, the variety of experiences students present to the educational community, in terms of their highly-individualized pursuit of personal goals, creates a difficulty in definitional clarity which clouds the practical responses of institutions.

An associated term in the lexicon of retention theory is persistence, an indication that students are continuing enrollment in their chosen educational program. To clarify the distinction between the terms retention and persistence, Hagedorn (2012) adopts the United States Department of Education’s differentiation between the terms wherein “retention” is seen “as an institutional measure” and persistence measures continuing student attendance (p. 85). In that view, the college or university retains its students, and the student maintains his or her enrollment. Here, however, there is little shared responsibility for the outcome. The institution is presumably interested in maintaining census, and the student is concerned with attaining personal goals. These understandings may often be competing from a practical standpoint, driving a measure of terminological opacity. Persistence is commonly used in a manner that
captures the sense that students remain in school, are engaged, and academically succeed. In other words, from the institutional mindset, they graduate.

Robert Reason (2009) suggests that ambiguity exists, as is inferred above, when students’ goals differ from the institutional standard of persistence to graduation. Reason highlights the implied insufficiency of current institutional usages of persistence as a term indicative of student success by arguing that although a “student may successfully persist” to the achievement of the student’s goals, the difference between student and institutional goals may thwart the institutional effort at graduating the student (p. 660). With that in mind, the necessity arises for institutional environments, services, and curriculum to be constructed in a manner that allows students to come to school to reach proximate goals, leave for a time to pursue associated goals, and return to complete their degrees as secondary, and perhaps tertiary goals become once again salient. At stake in this reimagined type of student trajectory is the veracity of the current means of validating and measuring what is acceptable persistence and what can be considered respectable retention.

Despite the many years of research on matters of retention, and in the face of countless institutional attempts to provide interventions designed to reduce student departure, higher education continues to experience student attrition. These efforts reflect the thinking that problems with student attrition result from institutional abilities to engage the student (Pearson, 2012; Russo-Gleicher, 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Terrion & Daoust, 2011-2012; Turner, 2014). This is an interesting directional observation, suggesting that it is the institution which must engage the student, rather than taking the view that the student must engage with the institution. However, engagement is an outcome, as is disengagement, of a host of other
variables. It is somewhat futile to address student engagement without addressing antecedents which may describe causality within the engagement category.

Institutional efforts to reduce attrition have addressed operational areas of practice such as curriculum construction (Baxter, 2012), highlighting the importance of in-class experiences as a precursor to identity formation. Baxter, for example, describes new design characteristics of curriculum used to transport students through a degree program in distance learning. Baxter notes the link between commitment and the creation of a student identity, explaining that commitment to a constructed identity “indicates the degree to which levels of persistence and resilience” enter into students’ experiences (Baxter, 2012, para 3). Commitment has been previously researched by Stryker and Serpe (1982) and by Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, and Schultz (2012), among others, working within structural symbolic interactionist perspectives, noting that commitment is a variable that influences role stability, in agreement with Baxter (2012). Merolla et al. (2012), explain that the salience of a role identity is a measure of commitment, acknowledging that the greater importance a role has among all roles in an identity hierarchy, the greater the “likelihood that an individual will invoke a given role in particular situations” (p. 151). Aligning with that explanation is the notion that the fact of a student’s persistence at school is a demonstration of his or her commitment to the role of student.

**Retention and Identity**

Research about experiences outside the classroom demonstrates that community-based activities foster a strong sense of community (Elkins, Forrester, & Noel-Elkins, 2011). In addition, student-faculty interactions continue to be an area of investigation (Komaraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010; Pascarella, 1980), and useful perspectives have developed from that research. Though not specifically causal, per Fontaine (2014), these efforts have been
shown to correlate with moderate positive results at strengthening retention numbers. Granting that the institution has a significant role at crafting a culturally and symbolically engaging environment, research on the role of student perceptions, identities, and identity based behaviors as mediating factors to retention remains a promising area of inquiry.

The focus on perception and intention has not always been included in the research efforts of retention practitioners over the years, as they have focused more particularly on institutional initiatives which can then be measured as outcomes (see Spittle, 2013). Outcomes-based research measures the effects of interventions on observed problems thought to be causal to attrition; outcomes research does not, more precisely, address the effects of interventions on students’ views of their identities within the institution, nor does it address how effective identity negotiation might be a factor in student persistence. Thus, a dichotomous situation is created with the institution and institutional goals on one well researched pole, and the student as an inhabitant of an opposite less considered pole. Research has largely focused on institutional aspects of retention; however, it is equally important to hear the voice of the student regarding issues of retention in concert with a view towards the efficacy of the interventions colleges employ in support of persistence, prior to creating policy that may influence students’ lived experiences within the context of their institutional existence.

Although retention has been studied over better than the past half century, the components of the student community have changed substantially in that time. McCray and McHatton (2010) observe that the “ethnic and racial composition” of the United States will continue to change “at a remarkable pace” (para 1). The change in demographic composition presents challenges resulting from interactions of cultural, religious, and both social, and personal identities. These challenges are no more evident than in the classroom, as the
intersectional impacts of “cultural scripts” take their toll on students and on their identity construction (Ukasoanya, 2014, p. 153). Cultural scripts include the verbal and non-verbal communications operationalized around embedded assumptions, as Goddard (2012) explains, that include a person’s “presumed stance in relation to sameness and difference” (p. 1039). In this way, cultural scripts are an example of the symbolic representations of cohesive groups.

As socio-cultural projects, educational institutions prompt confrontations to perceived differences between people and groups while providing educative experiences both within an individual and between individuals. Equally, institutions as social structures typically represent the emplaced symbolic contexts of “dominant cultural standards” (Ukasoanya, 2014, p. 153) which define life categorically within the social milieu. As the demographics of the United States continue to diversify, student communities will likely sustain a mix of traditional, campus-based, residential students along with those who choose to study in online, in hybrid courses, and in other yet undeclared delivery formats. Multiple delivery methods ensure that various audiences can be served; however, institutional actors must be prepared to address the concerns associated with an increasing variety of student factions. Moreover, as the demographics of student populations continue to evolve, they incorporate not only greater percentages of minority students, as McCray and McHatton (2010) observe, but also a larger percentage of lower socio-economic students. While this trend has offered increased access to educational experiences for marginalized groups, it fails to represent equity of access to the vast array of educational offerings enjoyed by the larger community.

Despite the growing cohort of diverse students to the college classroom, Simmons (2011) remarks that “only a fraction” of lower socioeconomic students attend upper-tier American colleges and universities, adding credence to the notion that an access gap continues to plague
education (p. 210). Simmons observes that this access gap is, at least in part, a function of social capital which differs between socio-economic, racial, and ethnic classes, adding to perceived differences between various classes. Simmon’s observation contextualizes the complexities facing college administrations working to provide a successful transition for students of diverse backgrounds. The transition to college becomes a particularly compelling topic because colleges often symbolically reflect dominant social and cultural class distinctions generally attracting members of the representative class, yet as diversity increases intersectional conflict may increase as well.

Class-based distinctions add to the fundamental disequilibrium in institutional access for members of diverse classes. Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) explain that a tendency exists among members of social classes to construct social “firewalls” as protective class-based strategies to reduce “cross-class anxiety” that occurs as members of various classes interact (p. 687). As an example of these firewalls, Sanders and Mahalingam (2012), in a qualitative study investigating class-based privilege and a person’s likelihood to enter class-based discussions, suggest that in multi-class discourse, persons from the upper class tend to “distance themselves from their privileged position” (p. 123). This suggests a sense that “taboos” are in place about discussions of social stratification that “silence conversations about social class” (p. 123). The inability to speak representatively across class boundaries intuitively reinforces class divisions and detracts from retention efforts in increasingly diverse campus communities. Lee (2013) observes that upper-tier schools have “long been associated with socioeconomic reproduction” marketing and attracting those with backgrounds of privilege despite claimed efforts by the same institutions to diversify on-campus populations (p. 786). Continuing research on the effects of class-based identity interactions is desirable, particularly regarding the retention of students within various
social classes in mixed class populations. Finally, the variety of concerns diverse populations place before the institution challenges long-held assumptions about what works to support the retention and education of students, casting retention praxis as a fluid and continuously evolving social project.

Emerging Research

There are notable exceptions in retention research that put identity processes on center stage, and which point to emerging trends in the field. For example, Allen-Collinson and Brown (2012), in a compelling qualitative study, investigated identity negotiation among first-year students in the United Kingdom specifically related to their Christian and “jock” identities, reiterating in conclusion the importance of peer interactions at supporting retention, but also providing the sense that categories of difference are impactful to individuals and to the goal of retention (p. 499). Similarly, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010) examined working-class identities of students in higher-level institutions regarding their perceptions of whether they felt they had integrated with the community. The conclusions in that study pointed to the “inequitable experiences” that persist as students’ cross class barriers (p. 120). Both outcomes can be understood as factors involved in a student’s intent to persist. These studies lend credibility to notions that student identity is an essential element of persistence, and that raising the voice of the student into the retention debate are both complementary perspectives having merit for the field.

This research is attractive on several levels; (a) the gap in the research which Spittle (2013) highlights -- i.e., the paucity of qualitative research on factors supporting student persistence -- presents an occasion to ask questions that may lend important perspectives to the literature, (b) the opportunity to raise the voice of the student centrally to the conversation is
timely, particularly with the changes that have occurred to the construction of the student community in the last decades, and (c), those concerned with questions of the self, and of identity, will be fundamentally drawn to circumstances that experientially define the self. Thus, identity is a compelling construct with which to engage, and is a similarly important area in which to target the research efforts of committed educationists across the social project of education. Regarding the latter, issues of identity negotiation are ubiquitous -- an integral part of processes that work together to define an individual. At the same time, identity is instinctively a factor in student persistence and success. These motivations are concurrently present in this research plan.

The academic literature describes student identity in concert with student/ institutional identity interaction as a means towards student integration or disassociation (Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor, & Lauder, 2011; Field, 2013; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012). Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor, and Lauder (2011) suggest that a “misreading by students of the role” they are to enact is a catalyst of attrition (p. 1086). Thus, questions about symbolic signaling by the institutional community arise concerning how students perceive the student role as characterized by the institution. Field (2013) argues that processual issues of “agency and identity change” exercise the identity construct forcing its continual “(re)construction” among students (p. 165).

Research in identity theory indicates that students enact behaviors congruent with institutional expectations, whose meanings are consistent with their perceived “identity standards” (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 193). Alternately, when there is ambiguity in feedback, the student may be dissuaded from enacting appropriate behaviors. An examination of identity construction raises questions about how students perceive their own and the institutional identity
expectations that exist. Therefore, an understanding of how students receive and evaluate feedback to their behaviors is implied as a goal to the research.

Further, the thorny problem of *intention* arises. In this use the term is focused on students’ intent to persist or intent to discontinue their involvement, potentially as the result of the variety of interactions students have with the institution. Bowman and Denson (2014), for example, in a multi-site model using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine categories of student / institution fit, found that over-all “college satisfaction is positively related to intent to persist” (p. 136). This is not a surprising outcome, and, as the authors note, it is related to previous results in the field (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Sansom (2012), publishing dissertation research, argues that religiously-affiliated colleges engage the intent to persist variable when students’ “religious beliefs are strengthened during the first-year” at the institution (p. 93). The conclusion for religious colleges is that a strong sense of religious inclusion supports students’ feelings of community as a variable in student satisfaction. A similar inference can be taken for secular colleges. The task of creating an inclusive and welcoming sense of community can be essential to the challenge of engaging students in the community. Sansom validates this inference suggesting that a “sense of belonging” is “the strongest predictor of student retention” (p. 96).

An associated question arises concerning students’ perceptions of religious marginalization that might occur when there is inconsistency between one’s religious proclivities and the religious climate of the campus. Goodman and Mueller (2009), exposing the experiences of atheists on college campuses, for example, suggest that those who identify as atheist are relegated to be “invisible, stigmatized, and marginalized” because of their beliefs (p. 57). This outcome is not only a function of the social unease that exists around the topic of nonbelief, but
also results because many atheists simply “keep their nonbelief hidden for their own good” (p. 58); they self-select anonymity as a defensive posture.

Small and Bowman (2011) offer a compelling argument that those of a religious minority face increased pressure about their religious identity in the face of more mainline religious communities. This suggests that denominational minorities, even within the larger Christian community, may encounter religious-identity pressure. The variability in denominational viewpoints occurs in many sequences of experience, as Woodford, Levy, and Walls (2013) argue, but is particularly apparent in the differences in opinion between various denominations towards categories of social difference, particularly of late towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) lifestyles, about women’s issues, in particular, the topical questions of abortion and birth control, and stemming from the age-old pressures of pre-marital sex, among many others. Denominational doctrinal teachings, argue Woodford et al. (2013) even within evangelical circles, are often not embraced by individuals within the group, let alone across group boundaries. Woodford et al. (2013) expose difficulties with the “assumption of doctrine-belief congruence” (p. 106) which is contextualized by “individuals’ lived experiences” to the extent that they often do not embrace all doctrinal directives (p. 107). These differences in interpretation intuitively may lead to religious pressure among student groups within the diversified Christian community, particularly regarding pressure to conform to the interpretations of the dominant religious group. This speaks to the processes of agency and identity in profound ways, moving intent to persist to a more centralized position in student retention thinking within religious institutions.

Kogler (2010) validates intention as a factor in continuing positive agentic behaviors. Kogler argues that, within socially defined roles, the individual agent acts “intentionally by
participating in a social and rule governed context” (p. 453). Explaining, Kogler (2010) asserts that the individual exists in a socially mediated grouping evidenced by “certain normatively designated roles which express the ethical substance of a lebensform”, or life-form (p. 453). In the context of education, the role of student is characterized both institutionally and by the student. The important distinction in this conceptualization, per Kogler (2010), is that the choice to enact role-based behaviors is a matter of the agent “understanding herself to be situated” in a socially defined role relationship in which behaviors have validity only if they can “pass the muster of social recognition” (p. 454). Kogler’s reasoning is generally consistent with identity theory and other explanations of agency and identity proceeding from the work of Mead (1934).

**Arresting Attrition**

Aside from emic categories within which the intentional agentic self is engaged with the larger social milieu, topics such as the interventions used by institutions, preparedness, and stress as variables of interest lend further complexity to questions of retention and intent to persist, and represent an etic thrust in retention research and practice. While it is interesting to understand the internal challenges that people face in college which might place them in a marginalized position, and perhaps exacerbate student attrition, it is equally interesting to look at some of the efforts and conditions that serve to create the environment within which a student must negotiate his or her identity. Thus, institutional culture, programs, services, and especially the interventional strategies institutions use to arrest attrition take on enhanced importance. Moreover, the accessibility of resources, both physical, and in the sense of psycho-social resources, provides the wherewithal for students to persist through challenges that may occur in the normal activities of the college experience (see Stets & Cast, 2007). Moreover, variables that contextualize an individual’s experience, such as preparedness, the way in which he or she
processes stress and the accessibility of psychosocial and physical resources are important to the retention equation.

**Interventions.** The evolving body of literature, continuing today, focuses on a range of activities and practices institutions can employ to facilitate measurably successful student integration. The breadth of active, topical research areas supports such strategies. These areas include student-faculty interactions (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010), perspectives on how to address the needs of students transitioning to the institutional environment (Leese, 2010), and topics in student engagement (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Additional research avenues consider the use of support interventions by faculty (Russo-Gleicher, 2013), and the efficacy of counseling to strengthen institutional retention (Pearson, 2012). DeWitz, Woolsey, and Walsh (2009) examined the impact of self-efficacy on retention concluding that interventions based on supporting self-efficacy among students have a positive effect on retention. There are categories of need that interventions can be directed towards. For example, student preparedness is a growing concern. Equally important are the ways in which students handle stress, and the ways in which students recognize and employ resources. Taken together, these are all areas in which targeted interventions can play a part in maintaining student health.

**Preparedness.** Swail (2014) lays academic preparedness at the feet of college dropout causation, suggesting that, although students must negotiate increasing cost metrics, the “primary reason that students do not prepare, apply, admit, and succeed in higher education is academic wherewithal” the effect of which limits students not only in their intention to apply, but in their capacities to succeed (p. 20). The perspective is interesting and telling, and the inescapable conclusion is that it is less than probable that students can overcome the barrier of preparedness derived from their previous primary and secondary schooling without targeted intervention.
A prominent argument in Swail’s (2014) thesis is that not everyone who seeks admission to post-secondary schooling can succeed, nor should they be admitted, echoing Kaufman and Feldman’s (2004) observation of the “gatekeeping context” inherent in higher education (p. 465). Further, Swail (2014) continues, society “must decide, on a policy basis, who we want to go to college, who we want to succeed, and who will pay for it” (p. 24). Enacting Swail’s exclusionary argument can presumably help institutions arrest attrition; however, the loss of access to higher educational opportunity that comes along with these types of policies may not be acceptable alternatives to a society that purports to value education as a human right, and as an economic essential. Additionally, such policies are arguably misdirected, particularly when the problem of preparedness speaks directly to the over-arching issues facing K-12 education.

Miranda (2014), channeling Steinberg, adds context to the argument on preparedness suggesting that of students graduating “in the bottom quarter of their high school classes” only about 20% will ever earn a college degree (Miranda, 2014, para. 8). Miranda (2014) asserts that, at least in part, the students’ “misconceptions about college” generally, “and above all, about themselves” are central reasons contributing to that outcome (para. 11). This suggestion about preparedness indicted secondary schools’ outcomes across the project.

**Stress.** Stress continues to be a well-researched topic, with appropriate application to the college environment, and to attrition. Stress, using the seminal perspective articulated by Selye (1975), derives from “any nonspecific response of the body to any demand placed upon it” (p. 137). Stress can be positive or negative in its effect on the person. Selye observes: “A painful blow and a passionate kiss can be equally stressful” (p. 137). There is a tendency in the literature to focus largely on the negative, anxiety-producing aspect of stress (O’Sullivan, 2011). Kurebayashi, Miyuki do Prado, and Paes da Silva (2012), researching nursing students, for
example, argue that when stress is elevated, anxiety increases, confirming a positive correlation between distress and anxiety (p. 133). While not a surprising finding, questions regarding the impact of stress and anxiety on the student remain timely.

McGowan, Gardner, and Fletcher (2006) explain that the means in which stress is perceived and the perspective from which a response is operationalized by an individual is a predictor of the positive or negative effect of stress on the person. When an environmental impact is a threat, the response tends to be based in the emotions. In the McGowan et al. (2006) study, emotionally-based responses correlate with distress, while persons responding to stress as a challenge instead of a threat tend towards a “task focused coping strategy” (p. 96). The latter strategy results in eustress, rather than in distress. Interventional designs that highlight the variety of means with which a person may operationalize coping strategies is a compelling research category.

Previous research has examined various forms of psychological stress as antecedent to student departure (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2013). Noted stressors include academic pressure, particularly when those pressures affect commitment, and socially modulated difficulties, the latter indicating a “negative direct effect on commitment” and “indirect effects on intention to return” (Johnson et al., 2013, p. 92). Bean (2005) previously noted that stress was causal to student departure, and that the degree to which stress was perceived by an individual was important in the decision to drop out. The study by Johnson et al. (2013) draws out the relationship between stress and commitment, and the associated negative effects of stress on intent to persist. Moreover, the finding that social difficulties affect intent to persist accentuates the influence that institutional climate and peer interactions have on student success.
Stress has been considered in identity theory with a primary benchmark being that people tend to establish a baseline identity standard and work to maintain behavioral consistency to that standard (Burke & Stets, 2009; Burke, 1991; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stets & Carter, 2011; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 2002; 1980). Burke (1991), considering student identities and stress, acknowledged the link between distress and anxiety, arguing that student identities can “be set at certain degrees of academic responsibility, intellectualism, sociability, and personal assertiveness” (p. 838). Burke (1991) explains that as a means of fitting in to the group, students adapt their behavior so that their perceptions of “reflected appraisals” received from their interactions across the community continue to match salient aspects of their identity standards (p. 840). Thus, when a student does not performatively reach their level of expectation, in any category, distress occurs and prompts adaptive responses. As Burke puts it, “because of distress, outputs from the identity system to the environment will change” (Burke, 1991, p. 838). This poses a question regarding what influence the quality of response to behaviors has on the direction a student’s behavioral adaptation will take. One wonders what types of responses prompt a student to continue to try and adapt to the group, or at what point will the student make a conscious choice to abandon the unsuccessful role?

**Resources.** A compelling area of investigation that holds intuitive importance for the student persistence debate is encompassed in discussions about the action of resources on agentic outcomes. The usage of resources in identity theory to describe and maintain identity has been addressed by Freese and colleagues (Freese & Burke 1994; Freese, 1988) and further developed by Burke (2004), and by Stets and Cast (2005; 2007), among others. Of importance is the category of social resources. Resources, in this context, are defined by Hobfoll as “entities valued in their own right” (as cited by Dutton, Roberts & Bednar, 2010, p. 275).
Further, as Burke (2004) argues, resources in the identity theater are thought to be those things that “sustain individuals in interaction” (p. 577). Burke further explicates the term to include anything that “acts to sustain a system of interaction, even if it is not recognized as such” (p. 577). The implication of Burke’s assessment is that anything a person can conceive of as having perceptual value is a potential resource. What is important and useful to one may not be important to another. One’s perception of value for conceptualized resources presently accessible, or alternately, conceptualized resources that might “exist in the future” and which are conceivably attached to a future self, are thought to be instrumental at helping the individual to craft and maintain the self (Burke, 2004, p. 577). Thus, valued social relationships are resources that aid a person at creating and integrating to a group. Moreover, the associated benefits which derive from a future state are also “potential resources” that a person may conceptually access, for example, as an aid in maintaining current commitment to an enacted role (Burke, 2004, p. 577).

In the case of a student, intuitively, the perceptual benefits which attach to the attainment of a degree, potentially of a professional position to which one aspires, are themselves value added resources which are currently implementable by the student at maintaining the present role of student. Stets and Cast (2005) make the case that it is not necessarily the resources themselves that are additive; rather it is “what persons do in the situation that is the resourceful” action or conclusion which is a result of the perceptual influences of resources – present and future -- that is important (p. 3). The end goal of resource usage in the context of identity theory is the use of resources to “receive self-confirming feedback”, which validates the identity and “maintains the self” (Stets & Cast, 2005, p. 3).
Ida and Christie-Mizell (2012), focusing on psychosocial resources which aid in managing depression among African Americans, highlight the categories of self-esteem, mastery, and social support as important to group and identity processes. Positive outcomes in these categories indicate “mostly direct effects of the protective factors” associated with negotiating group resilience (p. 58). This outcome informs areas of practice for college personnel when creating opportunities for group engagement among minority populations.

Psychosocial resources have been investigated from several angles. For example, Andersson (2012) investigated the psychologically based variable of “dispositional optimism”, a personal attribute that inures a person to the negative effects of stress (p. 291). Andersson observes that “levels of dispositional optimism do not change across most life situations” highlighting the variable of “durability” and inferring a link from dispositional optimism to resilience (p. 291). Countervailingly, in what Andersson calls a sociological process, self-esteem “fluctuates considerably due to interactional and situational processes” (p. 291). This interesting comparison of the psychological to the sociological calls to mind the multi-modal investigations into identity processes from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), a psychological process, and from identity theory (Burke, 1991), a sociological process. When questioning the effect of stress on optimism, and on other psychosocial processes, Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, and Mullan observed that a dispositive link exists between stress and a diminishment of certain psychological resources, and this outcome could lead to student attrition (as cited in Andersson, 2012).

The wide range of research activity contained in the literature serves to extend understandings of the many factors and challenges facing both the student and the institution as they confront the reality of student retention and attrition. Despite this increased understanding,
retention, student engagement, and student success continue to challenge institutional practice. Research on interactions between the institution and the student remains relevant for suggesting efficient areas of institutional practice that can impact student retention. However, while it is important to understand the range of initiatives and outcomes on retention which are attributable to institutional intervention based on past and continuing research, the fundamental limit to the range of theoretical efforts which measure outcomes is that they divorce the voice of the student from the process. Thus, while much of the current research is adept at telling researchers what happens, that research often fails in providing an understanding of why measured outcomes occur.

Summary

The literature review introduces the relevance of identity processes to the creation, development, and maintenance of a persistent student identity. The means used to explain this process are contained in identity theory (Burke, 1991), and a secondary theory developed by Burke, identity control theory (Burke, 1991; Carter, 2013; Stets, 2006), with the later containing the active construct with which individuals evaluate identity performance. The concepts of role taking and identity negotiation as discussed earlier are directive to the project, explaining how students conceive of and enact their roles as students in the university setting. This conceptualization incorporates the direct responses students will field from the institutional community, but also respects that the symbolic presence of the institution is itself a context in which students must find their place. Students’ personal evaluations and perceptions of their situatedness, as Kogler (2010) explains, are intuitively connected to a further capacity to report a desire to persist in their studies, not only in relation to their current place, but in relation to their preconceived notions of life in the university context.
Additionally, aspirations, as a resource-dependent variable, are considered in the context of an identity standard. In this iteration, aspirations are understood to be contained in the proposed aspirational identity standard, a construct which shares the characteristics of other named identity standards in so far as aspirations are conceived to exist on a continuum of meanings, and, importantly, retain resource dependence. Thus, when resources are no longer accessible to maintain the aspirational identity standard at the level in which it initially exists, aspirations decrease to match the availability and quality of accessible resources. Inputs to enacted role behaviors are thereafter a contributor to the psychosocial resources accessible to the individual (see Stats & Cast, 2005). Should these inputs become overly critical, or overly positive, distress overwhelms aspirations as well as the individual’s commitment to the enacted role. This circumstance is thought to be evident in students’ reported intent to persist.

Moreover, the means in which a student responds to stress is a factor in student departure and in intent to persist (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2013). The interaction of resources, both physical and psychosocial, with Andersson’s (2010) notion of dispositional optimism are conditions that affect role resilience. Dispositional optimism is a variable which can be instrumental in contextualizing how students’ perceptions reflect a positive or negative response to the community.

The literature cited also describes the relatedness of retention, as a driving force in the higher education community, to the continued enrollment of students to graduation as a measure of institutional effectiveness. The literature review grounds retention theory in the seminal work of Vincent Tinto (1975; 1993). While most of the retention-based research has been quantitative in nature, this study seeks the qualitative, personalized perceptions of participants as they recount their reactions to salient elements of their interaction with college community. Students' abilities
to evaluate their situational engagement with faculty, curriculum, peers, and colleagues in the cultural context of the institution are thought to be important to their futures as students, but the individual voice of a student, in his or her individualized experiences regarding their reception by the college community has only rarely been heard in the ongoing retention dialogue. This represents an opportunity to include the student voice to the debate on ways to enact retention policy which is inclusive of students’ viewpoints.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe how participants reported perceptions of direct and symbolic inputs which responded to their behaviors within the university setting. My proximate interest in raising the voices of participants into the retention discussion was to develop a richer understanding of how individual perceptions influenced participants’ sense of identity, and their self-reported intent to persist in the activated role as a student (Carter, 2014). During data collection, I was interested in understanding how these perceptions were used to construct, evaluate, and interpret meaning around the signature issues of participants’ transitions to the university environment. These issues included their integration to the peer community, a view towards how they were negotiating the demands of the college classroom, and potential challenges that occurred with the wider university community. Additional interest existed in how students used derived meaning constructs to develop the intent to persist in their studies.

Design

The study used a qualitative, transcendental, phenomenological methodology. The phenomenological method began with the work of Edmund Husserl (1965) who laid the foundational groundwork for the phenomenological method. Phenomenology has continued as a central method of qualitative research. Phenomenology concerns itself with “perceptions, thought, memory, imagination, [and] emotion” as qualities of lived experience (Smith, 2013, para. 6). Reflecting Creswell’s (2013) explanation, phenomenology is an appropriate method with which to understand how multiple participants construct meaning in response to a context.
In the current study, students’ perceptions of the direct and symbolic inputs from the college community were at the heart of the investigation. While much research has been done in retention, surprisingly little has incorporated the perceptions of students and the impact their interpretations might have on the retention paradigm (Spittle, 2013). During the study, research questions seeking to expose students’ perceptions to key areas of their institutional experience were investigated using observations, focus groups, and interviews. Students’ responses to the focus groups and interviews generated a detailed transcript, which along with researcher generated classroom observations notes, was committed to analyses. Analyses proceeded with Moustakas’ (1994) modified Van Kaam methodology, which perfectly aligned with the study. The Van Kaam method allows for the organization of thematically correlated statements, easing analyses across the transcript.

**Research Questions**

**RQ1.** How do student participants report their perceived and evaluated inputs from the college community in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student?

**RQ2.** How do the inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as a student?

**RQ3.** How do received and evaluated inputs, understood by students to be reflected appraisals from the community, influence students' self-reported intention to persist as a student?

**Setting**

The research was conducted on the campus of Higher Matters University -- a pseudonym. Higher Matters is a large, non-profit, private Christian evangelical University in the mid-Atlantic
region of the United States. Per the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), Higher Matters University serves approximately 80,500 students in on-ground and online programs. The physical setting for the interview process were various conference rooms within the campus library. These rooms were quiet, well-appointed, properly climate-controlled, and appropriate for private conversation. They were also handicapped accessible, should the need arise. The conference rooms were scheduled for reasonable periods of time within which to conduct data gathering.

**Participants**

The participants were selected from first-year students in the host university. To meet the initial inclusion criteria, students were 18 years or older, and had graduated either from high school, home school, or received a GED in the immediately preceding academic year. A primary reason for the use of first-year students was the likelihood that they would have been still negotiating a student identity. Sampling was purposive, maximum variation sampling with a goal of recruiting 10 to 15 participants for the study. Purposive sampling, as Creswell (2013) explains, refers to the intentional selection of participants with the experiential capacity to inform the study. Moreover, in this iteration, the notion of maximum variation as a sampling criterion refers to participants who have varied experiences of their first-year in school. Thus, the sample was planned to include those with a relatively benign transition to the university, as well as those for whom the identity negotiation process has been challenging. Creswell reflects on maximum variation sampling, explaining that differences in experience can equate to reports of “different perceptions” of the phenomenon under consideration by participants (p. 157). This outcome was an ideal result in the current study. Participants were identified as detailed below resulting in 11 students (six males, five females). Relevant descriptions are included in Table 1.
Table 1

*Participant Information*

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<th>Participants (Pseudonyms)</th>
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<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In describing the sample, religion was noted as a factor in all but one of the participants. Alice self-identified as an atheist, a factor which added a degree of interest to her responses regarding life in a religiously-defined institution. Denominational preferences among the balance of the participant sample ranged from very conservative Christian denominations to less strict denominations, and this was evidenced in participant responses to research questions.

Additional interest developed as I listened to participants’ responses, reminding me that the age group was still negotiating identity – which was exactly what I had hoped in the design. Since identities were still relatively fluid, the effect of inputs from the community became more pronounced. This aided me in determining the effects of inputs on interpretations.

**Procedures**

Procedurally, the study began with required Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (See Appendix A). Participant recruitment and selection began using an invitational email purposed to identify likely candidates (See Appendix B). The initial email campaign targeted specific computer classes searching for students in the School of Education at Higher Matters University. Appropriate faculty were engaged by email to facilitate students’ receptions of the
invitational email (See Appendix C). The first attempts to recruit students brought insufficient response, and a change in protocol was initiated to remove the requirement that students were enrolled in the School of Education. Student respondents meeting the inclusion criteria as residential, first-year college students having attained their 18th birthday thereafter qualified for the study. Those failing to meet the inclusion criteria were not considered for the study.

However, even after the initial change in protocol, participants did not engage in the study in sufficient quantities to complete the research. Consequently, a second change in protocol was initiated thereafter to expand the recruiting field, incorporating larger classes with greater potentials to recruit students. The actual recruitment, even with those changes, was not adequate, I arranged with individual faculty to personally visit classes. Faculty were gracious in allowing me entry to discuss my research, and afterwards to observe classes in session. Classes from which students were recruited included INFT 110, INFT 104, and INFT 102, all introductory computer classes, with approximately 30 to 40 students per section, about half of which were first-year students. My presentation to students within these classes is included as Appendix D. The result of these visits yielded 16 respondents, however, five of them were excluded. Three did not meet the inclusion criteria, and two failed to attend the research interviews and focus groups. The study proceeded with the remaining 11 participants.

An intake survey captured relevant participant data from those electing to proceed in the study (See Appendix E). Of interest in that survey were elements of culture, race or ethnicity, age, gender, religious self-descriptors, the location where they were raised, socioeconomic status, and whether they were first generation college attendees. These descriptive elements painted a picture of students that ingests formative factors to the study. The survey was created through Survey Monkey™, a platform capable of addressing the criteria of interest.
The selected participants (six Male, and five female), received and executed a standard Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved consent form (See Appendix F). The consent forms serve as notifications of the purpose of the research, the privacy afforded to each regarding the protection of personal information, and the entirely voluntary aspect of participating in research, including their retained ability to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identity as a standard practice. Participants did not know their pseudonyms, nor those of others in the study. Participants were advised of schedules for the focus groups and semi-structured interview methodologies, and these were adjusted to accommodate students’ schedules. Additionally, available on-campus facilities were identified and engaged as necessary and communicated to the candidate participants. I established a calendar of events within which participants were scheduled for focus groups and semi-structured interviews and the associated classroom observations.

Once the study began, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations comprised the bulk of the research procedures. I had previously piloted the focus group prompts and interview questions to colleagues to ensure that the questions and prompts reasonably examine the research questions. Per Leon, Davis, and Kraemer (2011), pilot studies are implemented to “examine the feasibility of an approach that is intended to be used in a larger scale study” (para. 2). I anticipated that the results of the pilot study would be an aid in understanding how participants interpret the tone, meaning, and intent of the focus group prompts, and of the questions used in the semi-structured interviews. Questions were altered or completely changed based on the feasibility evidenced in the pilot study, the questions written into the proposed study were largely retained.
Focus groups and interviews were recorded on two Olympus™ ws-822 GMT voice recorders. The focus group and interviews generated a great deal of data. Thereafter, transcription occurred. I transferred the recorded data to an audio file on my personal computer, which is locked in my home workspace. The computer is password protected, as is the file containing data. Audio files were transcribed with the assistance of a word recognition software, and then manually edited to ensure exact accuracy. The data collected from classroom observations, as well as my journal notes, are included in the transcribed materials and all collection methods were subjected to analysis.

Once transcribed, the transcription was analyzed with the Van Kaam method of analysis as Moustakas (1994) suggests. This process moves through various stages of reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation to produce essential themes. These were reduced to a final textual, structural description of the important elements of the transcription, essentially describing the phenomenon.

**The Researcher's Role**

As the principle researcher, I solely operationalized the research plan, interacting with the participants throughout all phases of recruitment and data collection. I had no prior relationship with the participants, and no pre-knowledge of any aspect of their individual lives, past the knowledge that they were students at the university, and that they had satisfied the inclusion criteria of the study. I recognized, however, that my career in higher education had inculcated a mix of assumptions about the project of education and about students, some of which were conscious, and perhaps a great many more that may have been preconscious. Additionally, I have studied at the host university, having earned the master’s and the educational specialist degrees previously. I do have assumptions about the university itself that I had to be sensitive
towards, and endeavored not to emplace those assumptions in the participants’ responses, or in the analysis. Therefore, an intentional bracketing of my experiences occurred within the transcendental phenomenological method specifically to address any conscious bias I might have and that may influence the study.

**Data Collection**

Once approved by the IRB, research proceeded in the data collection phase with the use of two focus groups, as well as the semi-structured interview methodology. I also visited the classrooms and made observations about each class. The usage of multiple collection methods, or “triangulation” works as means to “validate” results per Creswell (2013, p. 250). Data collection was operationalized with focus groups at the onset as a first method of data collection. The focus groups were a means to gather an overview of the participants as an interactive group based on their responses to the prompts. The focus groups responded to research question 1 (**RQ1**).

Following the focus groups, and with the benefit of a broad-based orientation to the participants gained through the focus groups, semi-structured interviews occurred with each participant. This step moved data collection from a top line overview to more personalized inquiry and informed research question 2 (**RQ2**) and research question 3 (**RQ3**). As a third means of data collection, the notes from classroom observations helped to add context to the final analysis. Focus groups, interviews, and observations provided three distinct formats in three equally distinct settings in which data was gathered and met the criteria for triangulated data collection.
Focus Groups

Focus groups were employed as a qualitative research methodology. Dilshad and Latif (2013) point out that focus groups are appropriate “when the researcher lacks substantial information” concerning the participants to the study (p. 192). In this case, although I knew that participants were students of Higher Matters University, I did not know them, their opinions, nor their specific values and beliefs. According to Then, Rankin, and Ali (2014), focus groups are effective at providing “in-depth knowledge about attitudes, beliefs, and opinions” of research participants (p. 16). The output of focus groups can contain valuable insights and are “concerned with the actual words that are said”, but also provides insight into group processes through the “non-verbal communication” that develops as participants interact (Then et al., 2014, p. 17). Additionally, focus group interviews allow a researcher to effectively create a setting within which a “relatively homogeneous group” can consider several research questions (Dilshad & Latif, 2013, p. 192).

The focus groups were conducted with selected participants in two groups, one containing five participants and the second with six members. I acted as the sole facilitator. I rationalized the use of two groups of five or more participants each on the assumption that ten people in a single group would have been too large, thereby “preventing individuals from participating and sharing” (Then et al., 2014, p. 18). Barbour (2007) believes two focus groups can put the “researcher on firmer ground” because of the multiple streams of data that result (p. 59). I found this result to be beneficial, and interestingly, the focus groups were completely different in tone, and in content. Two focus groups were used to investigate the group’s perceptions of research question one. Research question one asked participants to report on perceived and evaluated inputs regarding the behavioral outputs they receive from the college
community in concert with their predefined meanings of what it would be like to be a student. The focus groups were asked to respond to a set of questions with an open discussion between members.

**Focus Group Prompts.** Focus group prompts (see Appendix G) were grouped to respond to research question one (RQ1): How do student participants report their perceived and evaluated inputs received from the college community in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student? The question was investigated with the following prompts:

1. Prior to coming to the university, how did you imagine the experience would be?
2. How did you decide between the various institutions you had interest in attending?
3. How similar is your overall experience of the institution, now that you are attending, with what you had imagined your experience would be prior to attending?
4. Are there other topics that anyone would like to discuss as we wrap up the focus group?

The two-group methodology allowed me to compare the output from both groups to the same topic to capture any differential in the responses. Additionally, the focus group outputs were captured using two Olympus™ ws-822 GMT voice recorders, and I made use of field notes to describe the setting, and capture interesting bits of body language, and any other events contextualizing the analysis. The focus groups were anticipated to be of short duration, with no more than fifteen minutes per question. As four questions operationalize the focus groups, 45 minutes to an hour should have been a sufficient time parameter for each focus group. That was not the case however, as students in both groups were lively and engaged, and their conversations lasted nearly 1.5 hours each.
Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were engaged to respond to research questions 2 (RQ2), and 3 (RQ3). Interviews are useful because they allow participants to respond to questions with a narrative of their lived experience. Moustakas (1994) comments on this process stating that the way questions are phrased, and the “timely way in which questions are posed, facilitates full disclosure of the co-researcher’s experience” (p. 116). Moustakas’ use of the term “co-researcher” is indicative of the collaborative nature of phenomenological research, however, I continued to use the term participant(s) (p. 116). Semi-structured interviews can be a pitfall for researchers, particularly if undue weight is given to the participants’ responses indicative of other than participants somewhat shrouded realities. Qu and Dumay (2011) observe that it is a precarious approach to assume that “interviewees are competent and moral truth tellers” (p. 238).

To guard against inequitably ascribing absolute facticity to participants’ responses, and acknowledging that I have a depth of experience in higher education, I intentionally kept a journal containing my “feelings audit” (Bednall, 2006, para. 18) to identify and bracket my assumptions about the data which I noticed during the collection process. Additionally, observations of participants regarding their demeanor were observed and noted, including their apparent level of comfort, anything notable about the site, for example, whether it was warm or chilly, if the seating was comfortable, and anything else that could add to, or take away from the respondents’ ability to honestly engage in a reflective conversation. Field notes were used to record observational data and perceptions of interesting phenomena that evidence themselves during the focus groups, interviews, and observations processes.

Memoing occurred during the interviews, and persisted during and after the interview, to capture my perceptions as they developed, and to capture and flag new knowledge and themes
developing during conversation. Further, I was expressly concerned with not contextualizing the interview by allowing my feelings and perceptions to intervene in the process.

The following questions investigated RQ 2: How do the inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as a student (Appendix H)?

1. Considering yourself as a student, how would you characterize your academic capacity?
2. What does it mean to you to be a student?
3. Can you describe the feedback you receive from faculty regarding your academic work?
4. How important is it to you to receive excellent feedback from faculty regarding your academic work?
5. How do you feel about yourself as a student when you receive excellent feedback from faculty regarding your academic work?
6. When you receive feedback that is less than you expected, how do you generally react?
7. How do you feel you are fitting in with other students in the campus community?
8. What types of interactions with other students make you feel included and a part of the community?
9. What types of interactions cause you to feel uncomfortable in the campus community?
10. What aspects of the institution do you feel most closely speak to your core beliefs and values?
11. What aspects of the institution do you find challenging to your core beliefs and values?
12. Are there any other areas about your experience as a student that you want to share?

Finally, research question 3 was investigated in semi-structured interviews with the following interview questions.

1. How would you describe your feelings about your association with the institution?
2. When you consider your academic program and your future goals, in what ways do you feel that your academic program is preparing you for your future occupation?

3. When you contemplate the next several years, how comfortable do you feel with your academic program?

4. Again, contemplating the next several years, how comfortable do you feel with the prospect of continuing in the current institution?

5. How would you describe changes to your goals which have occurred as a result of your experiences at the host university?

6. Are there any other items you would like to discuss regarding your association with the university?

Lastly, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. I used two Olympus™ ws-822 GMT voice recorders to record interviews. The use of two recorders was a guard against mechanical failure. In the process of transcription which followed, I paid explicit attention to any utterances the respondents made as the interviews developed. These included expletives, and preparatory utterances and pauses, which are normal parts of casual conversation. Such details helped to preserve the context and quality of the conversation.

**Observations**

Classroom observations were conducted observing participants in their field. Observations included students’ reactions, body language, and response attributes, which were noted as the class unfolded. I recorded whether participants appeared comfortable, nervous, fidgety, engaged, or bored. A field notes instrument (May, 2011) was used to capture these observations (See Appendix I). Following Tim May’s reliance on Severyn Bruyn’s construct of “subjective adequacy”, I constructed my field notes template to reflect the six categories of
Bruyn’s construct: “Time, place, social circumstances, language, intimacy, and social consensus” (Bruyn, 1966, as cited in May, 2011, p. 178).

I employed these directives based on my own sense of their relevance. The category of time related to the actual time of the event, and place described the location. The category of social circumstance referred to participants’ locations in the college. Intimacy attached to the level of openness participants demonstrated with each other and with me. Social consensus indicated the general sense of agreeability between participants on key issues. Field notes were a means to record impressions as they occurred, particularly as they related to any of the research questions. I used a rudimentary classroom sketch to indicate the layout of the room for my own recall and orientation (See Appendix J). Observations were scheduled with the help of faculty through the information technology classes at the university. I was not a participant; rather I remained a third-party observer throughout the process.

**Data Analysis**

I followed Moustakas’ (1994) description of the modified Van Kaam method of data analysis. The method provides a roadmap guiding the processes of understanding that are central to phenomenological inquiry. The method takes data associated with the phenomenon through the epoché and the reductions in order to uncover a deeper understanding of the essential meanings inherent to the data. The process of the modified van Kaam method is detailed herein.

**The Modified van Kaam Method**

The modified van Kaam method, as described by Moustakas (1994) is a means to interpret the essential themes of data collected through participant evolutions. As phenomenology begins with a period of researcher preparation, I began by opening the epoché. The primary methodology to approach epoché was informed by Bednall’s (2006)
characterization of employing the Husserlian method, wherein I sought to develop a phenomenological “state of mind” (para. 18). This included a period of quiet reflection to recall my assumptions of the phenomenon under investigation. This was the beginning of the transcendental reduction. The process occurred throughout analysis, indicating the continuous nature of epoché and associated bracketing of myself.

**Reductions**

As analysis developed,” significant statements” (Creswell, 2013, p. 79) were identified and, as Moustakas (1994) argued, “non-repetitive, non-overlapping” statements, which Moustakas identified as “invariant horizons” were listed with the purpose of identifying meaning clusters, or “thematic linkages” within the data (p. 122). The themes identified became the structural foundation for a clustering of the perceptions participants reported within the context of their lived experiences. Thereafter, the essences of the experiences that emerged among participants, as overarching meanings, were identified and bracketed. This process coincided with the modified van Kaam methodology which Moustakas (1994) described as a seven-step process. The method is described herein:

Moustakas’ steps begin with the phenomenological reduction, and include:

1. Listing and preliminary grouping.

Here, one makes a list of every “relevant” statement (Moustakas 1994, p. 120). This is the beginning of horizontalization. I first grouped the transcript under prompts and interview questions for each participant. Then, I used an excel spreadsheet to capture relevant statements which I had earmarked in the transcription. Once that was done, I was able to move to the process of “reduction and elimination” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).
2. Reduction and Elimination.

Moustakas (1994) directs the researcher through a two-step process to determine if the item -- a “moment of experience” -- is “necessary” to one’s analysis (p. 121). Secondly, Moustakas asks if it is possible to “abstract and label” the experience (p. 121). If not, they are not retained. As well, Moustakas says, “overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions” are either “eliminated” or represented “in more exact descriptive terms” (p. 121). Moustakas is clear that “the horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience” (p. 121).

The process Moustakas (1994) described became clear as I moved through the analysis. There were many statements that were either repetitive, or had little to do with the context of the conversation. I removed these statements, although they remained in the original transcription.

3. Cluster like invariant constituents into themes.

What remained were categorically similar responses, which I began to understand to be thematic divisions in the transcript. This understanding gave way to step 4, the final identification of invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

4. Create a final identification of the invariant constituents.

This step involved taking the invariant constituents, by theme, against the original record to determine if they were “explicit” in the original, or if not, were they at least “compatible” to the original for each participant. If neither, they were not retained. Again, I found some overlapping statements, and these were removed. To operationalize this step, I created a frequency table for each theme that showed me the percentage of respondents who had replied similarly to a prompt or interview question. The table was helpful to me in understanding the emergence of themes.

5. With the remaining, construct an “individual textural description” for each participant (p. 121).
6. Create for each participant an “individual structural description” (p. 121).

Moustakas marks this as the point where “imaginative variation” is operationalized, and which takes place after phenomenological reduction. Imaginative variation is a process of looking for all the possible meanings associated with the structural description. It is the eidetic reduction – a deconstruction to the essences of meaning.

7. Incorporate for each participant, a synthesis of the textural-structural descriptions, the invariant constituents and the themes.

This contains the “meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). It was possible to take the thematic categorical responses and create the textural-structural description for each participant.

The method described above seems to be a straightforward means of analyzing data. It does contain terms which needed to be understood in greater detail. Those included horizontalization, imaginative variation, and the eidetic reduction.

**Horizontalization**

In discussing horizontalization, Rehorick and Bentz (2009) explain that as phenomena develop in experience, they are accorded “equal value” (p. 16), one is not given greater value than another (see also Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). Although phenomena are individually given the same weight, they are undoubtedly given greater or lesser importance by the agent in the discreet situation in which they initially come into existence. It is the context of the phenomena in its activity that provides meaning. Moustakas (1994) adds to this thinking by suggesting as “each horizon” presents itself to “our conscious experience” it becomes “the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character” (p. 95). The same event, viewed by different actors will have, despite their similarities, differences in interpretation, and intuitively
represent different horizons to individual actors. Experiencing the horizons of a phenomena, which Moustakas suggests are continually changing, allows the researcher to invest in only those which are discreet stand-alone statements or experiences to be retained. Thus, Moustakas explains, only the “textural meanings and the invariant constituents” remain (p. 95). These are the horizons of a phenomenon.

**Imaginative Variation**

Imaginative variation, a process that visualizes all possible interpretations of a phenomenological moment, proceeded using Moustakas’ (1994) perspective that my own remembered and flagged experiences, as researcher, are structural data that can be devolved into a “textual-structural” description of the “meaning and essence” of my experiences (p. 122).

Thus, those meaning contexts which were imbedded in participants’ experiences can also create textural-structural descriptions based on the tone, content, and context of participants’ responses. I gave this process due consideration as I analyzed the transcript for all participants. The textual-structural descriptions which emerged were then committed to a globalized analysis wherein the synthesized meanings and essences helped to create a conclusionary description. From Bednall’s (2006) description, the epoché continued as the data analysis proceeded until the time when the final analysis occurred. At that time, completing Bednall’s (2006) prescriptive, the epoché opened and those items I had attempted to hold in suspension – my previously bracketed assumptions -- were reinserted to a bracketed relationship with respondents’ data” (para. 28), in agreement with Moustakas’ version above. This step enriched the analysis.

**Eidetic Reduction**

In the end, the eidetic reduction was accomplished -- the process of reducing phenomena to their essences -- or, in Husserl’s terms, to “the condition or quality without which a thing
would not be what it is” (Husserl, as cited by Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). With all essences taken together, a final textural-structural description containing the essential conditions of a phenomenon, as Husserl remarks above, was created for each participant. This final stage presented only the crucial constructs of the phenomenon at a “particular time and place”, underscoring the ongoing flow of experience which characterizes the consciousness of time (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100; see also Schutz, 1970).

**Analysis Contexts in the Proposed Study**

One of the perceived difficulties in data analysis in the study had to do with understanding the ways in which participants responded to the differences between *direct* responses to their behaviors from the community versus the *symbolic* responses they received. While direct responses are generally relatively uncomplicated superficially, symbolic responses are far more complex, and this held true in students’ responses. The complexity was evident in the means in which symbols were formed and communicated as meaning constructs. It was interesting to observe how these constructs were maintained and passed along, to become the individualized interpretive processes of relative meaning which existed on a continuum between dissensus and consensus among the group.

Gray, Purdy, and Ansari (2015) explain that “microlevel interactions form the building blocks” of institutional structure (p. 117) (see also Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1974). Thus, the institution, as a socially emergent structure that is continually ratified, houses representative symbols of the social group which comprise the institution as a social structure. Symbols are meaning-making constructs, as Gray et al. (2015) argue, which are “continually being negotiated through ongoing interactions” (p. 116). The institution is itself a symbol of the social group. Symbols come into being with a micro to macro interactive directionality, consistent with the
explanation provided by Gray et al. (2015), from the individual interaction of group members to the socially constructed institution.

However, in the educational institution, adopted symbolization is less the result of the micro-level processes of student-institution interactions, rather institutional symbols reflect the a priori macro processes of the social group represented by the institution. The creation and maintenance of salient institutional symbols excludes to some extent the performative interactions of the student with that institution. Despite that point, it is the charge of the institution to pass on socially mandated symbolic meaning making constructs to the student in a macro – micro direction constitutive of formation. Thus, processes associated with individual formation that allow persons to enter the wider social group as recognized members contextualize the perceived tension within interactive and interpretive conditions. The way participants in this study interpreted institutional symbols – in the form of language, ritual, represented values, and social opportunities -- shapes what they “draw on to make sense of the situation and how to behave within it” (Gray et al., 2015, p. 119). Even direct responses, as say from a faculty member to a student, contain symbolic communication which must be pulled through, or drawn from within initial direct responses, for example, in the varying interpretations of power differentials which students may associate with faculty as those faculty members enact their role. Areas which I perceived to be potentially difficult were those wherein a dissonance existed between how a student valued certain constructs and reported them, and how the institution intended those constructs to be valued. An example of this is the way participants’ contextualized feedback from professors, where the possible interpretations were sometimes not consistent with the professor’s possible intent in giving the feedback.
Trustworthiness

An area in the study of significant importance is that of trustworthiness. Shenton (2004), unpacking the concept of trustworthiness, calls on Lincoln and Guba’s prescriptions of “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (as cited in Shenton, 2004, p. 64). While there is an alignment between these terms qualitatively and the means to ensure validity and reliability in quantitative studies, the alignment is not direct. Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) argue that because of its intent, qualitative research cannot, in fact, be judged with the same criteria that quantitative researchers employ. Nevertheless, Houghton et al. (2013) realize that qualitative research must still evidence a method for ensuring that appropriate rigor is encompassed in the procedures of the study. For example, to hit the marks of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, the researchers, in a multiple case study, used the techniques of “prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, audit trail, reflexivity, and thick descriptions” (p. 12). Thereafter, Houghton et al. (2013), describe the alignment of these methods to the goals referenced. For example, credibility is enhanced with the use of “prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking” (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 13). The categories of dependability and confirmability embrace the procedures involved in completing an “audit trail”, and in “reflexivity” (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 13). Finally, transferability is supported through the usage of “thick descriptions” (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 13). An interesting observation concerns the use of the same strategies in support of multiple categories. I employed an intentional process to ensure rigor. The following discussion helps to illuminate these targets.
**Transferability**

The transferability of a study, per Finfgeld-Connett (2010), reflects the ability to transfer its findings from one “theoretical context to another” (p. 248). There are a variety of means to do this as is explained above. However, in the context of qualitative research, argues Finfgeld-Connett, “validity (i.e. trustworthiness) is enhanced by triangulation” (p. 249).

**Triangulation.** As a proximate means to ensure trustworthiness, triangulation of data collection fundamentally provides multiple viewpoints on the data. This is a foundational category in trustworthiness that immediately establishes a means of “validation” according to Creswell (2013, p. 250). I used focus groups, interviews, and observational analyses which provided a triumvirate of collection methods useful in triangulation from the perspective of trustworthiness.

Denzin (2012), offering a further clarification while unpacking the confrontation of qualitative with quantitative methods in mixed methods research, returns to the usage, in qualitative methods, of multiple forms of interpretation, or triangulation, as a means not to validate data, per se, but to gain “an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 82). Further, warns Denzin, “objective reality can never be captured”, highlighting the innate tension between the qualitative method employed, which aspires to subjective interpretations of reality, and the quantitative alter ego of analysis methodologically centered on seeking objective facts (p. 82). Although the proposed study is purely qualitative, Denzin’s observation that *triangulation* is not specifically *validation* adds color to Creswell’s (2013) opinion that triangulation serves as a validating means to contextualize qualitative data. Although the lack of consensus on what procedures accomplish points to the difficulties that exist in merging the terminologies of both qualitative and quantitative methods outright, it also sheds light on the...
inherent difficulties in terminologically understanding the procedural intent of various researchers.

While this apparent difference of opinion seems to add complexity to the topic of triangulation, the difference does highlight the legitimacy of using multiple means of interpreting phenomena as an external means of analysis. Concomitantly, the use of multiple modalities emphasizes the admonition in phenomenology to withhold one’s assumptions in data analysis. Apart from being a purely terminological difference, these perspectives serve to highlight the necessity of a variety of viewpoints in painting the picture anecdotally advocated by the data. Yet, a significant and implementable script for the processual events of triangulation is still far from apparent, and claiming that using multiple methods to collect data, without speaking to multiple means to interpret that data, seems insufficient. Thus, Farmer, Robinson, Elliot and Eyles (2006) argue that a criticism of qualitative research throughout the larger research community “has been a lack of detailed methodological description” (p. 377). This very interesting observation explains the difficulties new researchers have at describing their processes. Pointing to the work of Erzerberger and Prien (1997), Farmer et al. (2006) remark that the “primary purposes of triangulation are to explore convergence, complementarity, and dissonance” (p. 378). Decrying the relative paucity of literature clarifying a methodological approach to employing triangulation, Farmer et al. suggest that a “triangulation protocol” is inherently necessary for the field (p. 380).

I used the variety of data collection methods previously designated for the study. I had originally intended to use the processes associated with the van Kaam methodology work to describe multiple forms of analysis, as Moustakas (1994) advocates, yet I was also drawn to the method introduced by Farmer et al. (2006). That model uses the term complementarity to
indicate completeness and then tests for convergence to indicate the level of agreement – either full, or partial in the sense of attitude, value, or belief – and dissonance which adds color to the textural-structural descriptions produced from the data. Farmer et al. suggested steps including “sorting” followed by “convergence or dissonance coding and assessment” (p. 380). This is followed by both “completeness” and “researcher comparison(s)” (p. 380). The categories of convergence and dissonance became a construct for me to think about attitudes, values, and beliefs across the sample and aided me in developing a final textual-structural description because I could assign certain interpretive values to the responses from participants. This was not only interesting, but from a practical standpoint, it enabled me to see more deeply into the transcript as I completed the van Kaam step of imaginative variation (Moustakas 1994). Using these multiple collection and analysis techniques ensured methodologically that transferability was considered.

Confirmability

Member checking. The final textual structural description was returned by email to the participants for their review and comment. Member checking is useful to gain the relevant insights of participants. This process allows the participant to provide additional clarification to the data, and to verify the essential understandings derived from the data. Despite my efforts to engage with participants, I received responses from only one participant.

Credibility

Independent auditor. The final step in the category of trustworthiness is to engage colleagues in the process of verifying my reductions. I did this to ensure several things, a) I wanted to gain the benefit of professional oversight to my work, b) this ensured that I was not representing me in the final product, rather, I represented the participants’ views, c) using
colleagues sets the stage for reciprocal professional collaborative relationships that will continue to be useful for this and future research. The responses of colleagues to the conclusions I had drawn helped to verify that the methods of analysis were successfully implemented.

**Journaling.** I employed a journal in which to capture and record personal impressions of the phenomena under investigation. This was done to reduce bias arising from my experiences in the field and which could color the interview process. The journal was an excellent instrument in which to add items of personal impressions, memories, assumptions, and other personal leanings, which evidenced themselves during data collection, to brackets (see Bednall, 2006). My journal not only was useful during participant research, it was also a tool I used throughout the dissertation process to record my reflections, and add interpretations of theory.

**Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative research, according to Thomas and Magilvy (2011), can be achieved by ensuring a discernible audit trail exists. Dependability is in some respects the qualitative equivalent of reliability in quantitative studies suggest Thomas and Magilvy (2011), and so provides the reader with the sense that the study has a certain believability and gravitas. The methods suggested included a means to describe “the specific purpose of the study”, the thinking behind how “participants are selected”, and a through description of “how data was collected”, and interestingly, “how long data collection lasted” (p. 153). Thus, a well thought out, implemented, and described study inherently supports dependability. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) also point to the processes of reduction used and how these impact the “interpretation and presentation of the research findings” (p. 153). A rigorous adherence to method ensures dependability. I recognized my audit trail to include my journal, transcribed interviews, notes from classroom observations, notes to myself which I made at odd hours of the day and evening
as a thought occurred to me, various email communications, as well as the body of work which included the research plan, the prospectus, proposal, and the dissertation itself.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations in any study involving human beings vary based on the nature of the study, and the type of participant involved, but are intuitively more pressing when children are involved, or where the questions researched are of such a sensitive nature that negative events may befall a participant (Wiles & Boddy, 2013). In this research, the major focus concerned the means employed to ensure discretion and privacy. The study evolves through the voices of students. I made accommodations available to protect students, especially elements of privacy. Because the study includes observations and transcribed interviews, no identifying data is listed in the text. I collected IRB approved consent forms from each participant. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, and of their ability to withdraw for any reason from participation. Participants’ identifying information is protected with pseudonyms to avoid the unwanted release of descriptive data. All data collected regarding the participants is securely stored electronically in a password protected file on my computer, in a password protected flash drive and on an external hard drive. Physical data will be kept in my private files for the duration of the study, and disposed of by shredding papers, and by deleting electronic files, after having been retained for a period of three years as required by the IRB.

**Summary**

Chapter three opens by explaining the use of Husserl’s (1965) transcendental phenomenology as a research design. The method is intuitively appropriate as the study seeks to gather student perceptions of their interactions with the college community. Additionally, the chapter outlines the processes associated with participant selection, which uses a purposive,
maximum variation sampling criterion. Chapter three then presents the research questions in the context of the data collection methods which were operationalized in the study. In terms of data collection, the research plan includes classroom observations, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews to provide three streams of data.

Data analysis is accomplished with the use of Moustakas (1994) description of the modified Van Kaam method of data analysis in concert with categories of convergence and dissonance as described by Farmer et al. (2006). These methods move one from the epoché, through the reductions, to a final summary. This process yields to the requirements of trustworthiness which characterize a fruitful qualitative investigation.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study was to describe first-year university students’ responses to the direct and symbolic inputs they perceived as reactions from community members to their behaviors and interactions at the university. The proximate interest included gaining a sense of participants’ intent to persist in the academic setting and how their interactions influenced that decision. The theoretical frame rests on the feedback control loop of identity control theory (Burke, 1994) which emerged from structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980). In terms of analysis, the modified van Kaam method of analysis (Moustakas, 1994) was used to interpret the lived experiences of student participants. It was important to hear the voices of students especially in the context of a relative paucity of qualitative student retention literature which relies on students’ reports of perceptions. In this chapter, the findings are presented as derived from focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. Interwoven in the findings are notes from classroom observations of student participants (N = 11, Male = 6, Female = 5). The language the students used in their responses to prompts and questions is unchanged from the original. I hoped to capture their style of communication because doing so adds so much to the flavor of the transcript. Research was completed at the host campus in April of 2016 which for most participants was their second semester at the university. I begin with a short description of each participant followed by a discussion of relevant themes which emerged from the analysis of data.

The following research questions were addressed in the study using semi-structured interview questions, focus group prompts, and observations:
**RQ1.** How do student participants report their perceived and evaluated inputs from the college community in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student?

**RQ2.** How do the inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as a student?

**RQ3.** How do received and evaluated inputs, understood by the student to be reflected appraisals from the community, influence the student’s self-reported intention to persist as a student?

**Participants**

Eleven first-year university students participated in the study. All participants were assigned pseudonyms in the interest of maintaining anonymity. Participants included six males and five females. Participants also included four international students, two of Hispanic origin, one African American, one Asian/Pacific Islander, and seven Caucasians. Students were recruited from information technology classes at the university. The following paragraphs introduce participants based on my classroom observations of them, their participation in focus groups and semi-structured interviews held during April 2016.

**Anna**

Anna was the first volunteer. She is a soft spoken young lady of Hispanic origin. Although Anna was eager to participate, she was rather shy in the focus groups, and I often had to prompt her for a response. In class, she was very studious, quiet, and engaged. The class was well ventilated and warm. It was generally quiet without extraneous distractions, and Anna appeared comfortable in the environment. Anna was very accepting of the idea of engaging with me in research.
“I was hoping to participate in a research project in college, but I haven’t had the chance so far” (Personal Communication, 2016).

English is not her first language as she is an international student. Anna is respectful and engaging in manner, despite her shyness, and smiles often. Anna was 18 years old at the time of the study, and very excited to participate in the research process.

Mara

Mara is a funny, fast talking, Caucasian girl, born and raised on the east coast. She responded quickly, fluidly, and with well thought out answers and opinions throughout the focus groups, and in the interview. Mara came to the university after mentors from her church community suggested that she attend. She was unhappy with the local universities to which, she said, “everyone goes”, and called her choice of this university a “luxury.” Speaking of the tendency for many of her contemporaries to go to a local school, she was quick to point out that she came to Higher Matters, rather than her local school, simply because “I wasn't, like, I just didn't want to go there” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Sam

Sam is a 19-year-old Caucasian, international student. Sam participates in club sports at the university, and so his attitudes are driven by that involvement. He is perceptive and humorous, with a decidedly positive attitude. He laughed frequently and was interested in the differences between the culture of his country and that of the United States – particularly the culture in the South, which he really finds to be personally challenging. Sam is really excited about the sports programs and facilities at the university, and he enjoys his interactions with team mates and coaches very much. He wants to be an investment banker, thinking that a Christian education will help in a field not necessarily known for its adherence to ethical considerations.
He acknowledges what he considers to be the reputation of investment bankers, saying, “Oh, yes. Cut-throat. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. But in that industry, like the outlook on an investment banker is like a greedy, not very honest person. And Higher Matters University has the opposite sense” (Interview Communication, 2016).

Mike

Mike is a legacy student as his parents graduated from the same university and it was important to Mike that he followed in his parents’ footsteps, especially those of his father, who is a career Army officer.

For the most part I was really kinda of just -- this is like the only school I actually even sent in an application form for just because I figured the only thing I really had in mind was, I want to go to, I want to get a commission in the Army (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

He is a Caucasian ROTC member and really interested in Christian leadership in the military. He is an outspoken, but respectful, 19 year-old young man with his life exactly laid out in his mind. He leans towards the liberal arts as he does not feel he is capable of a more technical field. He mentioned engineering, as those degrees which may have challenged him. Mike was home schooled, and is an active conversationalist with well thought out opinions. He is very conservative in his adherence to biblically-based expressions of his faith.

Art

Art is an enigmatic artist who often showed his sensitivities, which came out as insecurities, in the focus groups. At one point in his focus group, while he was talking, two others – amid poking fun at each other-- erupted into laughter. It was clearly apparent from Art’s expression that he thought they were laughing at him, and thereafter shut down for several
minutes. He had to be to specifically re-focused to actively continue to participate with the group. He was overshadowed by others in the group, but eventually found his voice.

Art lacks confidence and he does not consider himself a good student, nor does he see potential in his studies to inform his life. Here is Art’s voice: “I am what they call an underachiever. I typically go for the lowest standard possible and achieve that” (Interview Communication, 2016).

Art is a Caucasian, and was 19 years old at the time of the research. He thinks deeply about social issues and is not as overtly conservative in his views as many of his peers. Art has a darker side to his personality which causes him to ruminate on inconsistencies and things he feels are unfair. He does not see how his studies will prepare him for his desired career in artistic fields.

Sue

Sue is a Caucasian young lady from the east coast. She considers herself to be an above average student, but makes the claim with a certain modesty which comes through in her interactions. Sue wants to be a teacher. She loves little children and that is her focus. Sue has a manner which would make one think she is perfectly suited to teaching children. She appears caring and nurturing and welcoming to all in her circle of influence. Sue was 19 as the research commenced.

Sue’s family members attended Higher Matters University and through her visits to the campus she formed a positive impression which guided her decision making when it came time to decide where she would attend school. “I did not look at anywhere else. My brothers went here, so I just kind of visited a bunch and then decided I would come too. I didn't really want to look anywhere else” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).
George

George is an African American, international student, now a permanent resident in the United States. He is sensitive to issues of race and gender, and often notes issues of discrimination or power inequities with which he struggles at the university. One proximate issue occurred in his perceptions of housing discrimination when he felt that the inputs he received from the community at large were marginalizing. He is not politically conservative and is sometimes offended by the overt politicization he sees as occurring in the university environment. For example, George admitted to having a significant problem with a political happenstance at the university, “Do you remember that comment about gun control? About open carrier on campus? I had my entire family calling me be like: “We want you to transfer where there are no ISIS”” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). He is very talkative and dramatic. He was also very funny, with a warm and compelling quality. He was 19 at the time of the research. George was not as confident in his academic capacities as others, yet has maintained a good grade point average so far. He looks forward to graduate school, but not at Higher Matters University.

Don

Don is an extremely articulate young man. He is of Asian American heritage, was home schooled, and raised in a church-going family. He expresses very distinct views on aspects of disingenuousness he sees within the Christian community, and especially at the university. Thus, he says that he feels less than included in certain circumstances, and this insecurity comes out in various ways. He was 19 at the time of the research and spoke thoughtfully about his experiences and how the university community, despite his many criticisms of the environment,
was supportive to him. He has had significant emotional struggles while at the school, but says those issues are behind him:

Last semester, I was considering suicide on certain occasions and then I'm still struggling with depression in some way but the structure that I have being able to connect with certain people has enabled me to push through and I really appreciate it (Interview Communication, 2016).

He is a very compelling young man, honest and open.

Amy

Amy is an 18-year-old Caucasian female. She is very bright and very expressive. Amy is thoughtful, with an easy, confident manner, but tends to look sideways at certain topics, drawing opinions very quickly, and sharing them with ease and confidence. Still, she is always observing and evaluating. Amy was one of several participants upset with perceived stereotyping and marginalization, particularly in interpersonal relationships within the university community. She noted that some groups were inconsistent in the practice of what she considered to be Christian principles governing how people should be treated, but was quick to add: “I do though believe there are lot of great people here who are genuine and totally are Christ like but then there are also other groups” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). I sat several seats away from Amy as I observed her class, and she was among the first to come up to me to volunteer for the study. She mentioned that she had always looked forward to participating in research and was intensely interested in the research process.

Will

Will is a soft spoken 18-year-old Caucasian. He attended a private Christian school and says he is uncomfortable and shy in group settings. His primary reason for coming to the
university, other than its Christian nature, was that he felt it would be a less challenging
environment socially than other schools. He was looking forward to good social opportunities,
but as he said,

. . . stuff that doesn’t require anything late night or illegal; sometimes a lot of people can
get kind of wild. I think Higher Matters was more tamed, able to work and kind of meet
good people and not to worry about giving into, like, temptations (Focus Group
Communication).

He is articulate once he finds his voice and expresses deeply-considered opinions, particularly
when in one-on-one environments.

Will defended the university in conversations with other students when their comments
were negative about the environment, although he had concerns about the university giving voice
to certain political views. For example, in response to Republican candidate Donald Trump’s
visit, he was put off because Trump “didn’t even know what Easter was” (Focus Group
Communication, 2016). As I observed him in class, he was very quiet and studious. He seemed
to have a good grasp on the material, and worked quickly on the task assigned.

Alice

Alice is an international student. She describes an upbringing in a “good family” and was
educated in private schools (Focus Group Communication). She plays a club sport and is an
avowed Atheist. Despite her non-acceptance of Christianity, she admits to enjoying the sense of
family she has with her team as everyone prays before practices and matches. Her decision to
come to the university was based on a conversation she had with her coach, and she made her
decision to come to the United States for school all in three months.
Her parents supported her decision although she indicated that the decision was predominantly hers to make despite any misgivings her family might have raised. “My parents, they have me for eighteen years. Now I have this for me . . . to come to school on my own” (Interview Conversation, 2016).

She is well spoken in English, although Spanish is her first language, so she admits to sometimes searching for the English equivalent to specific words, belying her tendency to think in Spanish. Alice wants to raise polo ponies, telling me she has the land already (family’s ranch). She loves the beauty and power of polo ponies.

Results- Focus Groups

Research Question 1

In this section, the results are presented of each of two focus groups, and the semi-structured interviews through the themes which emerged. The focus groups respond to RQ1: How do student participants report their perceived and evaluated inputs from the college community in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student? Specific interest existed in how students expressed their sense of what the university experience would be for them as they contemplated their future, versus their actual lived experience now that they are at the university. Predictably, students were varied in their responses to differing aspects of their transition to the university. The participants shared with candor, often with emotion, and with wonderful humor, which belied the challenge that transitioning to university life can be for students, which often include “increased risky behaviors and emotional extremes” which attend the first-year of college for many students (Berry, Bass, Shimp-Fassler, & Succop, 2013, p. 697). Emotional extremes were present in the sample.
It was important to understand whether their expectations were fulfilled by their lived experiences and how their experiences translated to integration in the collegiate community. Following Tinto’s (1975) prescriptive, integration into the collegiate community is a support to student persistence. Focus group prompts structured the investigation:

Prompt 1: Prior to coming to the university, how did you imagine the experience would be?

Prompt 2: How did you decide between the various institutions you had interest in attending?

Prompt 3: How similar is your overall experience of the institution, now that you are attending, with what you had imagined your experience would be prior to attending?

Prompt 4: Are there other topics that anyone would like to discuss as we wrap up the focus group?

Focus group one was held with six students: Anna, Mara, Sam, Mike, Sue, and Art. Focus group two included the balance of participants: George, Don, Amy, Will, and Alice. Focus group prompts produced a variety of themes. For example, the category of community is identified along with sub-themes associated with life in the community. Categorical divisions are identified as sub-themes rather than just themes because they are so inter-related and descriptive of community life.

Over-all, five themes and six sub-themes were derived from the analysis of focus groups. Themes are: (a) challenges and expectations of coming to school; (b) adapting to the role of student (c) perceptions of marginalization; (d) reactions to politicization; and (e) challenges of relationships.
Two sub-themes were evident under the first theme, that of the challenges and expectations associated with entering the community.

1. The perception that coming to school was a different experience than participants expected, and:
2. The inconsistent expression of Christian values.

Responding to the second theme, that of adapting to the role of student, two sub-themes emerged.

1. The sense among participants that an increased level of personal responsibility was required.
2. The existence of an implied requirement to adhere to community rules, which were new for participants.

The challenges of finding their places within the community gave rise to the third main theme, that of a growing sense of marginalization which were explained by associated subthemes.

1. Disingenuous people
2. Stereotyping

The fourth main theme involved perceptions of the politicization within the university community. These included their reactions to communications from senior administrators, which were often disconcerting to them, and the thinking that visitors to the university reflected political positions which they felt were challenging in the context in which they were presented.

Finally, the experiences and challenges associated with the advent of relationships at a more adult level were evidenced. Students began to speak about relationships through describing
an event the students called “a ring by spring”. As a code phrase, “a ring by spring” opens a window into the pressures associated with developing relational maturity.

The use of a simple frequency table provides an aid to understand not only the categorical aspect of the themes identified, but also their weight overall. Table 2 presents themes which were sparked by focus group prompts, and the frequency of responses in those categories, however, they are presented based on their positions within the narrative.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Relative Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Challenges to Expectations of Coming to School</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. A Different Experience than Expected</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Inconsistent Expressions of Christian Values</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Adapting to the Role of Student</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Increased Personal Responsibility</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Adherence to Rules</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Perceptions of Marginalization</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Disingenuous People</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Perceptions of Stereotyping</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reactions to Politicization</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Challenges to Relationships</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54.54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme One: Challenges to Expectations of Coming to School**

Responses from participants provided evidence that coming to school presented challenges against their a priori expectations. While challenges are to be expected when engaging in new circumstances and experiences, they were not necessarily the same challenges that they expected to find as they contemplated their lives in college. Each had a sense of what living in the university community would be like. Often, their expectations were corroborated. Still, circumstances which tested their forethinking regarding university life were noted by participants. As circumstances arose which were not consistent with what they had imagined, they were required to adapt in their behaviors and thinking. The effects that both the positive
and negative experiences of coming to college had on their integration to the community provided a lens to how students negotiated student identity.

A Different Experience than Expected

Differences in the lived experiences of university life emerged on a continuum that included both positive and negative perceptions of the community for all participants. For some the difference was in how they viewed their faith and the expressed faith of others. For others, differences in experiences prompted a more diverse response to the cultural aspects of the university. Mara, for example, noted a positive experience that exposed how Christian values aided her integration to the university. She remarked that the sight of students praying with each other spontaneously prompted her to look at the university community in a different light.

There are a lot of different people here but like, I don't know, like I went to public school and stuff so coming here I knew it was a Christian school, but, like I look around sometimes and still, like being in the hall or something and seeing someone, like pray with, like their roommate or, like stop and pray with a worker, like I never got that in public school. So, like that’s a lot different for me in the good way so like, I mean, like in the back of my mind I guess I could've expected that but that the thoughts of these little things that happen here never crossed my mind. It's expected but unexpected, like when it actually happens. I was like, "oh wait" like that can happen here! (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Mike’s experience was good as he transitioned to the university, noting that it met his expectations. He wanted a strong Christian atmosphere but not necessarily a restrictive atmosphere:
Ah, I'd say that is yes, I mean, the experience of it out here it's . . . it was quite a bit what I expected. You know, with the spiritual atmosphere, you know, it's different in a good way but I also like it that it’s not like a BJU (Bob Jones University). I mean I thought of that. We did a lot of BJU curriculum because I was home schooled. And there's Pensacola and all the schools and I heard stories, and my sister went with every summer camp, and I didn't like the over-conservative atmosphere of that. I suppose there's advantages to it but it seems it was too legalistic. From what I hear, that their goal is to like, OK, we've given you freedom because we promote the Christian faith we're going to allow that, we're gonna tolerate, and I think it's the right use of tolerance. There can’t be a personal lack of respect for the values you bring here because this school stands for values and will never be compromised on that. We use the Bible as our measuring stick (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

**Inconsistent Expressions of Christian Values**

The topic of Christian values continued to emerge throughout the transcript. Participants represented their understandings of what it was to be a Christian. Notably, responses existed along a continuum, with some taking a very strict and literal interpretation of the faith, and others taking a more progressive position. Despite the central values of Christianity, general agreement did not exist as to how those teachings influenced life in the community.

While implementing the focus groups, it became clear that the Christian environment in which participants were raised was a proximate factor in how they saw their role in the Christian community. Environment influenced decision making in many instances. For example, Mara chose the university because it was a Christian environment. Mara’s story uncovers the role of
community environments and the relationships which exist in those communities in helping students decide on future courses of action. Mara lives in Virginia Beach:

Yes, so it was mainly just kinda like, I don't know, the luxury of going to Higher Matters. Really the main reason I came in the first place. Because I wasn't, I just didn't want to go there [ODU]. My youth pastors had graduated like the summer before, and then she was my mentor, and then right when I was going to apply, I didn't want to go to ODU, so she was like, "What about Higher Matters?" and I had never heard of it so then that's how it kind of came up (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

The fact that many people with whom Mara associated through her local church had a positive impression of Higher Matters University underscored the role that social supports play in college selection, particularly when a lack of college choice information exists for the student.

So ODU [Old Dominion University] is literally like walking distance from my house. So, like everybody goes there but like Higher Matters, like everybody from my church knew of Higher Matters as a Christian University. So, they had like a better holding in people's minds when I was telling them where I was going (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

The assumptions of social supports transcend the home community a student is contemplating leaving as he or she transitions to university, and extends to those that will become part of his or her support system at school. For example, Amy liked the aspect of having Christian friends, and was interested in the quality of Christian friendships. This was important to her because she was used to having a solid faith-based support system in her home environment. She was nervous that a lack of a similar structure derived from family, school, church, and friends would be challenging to her, and finding a reasonable support structure was
important in her decision to choose the university. “I figured it would be a good school to come to. You have good accountability and I’ll be able to have good Christian friends and build good relationships” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Continuing in that vein, another participant, Will, stressed the moral aspect of the university, reflecting on the expectations for behaviors and how the local activities are set up to help provide a solid moral culture. “Actually, kind of what I was seeking actually. Lot of good activities though. Lot of stuff that doesn’t require anything late night or illegal” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Others had perceptions of the Christian aspect of the university as well, but dissimilarities existed in their perceptions. Mike was of the mindset that most students at the university would be Christians, and for the most part, his expectations were met.

I thought that it'd be really. . . I'd say it's pretty much what I expected to it to be a Christian school you know with average people here not all of them are gonna be Christian but the people you come into contact with the most and really actually develop a relationship with generally are going to be believers (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

On the other hand, Anna held a completely different position, and seemed upset that a more Christian-centric identity was not apparent.

I thought it was going to be more Christian like people being here and being able to talk to me. . . I live in the East Campus, so I have seven quad mates and just like being able to talk to them in my hall meeting or in my prayer group. Just listening to the people is not what I thought it was going to be. I thought it was going to be like more Christian like or people who really wanted to be here because they're Christians and I have roommates
that are not Christian and are just Christians that think they are Christians but they are not Christians (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

The value judgment that some students were not expressing narrowly defined Christian values arose. Mike agreed in part that a difference in the overt practice of religion was apparent adding to the sentiment Anna expressed, and highlighting the intersectional aspects of the variety of denominations that make up the Christian world:

There are people here who aren't quite like the others, just kinda like, you're in the Christian culture but you're not in the faith as much. But I think that . . . there's different denominations, there's different like, different spheres of it (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

**Theme Two: Adapting to the Role of Student**

One of the more interesting aspects of the focus groups was the way students reported how they were adapting to the role of student. Since a social role, according to symbolic interactionism, is derived from group norms, and the expectations those norms place on individuals to adhere to those tenets, it is intuitively easier for those with like interpretations of community expectations to integrate (Stryker, 2007; 1980). Participants expressed the view that they would face increasing requirements to exercise personal responsibility to adapt and adhere to the role requirements as a student, but also to the social rules and conventions that describe life at the university.
Increased Personal Responsibility

A general sense prevailed that university life would carry a requirement for increased levels of personal responsibility. Participants mentioned the perception that academics would be hard, requiring their attention but that a certain amount of excitement attended the requirement that they act more responsible. The concern was described by Mara, who led into the topic of personal responsibility by reflecting on what she thought life at the university would be like. “I imagined it to be similar to high school but more workload, stuff like that, and then the social aspect to be – to, like, consist of more mature people” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Other participants also commented that they felt academics were going to be hard, and that this was something that would take much of their time. Sue had a much firmer grasp of the expectation that a good deal of personal responsibility was expected, and that the requirement was consistent with the responsibilities of adulthood.

I would say for me is I thought that there would be more organization, I guess, from the teachers, but I realized coming here that you have the weight of a class on you and you have to figure out when things are due. You got a look at the syllabus that was used like in high school and like a teacher, umm, was in charge . . . The teacher will be like "Tomorrow is due. Tomorrow is due. Tomorrow is due." And now it's like, “Well, it's on the syllabus, you should have read it.” That would be my experience. I mean it's a good step towards like adulthood because I'm not going to have people telling me all the time like, “Your bills are due. Your bills are due.” But I think it's good. It's just definitely different and something I didn't expect but I think it is good to help people mature and grow up kind of so that they do realize that they're not going to be babied (Focus Group Communication, 2016).
Alice, as a member of a sports team worried that academics and sports might be a difficult mix, highlighting her sense that practice and study time presented challenges.

Like as an athlete, I thought it was going to be really exhausting . . . uh, like we’re going to train and just study - do all of that stuff, and, uh, like, I don’t know, I also thought it was going to be, like, umm, like, umm, so hard like I thought it was going to be very difficult like academically talking, umm, and I don’t know. . . (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Mara used fewer words to describe her fears of successfully integrating to the college community, and others in her group responded with knowing nods and smiles indicating their agreement with Mara’s position about the potential difficulties they would face. Mara simply said: “Hard”! (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Despite the challenges of the transition to college life, which marks an important sequence of event for students, a certain anticipation, if not excitement was evident in participant responses. The first level of anticipation included the likelihood that the move to the college setting may be a student’s first time away from home for an extended period. Ruberman (2014) suggests that this time in life is filled with the added stress of “emerging adulthood”, a term she attributes to Arnett, and which carries with it a sense of all the psychosocial challenges that living on one’s own, making one’s own decisions, and accepting the consequences, both good and bad, of self-directedness (p. 108).

At the same time, the challenges of the transition to college provide a good deal of excitement, as the first focus group brought to light. For these students, they had, through their high school years, spent time wondering what would come next. Finally, it came time to apply to the schools of their choice, and then to choose between those to which they received
acceptance. After that, it is only the planning and anticipation of moving to the campus to begin a new chapter of their lives.

The focus groups expressed wide agreement that the transition of coming to college was exciting, and participants all displayed agreement and similar emotions when considering their future college adventure. The first responder in a focus group was Mike who jumped in quickly to express the excitement he felt when considering the university.

Pretty exciting, even before we set foot on campus For the most part I was really kinda just -- this is like the only school I actually even sent in an application form for just because I figured the only thing I really had in mind was, I want to go to, I want to get commissioned in the Army, I'm going to do that through ROTC, and I'd like to go to a Christian College and study history, and then I decided to study a minor in Chinese when I got here (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

For Alice, like so many other first-year students, the transition to university life was filled with firsts, and for her, these experiences were not only exciting but challenging. In Alice’s case, as in Jeff’s, the transition to the university was aided by their inclusion in the sports community. Higher Matters University has exceptionally active sports programs offering a variety of opportunities for students to participate in sports. Alice is an international student, and she expressed her nervousness and anticipation at leaving her home to travel to an entirely new culture.

I was really nervous . . . because – yes – it was my first flight alone like from Argentina. So, it was like all things new -- alone and everything – and, yes, I was really nervous and excited (Focus Group Communication, 2016).
Alice’s response to her travel requirements underscores the emotional challenges that leaving home to begin a new life circumstance can pose for new students. Alice had not researched the university, and her choice was made quickly based on the sports program at the university, and, significantly, was due to a personal conversation with the university’s coach.

I really didn’t have so much information like how it’s going to be because I decide to come here like three months before I came here, because I didn’t have a lot of information . . . Because the coach here . . . amazing. So, and they have a like different perspective because they thought their team was a family and I love that . . . I decided more for sports (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Since the college has done so much building over the past several years, including its sports facilities, I asked her what she thought of the facilities at the university. “They’re so good, yes, yes, everything’s like, umm, it’s more than we need” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

As she spoke about her experiences now that she is attending the university, she was glowing:

I love it. It’s amazing like, umm, people, it’s amazing, all the constructions and everything it’s exciting! Exciting, unbelievable, I love it, it’s very . . . like . . . the day to day is so hard, but it's like, it’s amazing (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

I asked her if her experience was consistent with what she expected before she came to campus. She responded thoughtfully expressing her apprehension and excitement in the same response.

It’s more than I thought it would be (laughs), but umm, like the classes and those types of things, they’re not so hard but they’re time consuming and we train so much – so, I love training. It’s awesome but it’s like you really have to really be able to manage time to be
like en route. It’s so exciting because people here think it’s really important. In Argentina, they like sports but nobody cares, but here it’s like so important, so that’s motivating (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Sam agreed wholeheartedly with Alice. He came to the school from Canada, so the transition included not just the typical transition to a school, but, like Alice’s experience, to an entirely new culture. Sam participates in a club sport as well. He is amazed at the quality of the facilities.

Yeah. Like I didn't expect that aspect of school to be so spectacular. The facilities here are crazy good. They just renovated it. But in that standpoint, it was actually better than what I imagined (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

**Adherence to Rules**

As a sub-theme, participants expressed an understanding that personal behavior would be governed by rules put in place to guide that behavior. Participants did not hold wholly compatible perceptions about the appropriateness of those guidelines/restrictions. The sense of inclusion expressed by Alice and Jeff, in part because of their participation in sports, was not shared among other participants. Mixed opinions were expressed, positively and negatively, on not only the quality of those rules, but often their necessity.

Amy had the sense that there were going to be rules that one would have to follow because the school is a Christian school. She was surprised that the over-all environmental feeling was less restrictive than she had imagined.

I thought the school is going to be strict with rules, they do have good rules that they stick with but I thought they’d be much stricter. They are strict enough. Like they have
good rules. I just thought it would be more uptight (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Don agreed with Amy, and both being the son of a pastor, and coming from a home-school environment contextualized much of his outlook.

But the atmosphere here, I did -- like she said coming from my background I kind of expected it to be a little stricter, but I was pleasantly surprised to find they weren’t overly strict about a lot of things. As far as the rules being unpleasant I don’t find many of the rules to be really restrictive about my personal behavior. Regardless of that I would say I would probably act based on my own principles no matter of what rule system I had in front of me but here I am kinda free to act according to my conscious not having to be restricted by any (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

The most negative responses to rules imposed by the university concerned convocation. Convocation is an hour or so long event with music, prayer, and speakers. The conversation about convocation erupted as an offshoot of comments about students’ views concerning the varied practice of Christianity among students. As the students that participated in this study are first-year students, it would be interesting to compare their views with students who have attended for multiple years. These conversations were in response to questioning if there was anything else they wanted to share. Anna jumped in at the chance to speak about convocation.

My aunt studied here a long time ago when (another person) was still the president. She talked about how like pastors came for convocation and missionaries so I thought it was going to be still like that. And I thought . . . well . . . and I was going to touch this or tell you this at some point, but it's maybe one of the questions that's coming after. Also, I think that in convocation all the pastors that come are not in line with the same
doctrine. So, it's like really confusing and for people that are starting in their Christian life, and their Christian walk with God is really confusing just to be hearing different perspectives or different doctrinal language. It doesn't challenge my faith but I disagree with many things that they say (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

George led into his comments on convocation by talking about people who are forced to do something in the university by circumstance, for example either because of financial concerns, or because of expectations. He spoke of a student who applied to a position because he did not have the money for the next semester, even though that student did not want the job. George conflated that student’s doing something he was not excited to do, with the required three times per week attendance at convocation, which he felt was an imposition.

I just like it kind of just felt forced like he had to do it because of money . . . and I was just like that’s just sad. I just see a lot of who's here that are kinda like that and I cannot talk about convocation. Okay, I get to the meeting once a week, but three times, all those songs, you literally hear them and you don’t feel the spirit anymore. You usually said, “Oh my God. Cry so low . . .” and you’re on your phone because you’re tired of it . . . you become desensitized to it (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Don observed that students are fined $25.00 for each time they miss convocation adding context to George’s concern about money. He felt that this was an imposition. A sentiment to which most expressed agreement.

This is what I’m gonna say is like I think convocation is great, don’t get me wrong, I really enjoy a lot of the good speakers that come, you make it mandatory though, then it becomes tough for everybody. That’s my concern. I would like the opportunity be open
for people to be able to go, but if they don’t want to go you should not penalize and make them pay money (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Don continued, expressing his feelings about the attendance requirements of convocation versus a more relaxed requirement for academic classes:

Either they reduce convocation to one time a week or they give us more skips is what I would suggest. Because they only give us one skip, but for a class, which is three times a week, we get four skips. And in convocation which is not academic credit they only give us one skip. It doesn’t make any sense (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Will agreed that convocation was challenging three times per week, but noted that at times he was happy that an opportunity existed to get together as a community.

I don't know about that. I mean convocation may be three days a week is a lot -- maybe two days a week might be more minimum. I just feel like since I have been going to convocation I have been able to hear a lot more from real famous people that I know my parents probably would never be able to hear from, never get to see them in your life. And if also with the songs also. I mean, yeah, that kind of gets the same . . . repetitive after a while, but I feel like sometimes you might have one of those bad days and since convocation is three times a week you might have a better chance of going in, and just kind of get the song might be new, kinda, get you new again, kinda to get your spirit up (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Amy added interesting, yet dichotomous, observations, noting the positive influences of a set time for community worship, but wondering at the appropriateness of some presentations:

I do agree with what he [Will] said. Like sometimes some of the songs go old like, "Oh my God, here we go again.” But for the most part I really like the worship time. I feel if
the song, if the words -- some songs I felt the words . . . I'm like why do we even bother singing this. But some of the songs have really good words and I think I like to sing the songs. But then at the same time sometimes it is annoying like having to go. If the speaker who's not a Christian and what they talk about doesn’t help anybody and why did they even pick you. Because they have one CEO come of chicken nuggets or something like that. I thought that was weird. I didn’t know why they brought him in (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Theme Three: Perceptions of Marginalization

Disingenuous People

Will started a line of discussion, surprising in its context considering his low key and shy manner, which exposed some of the negative perceptions some participants shared. It is interesting to note that positive impressions existed in the first focus group, but the second focus group moved more towards negative perceptions of the community and their place therein. Participants noted the influence of perceived stereotypes which they thought existed in their on-campus housing experience. Stereotypes are theorized to affect how a person negotiates his or her identity in much the same way as identities are characterized through Burke’s (2004) explanation of identity theory. As an example, Rogers, Schröder, and Scholl (2013) argue that the effects of stereotypes in within group interactions in some ways “reflect the relative power and esteem of social groups” as they influence actors’ behaviors (p. 130). This affect is clearly noticeable in the following comments. Will began to speak of how groups are sometimes exclusive.

Honestly, I am not sure what exactly I expect because this was entirely new for me.

I’ve got to say everyone was much more friendly and kind than I expected and I guess
that’s what struck me the most at first, I guess . . . except for some groups (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

It is not unusual for groups to form for a variety of reasons, but the sense that these were exclusive was disconcerting for several participants. Will went on to observe how groups tended to keep to themselves, an observation which prompted Amy to jump into the conversation about groups, exposing a stereotype she perceived.

I have these groups here . . . they’ll be friendly if you talk to them or if you want to do an activity with them they would say yes to be nice, but you’re not really a part of the friend group. And I feel like maybe it is kind of following the southern stereotype -- I feel like southern people are like really not genuine when they are nice. It's kinda fake. Not like I feel you are, Will, because I am also from up north too. I sense it more now when I am back here like everyone will be friendly but a lot of . . . I don’t know. I feel like a lot of people here who have their groups they’ll be nice to you but I feel like a lot of it's kind of fake. Last semester I had some friends I hung out with but once they got more people, I felt they were all really fake, they only wanted it to be them, they wouldn't really say that (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Don supported Amy’s perception with his comments. Recall that Don grew up in the church as a pastor’s son. He was home schooled, so many of his prior social interactions were in the church community rather than in a school setting. “Well most of my life I have come to understand that most human beings in this world are fake” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). The entire group nodded in affirmation. Don continued:

As far as the southern mentality goes I haven’t noticed a huge difference. My sister however, was at a very small school where she experienced that very much. They
were being nice to her but she could tell there was disdain towards her and all that kind of thing. Especially when she didn’t perform up to their expectations . . . something along those lines. Around here, I only hang out with a few people because that’s always been my way. It’s more efficient to make friends you know you can trust, you can’t hang out with everyone (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

A sense that students at a Christian school should act authentically was a common expectation among the group, however their responses suggested that such is not always the case. Moreover, that fact was surprising to these participants. Don revealed that the confrontation with disingenuousness was confirmed by his past experiences.

Well, I grew up in a church community and in youth group and all that type of thing. My observations come from that because I was home schooled, I wasn’t a public-school student. All people I ran into were pretty Christian and that’s where I started making observations about fakeness and all that (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Marginalization Arising from Housing

The conversation turned towards students’ feelings of marginalization which arose over perceptions of inconsistencies in their experiences of some university policies. University housing was seen in a negative light among the participants of the second focus group. George explains how the subject of housing became a challenge for him.

It’s so weird. Like last semester one of my roommates, I don’t know, because I felt I wasn’t paying attention to really anyone or anything that was going on. I was always like come back to my room sleeping and go to library after class. That was the only thing I would do. And you know, it was last semester this guy asked me where I was living and if I was living on campus. So, I was like, "Yeah, I am living at the Annex."
And the look on his face was literally like, "Oh my God! You literally live in the pit or something." Like I have been . . . (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Don quickly broke in with an explanation of the Annex.

The Annex was one of the old housing developments that were recently shut down . . . a very close to off-campus community of people. We had a bad name with main campus people for some reason, I don’t know why (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

George went on:

Yeah, I didn’t know that. For me just like I don’t know. I didn’t really know and I was like I am not really good at looking at people's expression but his body language was so strong that I was able to notice it. I asked my roommate I was like, "Wait! What do people say about on Annex?" And he told me, he started this conversation and he was like, “Oh yeah, apparently, people will live on campus, and the commons were the rich people and rich kids and we are like the poor.” I was like, “oh my God! Like seriously?” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

The perception that those living at the Annex are different was pervasive in the group, several of whom had lived at the Annex during their first semester. A perception common to this group, which was troubling to participants, was an element of implied classism which they felt existed. Don explained.

Okay, last semester I was on the Annex and it shut down. But, obviously, the pricing differences in the housing developments themselves is what kind of creates a class divide. It leads indirectly to that, it’s not intentional. I have heard because east campus is kind of pricey, that it’s very stuck-up people who live there, but, obviously, that’s a generalization. Coming from the Annex, the generalization, as it was explained to me,
was that mostly the people there were either foreigners or problem children in the East (dorm) on the Annex. That’s what they told me. It’s mostly foreigners and problem children. I heard from a guy on the Annex, he was explaining to me why there was such a difference. To be honest a lot of people on the Annex were unique at the same time they -- you could see they felt justified in being themselves because the community encouraged that. That was the Annex community . . . everyone could be themselves you know and I am sure here on main campus it’s not that people are inherently different, it’s just that they don’t feel able to show that behavior necessarily (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Amy commented on the stereotype of those residents of the Annex.

I have heard the stereotype of the Annex how just people there are like weird, not that necessarily that’s true but that’s the stereotype I have heard. I haven’t heard about like foreigners, I haven't heard that. I just heard people are weird. I have heard comments like it’s a true stereotype like the rich people. Yeah, but just to verify. I do though believe there are lot of great people here who are genuine and totally are Christ like, but then there are also other groups (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

**Theme Four: Reactions to Politicization**

The political representations of the university caused interesting emotional responses among participants. The discussion began with additional comments about convocation, and the practice of using convocation as a political platform. The conversation was spirited and pointed with George expressing an attitude that was almost disdainful.

One more thing about convo, sometimes I feel like it kind of becomes like a political platform and I am just like, why? (Focus Group Communication, 2016).
Participants remembered how presidential candidates from both parties had been speakers at convocation. Will wondered about their visits, but expressed his sense that the university was trying to present both sides of the argument.

Yeah. [Democratic candidate] came here because I mean that seemed very controversial to me because I thought this would be a very Republican university. I thought it’s amazing how they show they respect everyone’s to view (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

The sense that the university was Republican in its perceived outlook was prevalent. Amy explained that it was important to her to see who maintained a Christian outlook, although she believed candidates were not necessarily Christian, and this caused her to negotiate the sense that at least they may or may not support her Christian viewpoints on some topics. The intersection of social norms and political expedience is thought provoking.

To me like majority of the college is Republican. Because usually it's Republican. I think for this time of the voting, a lot of candidates, they do not have the Christian values that would be ideal but it is important to know who best upholds our Christian values (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Others were not so sure that a clear political position was in keeping with their beliefs, calling into question what they understood to be a more narrowed viewpoint. Don spoke about his frustrations with the universities positioning.

I’m going to go and say if here in the university -- and the reason now is kind of frustrating me -- we have started talking about politics and I’d like them to make a choice. Either you take a position as the university and you say we’re going to be leaning more toward bringing you mostly Christian teachers, or you say we’re not
going to be biased in who we bring you and we let you make that choice for yourselves and teach Christian principles in classes (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

I asked Don what his preference would be.

I think it would be better to bring everyone in. Anyone -- every point of view we can find so we can all know what they believe and critique it on our own. That’s important for me. And I admire that principle. And here in college, in convocation, people like resident representatives like David [inaudible] come up and say you know: We are a Christian university and respect Christian principles and support Christian principles and I completely agree with that sentiment, but when you’re talking about convocation and bringing people in, are you going to be more biased toward bringing in more Christian people, or are you gonna do what you said and try to widen the perspective and bring all kinds of people (Focus Group Communication, 2016)?

Will, like Amy, lamented that some of the politicians were not even Christian, and who, based on their comments, did not make a wholly positive impression on the students, in his opinion. This was an added stress for Will, and for others, as the incongruence between politics and religion was unsettling. Will began on the subject of [Republican candidate], “Like [Republican candidate] . . . he didn't even know what Easter was” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). Will wondered if that candidate was even a Christian. Don responded, “Not really. Not to a biblical standard. But he is endorsed by the university (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

The dichotomy Don suggested in his last statement drew reactions from the group at large. Will and Amy suggested separately that the endorsement was the university president’s
choice, and reflected his politics, but not the position of the school, or members of the community. Don again jumped into the discussion:

That’s why people are always saying he’s putting his foot in his mouth. Because he is saying statements and he is responsible to represent the student body and the administration here. So, when he says stuff like that people say, oh, the university believes this. From an individual standpoint, I’ll say believe what you believe from an administrative standpoint, I’ll say you have to be aware of your responsibilities. You have to be politically aware and not necessarily politically correct but politically aware (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

And finally, in terms of the politicization of the university, many were concerned with some of the comments the administration had brought forward. A specifically thorny subject concerned concealed weapons. The concern about violence on college campuses has an infamous history with many examples of tragedies which have occurred due to gun violence. Administrations in higher education are ubiquitously involved in questions about campus safety. The topic gives rise to a variety of opinions. George, for example volunteered feelings about gun control and concealed carry, which had been a controversial issue on campus.

Do you remember that comment about gun control? I had my entire family calling me be like, “We want you to transfer where there are no ISIS.” I think you should let people make those decisions for themselves. You cannot say that the entire school believed that. I have been literally targeted because I go to this university because of those comments that he made -- like some of my friends were saying like, "Oh! Don’t you go to Higher Matters? Haven’t you heard?" And I was like, "No I don’t go to
Higher Matters.” He was just like “oh, my God!” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Others had a less volatile reaction to the subject. Amy for example, felt that if more people had weapons, bad actors would not feel so entitled to engage in random shooting. Don recalled that the question of concealed carry was one that the school’s president supported, but did not mandate. He was concerned about the apparent challenge to specific groups.

He didn’t mandate it. He just said that he supported it. He said he is not making a rule we all get a permit at a certain age, but when you say something like . . . when you name some particular group in specific, you’re laying a challenge to that group. And personally, I’m like, well we have enough people here with guns who will shoot them, but that puts people in danger at the same time. I can understand the concern; personally, I don’t care, let them come, we will hurt them. But from other people’s perspective, for people who aren’t as capable as myself at defending themselves, I would say, yes, they are put in danger by that statement (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

**Theme Five: Challenges of Relationships**

As students move into young adulthood in the campus setting, relationship challenges begin to arise. One of the more interesting discussions concerning relationships, which came up in both focus groups, was an observation of what the students saw as a tradition: A ring by spring. It was explained by participants that the idea was to find a potential spouse by the end of spring term. Sam brought it up as we were discussing campus life in a focus group: “And now I want to tell you something -- well, the “ring by spring” thing here is pretty -- it holds true but . . .” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).
When asked him to explain the tradition, Sam added:


But coming in as an individual and thinking individually like while I was here --

because I got a girlfriend, it changed my views from only being individual to being like

hey, how do I impact this person, too? Yeah, I got whipped basically [all laughing]

(Focus Group Communication, 2016).

In the second focus group, the subject was raised again in response to a question about
the challenges of relationships. Varied and interesting perceptions existed across this group
which evidenced a continuum of positions. Will had heard of it, as had George and Amy. The
perceived problem with such a tradition among the group was the fact that students are only 18
to 22 years old, and their thoughts were that this age is much too young for the kind of
commitment that the tradition of “a ring by spring” implies. Moreover, the pressures of the age
group come to bear. The following two responses, the first from Don and the second from Amy,
disclose these perceptions.

Yeah. Lot of people kind of coming into college and checking if they haven’t had a lot of
success in relationships before coming to college, they feel this is their chance and they
rush it. I can definitely say that a lot of people are rushing it. I mean if you feel prepared
for that kind of responsibility then I say you might as well go for it, but most people
aren’t prepared for that kind of responsibility (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Amy brought her view to the discussion that the pressures of the age coupled with the
added pressures of religious appropriateness confront students as they contemplate and engage in
dating.
Part of it is also that a lot of people here are coming from a Christian background, so you are always learning about how God has your mate for you. If they're gonna find them here, so when they find someone that they think lines up with everything they think like, I suppose, this is the one. Yeah. And also, since they believe you cannot have sex till marriage, that’s another reason they do get married quickly is because, oh, we don’t want to sin, but we wanna do everything (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Results - Interviews

Research Questions 2 and 3

Research questions 2 and 3 were investigated through semi-structured interviews, with the aid of perspectives gained in classroom observations, and from my journaling. The interviews were held with each participant over the course of several days. Research question 2 asks: How do the inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as a student? Research question 3 asks: How do received and evaluated inputs, understood by the student to be reflected appraisals from the community, influence students' self-reported intentions to persist as students?

In this context, responses to semi-structured interview questions, journal notes, and classroom observations, coupled with what had been discussed in the focus groups, began to create a perspective on how students felt about their time at the university. When considering the role of student, as an enacted role, it was important to gain an understanding of how the individual participant located themselves in the community, how the environment influenced them in their daily lives, and finally how they began to react to the inputs they received from the community. These perceptions contextualized participants’ considerations about the prospect of continuing at the university.
As was done with focus group responses, a simple frequency table was employed to help bracket like statements. The use of the table helped bring to light “overlapping statements” and was an aid to understanding topical horizons and “invariant constituents” as they came into view (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Part of the processing at that point was to reduce like responses to essential elements by removing duplicate statements and non-relevant remarks from the transcript. After committing the transcript to an initial bracketing, related items were grouped, and finally, the themes which were left began to emerge. Once themes were identified, there was time to reflect on the participants individually, on their personalities, their manners of speaking, observations of their senses of self, and on their contributions to the interview topics.

**Themes- Interviews**

Three constant themes emerged from the interviews, as well as related subthemes describing each phenomenon. These themes are (a) perceived difficulties with academics, (b) challenges in social acculturation, and (c) self-reported intent to persist. Sub-themes under the theme of perceived difficulties with academics examined students’ self-reported perceptions of their academic capacities, their perceptions of the role they were to play as students, their views on academic feedback, and their descriptions of the perceived quality of the academic program. In response to the challenge of social acculturation, sub-themes emerged which described how participants felt they were fitting in to the university, a discussion of their perceptions of the commonality of held values, and finally the perceptions of the similarities and differences in worship styles. The main theme of participants self-reported intent to persist exposed subthemes which identified the influence of relationships, challenges they associated with persistence, and their over-all sense of purpose.
As the transcript was processed the responses committed to bracketing, as described above, the emerging themes became intuitive. Responses to the theme of the perceived difficulties with academics had to do with the participants’ experiences as students, while their reported challenges in social acculturation had more to do with their experiences with peers and friends. The overriding aspect of the university as a Christian university came out in responses regarding issues of faith and spirituality, while the students’ perceptions about their association with the university were useful in uncovering how they felt about completing their degrees at the university.

Again, the use of a table brought these incidences into relief, making it easier to see their relationships. Table 3 represents this part of the process.

Table 3
Themes—Interviews
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Relative Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Sample, n = 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male = 6 (54.54%)</td>
<td>Female = 5 (45.45%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Difficulties with Academics</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Academic Capacity</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. The Role of Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Academic Program</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>90.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Fitting In</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Common Values</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Worship Style</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Self-reported Intent to Persist</td>
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<td>100.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Relationships</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Challenges to Persistence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Sense of Purpose</td>
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**Theme One: Difficulties with Academics**

Individual students’ descriptions of their challenges at the university clarified a variety of sub-themes which helped to illuminate students’ individual lived experiences. Interest existed in
how students perceived their abilities in academics. Also, it was important to understand how participants perceived the defined role of student, what it meant to them to be a student, and what they believed enacting the role required of them. Finally, it was important to learn how the participants thought their program of choice at the university would prepare them to continue in life beyond college. The theme of academics incorporates a larger grouping of participant responses than all other themes, and so takes the most description. It was illuminating to see how students responded to the challenges of their academic interactions. The following discussion presents some of their perceptions.

**Academic Capacity**

When students were asked how they characterized their academic capacities, a continuum of responses were received. Most thought of themselves as average or above average. Sue was a little tenuous in her description of self, and she suggested that she felt she was only slightly above average. Sam had a similar response, but Mike had a reasonably thought out answer to the question.

I'd say mine at the moment is limited to the liberal arts field. I'm not an engineer, I'm not, I'm not going to be a bio-medical scientist. I might be a linguist at best, but I think that when you get to college you find out what you're really good at. Like basic Math, okay. What else can I function in that capacity but I'm not really, I don't feel like I have the mental acuity to become an engineer. I might be able to, but . . . you know (Personal Communication, 2016)?

Mike was heading towards a career in the military, which he had explained during the focus group discussions. Nevertheless, he was not concerned about whether his academic choices had to especially preparatory for a specific career field in the military.
I didn't realize that I'm not taking a bunch of [inaudible] I'm taking what I want to take, what I shouldn't even take, and you know, it's diverse but it's focused in the right direction towards what’s going to give me a good standing and career in the military (Personal Communication, 2016).

His primary concern was that he would be able to demonstrate solid Christian leadership in the military.

A variety of distractions were challenges faced by several students. For example, while the social life of the campus offers opportunities for time away from studies for students, personal proclivities became distractive for other students. Will, had a hard time characterizing his strengths as a student. He admitted to spending a little too much time in other personal endeavors which took away from his focus on academics.

I love this school. I'm not sure how I qualify as a strong student. I know I do have my challenges, like distractions. Netflix, I guess some . . . I know a roommate of mine, we both get a free trial, kind of got sucked into it and my school work was probably near in a back seat almost . . . When the free trial was over I was really relieved because now I felt I have more focus on my school work and whatnot, but even after that I - before and after that I just feel like it's still just tough for me to just sit down and get my full attention on it (Personal Communication, 2016).

In another interview, Amy, whose her perception was that she was a pretty good student, admitted to a similar distraction.

I feel like I'm a pretty good student. I do have my Netflix binges, but I like to just plan out what I have to do and write it all down, and I put in the time slots how long each thing will take, and then, I just get my work down (Personal Communication, 2016).
Note, however, Amy’s nod to her significant organizational skills. She takes the time to plan her work and perhaps has less of a haphazard approach than Will’s suggestion of the norm for his work style.

Don provided an interesting response to the question of his academic capacity. He had a variety of educational experiences in his formative schooling, and his perspectives were broad based.

I've always been an A student but my educational experience has varied significantly. I started out home schooling, made a transition into private school after a little bit of cyber-schooling in between. I will say that cyber-schooling was bad for my learning style, because I'm an audio learner and not a visual learner, so without having a teacher to actually speak with and discuss I can't learn things as well. So, private school, my grades got really good in private school even though they were good before they got really good (Personal Communication, 2016).

It was interesting that a student at Don’s level had a sense of his learning style. Don explained that cyber-schooling, which he explained to be an online course of study, was not appropriate for his learning style because he enjoyed having someone with whom to debate and to test his thinking. He did think that his organizational skills were more important.

Just drawing lines of logic for me depends on sound. And coming here to college I've been doing very well but the issue for me will probably be time management. I have a lot of confidence in my ability to do things within a very short amount of time, but sometimes I don't leave myself enough time. I underestimate my work and seems like it just can't be done in the time frame I thought it will be over (Personal Communication, 2016).
George hit upon a means to relieve the stress associated with studying. His response gives good insight to how he manages his approach to the challenges of academics.

I, yearly, have a to-do list on my iPhone and on time of like what I have to do next in an everyday basis. When I come home I would - what I eat- I would watch like twenty minutes of "Friends" -- because it's only twenty minutes -- when I'm done I can just take my nap for thirty minutes and then get back to study. I just try to vary because before, like, I've always been a pretty good student with a high GPA and it's just before I would just do study, study, study and then sometimes I would get crammed and now I would just balance by doing that. Twenty minutes of something funny or watch Vines or Instagram, my friends Snapchat story for ten minutes, and I will go back to studying again and it helps me (Personal Communication, 2016).

The Role of Student

Students’ perceived several challenges in understanding and enacting the role of student at the university level. In terms of an enacted identity, the ability to understand and implement the behaviors descriptive of the role as the institution understands it to be, is necessary for group cohesion. Indeed, the group provides feedback to the individual as he or she enacts the role, consistent with identity theory (Burke, 2004). The role of student in the university setting is intuitively different than that of the student role for a high school student. Participants were asked what it meant to them to be a student, understanding that how they viewed the role of student for themselves would help to characterize their resilience when challenges in academia arose. The responses ranged from those of passive adherence to academic norms for some students to an activated and assertive exploration for others. Will, for example defined the passive stance with his response.
To give your full attention to your professor, take in what they're saying and really try to understand it and apply to your own life and follow their- I would say orders or command. Follow their instructions, their assignment and complete them. Try to help build on what they are saying also (Personal Communication, 2016).

Amy had a similar viewpoint underscoring the role social expectations play in driving behaviors. Amy suggested that being a student was all about going to class and getting good grades, as did Mara, Sue, and Art. Sue alluded to the influence grades have on future success, something with which many participants agreed.

So, it's basically the grades are what keep you getting to the next level. I feel like everything in the end it's all about getting a good grade. There are people who don't do well in school and they end up becoming very successful. But pretty much, if you are not getting good grades, you are not going to be - at least the stereotype you won't be successful. The main role is to do whatever you can do get good grades (Personal Communication, 2016).

While the aspect of future success was ubiquitously present throughout most of the participants, Sam had the viewpoint that being a student occupied a lesser position on the social ladder than being in the workforce, and he was frustrated with where that perception located him in his role as a student.

For me, it's almost a means to an end because I would love to just go ahead to the workforce, but you need credentials to be able to go to work. But as a student, you're learning all the time and it is up to you to learn and retain the knowledge. But at the same time, from an outward view, you're almost not taken very seriously as a student. From the jobs standpoint, they would look at you and say, "Oh, you're just learning still."
From the institutional standpoint, I would say it's based on class, freshmen are less than others (Personal Communication, 2016).

On the other end of the spectrum was Don’s response, although he did agree that meeting expectations was a proximate goal in his enactment of the role of student. Don also made the distinction between acting in compliance to the social expectations of being a student and scholarship.

As far as a definition go, I'm going to separate scholar from student. I've always been a scholar outside being a student. I love to learn new things, but being a student is a burden on my shoulder with having to be mandated to learn certain things. Yes, and hopefully being able to apply that to your future career (Personal Communication, 2016).

**Feedback**

Participants took a wide range of positions when it came to feedback from professors in the university. In some circumstances, they saw feedback as helpful. In other instances, it was off-putting, and in at least one, based on how the feedback was delivered, it was embarrassing.

Amy felt that because her classes were so large, the feedback was insufficient to be motivating, in fact, because it was often just a note appended to her Blackboard account, it was frustrating. Mike’s response underscored the role that graduate assistants play in the university, and in feedback. Mike described how and when feedback from faculty can be helpful.

It depends on the class. There is . . . it is like, something like Western CIV. For the most part it's decently helpful; but, if it's something like if it's just a GA doing it there, they didn't teach the class so what they're doing is they're grading on parameters that the professor gave them and they don't know the student. It's not as personal. I have a friend who went to Wheaton, he transferred from Wheaton to come here. He said that a lot of
the faculty there have like that attitude I got mine now you have to get yours, not I want to help you get yours. If I learn, I'm a student for myself, I'm learning from the experience by teaching you I'm proving that art, demonstrating it, flexing my, well not my muscles, but exercising the muscle of knowledge by providing you that tool so you can be a leader and help you improve yourself (Personal Communication, 2016).

Although it may not initially be apparent, Mike displayed an undercurrent of frustration he felt about some of the feedback, although that same sense was not expressed throughout the sample. Mara was thrilled with the fact that professors prayed before class with their students. For her it was an affirmiting experience.

I really -- every professor I've had cares. They pray before class starts but like they don't do it because you don't have to, because they are required to, but like they want to, you know; they want you to know we're all in this together kind of a thing. But, also, I haven't had one professor who was either like finished the class or emailed us or contacted me individually it’s just been like, “I'm praying for you” like and I believe they say that because they honestly mean it and they are praying for us. Even if it’s not . . . I haven't had one professor not say, “I am praying for you and I love you guys.” And I thought they were just saying it because they felt required, you know, like I believe every single professor even if it's not by name they're praying for as close as they can get to you as possible like if they could get to know every student and get them to do their best (Personal Communication, 2016).

The sense that feedback can be too positive came out in Sue’s responses. In keeping with identity control theory, when inputs to one’s behavior are overly negative, or overly positive, they can spark “increased negative emotions” (Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 406). Sue described
feedback that was too positive, where she may have felt that the level of response was not deserved. In one instance, in which Sue felt that she had not done her best work, she was held up before the class as an example of the kind of work the professor was looking for from the class. Sue’s responses highlight feelings of embarrassment she felt at being presented as a comparison to the outputs of the whole class. Her eyes filled lightly with tears as she replied:

Embarrassed . . . it feels not genuine, like fake. Oh . . . yes, and because it was done in a way that it was trying to get other people do the same as me and I didn't want to be compared to everyone else; not in front of the whole class. They didn't end up liking me (Personal Communication, 2016).

Art, the enigmatic artist, who was quick to claim earlier that he did not always do his best, in fact, intentionally did the minimum amount just to get by, claimed to enjoy feedback. Further conversation revealed that he liked critical feedback to his artistic endeavors, but not so much to his classwork, which he dismissed as unimportant.

I like when I get -- I actually enjoy getting bad feedback because if I get that and like -- this is why I think feedback is necessary, especially if it's like feedback that's not too positive. Because like if they don't tell you where you're doing bad or where you're doing, how you're going to improve on who like you as a human being -- and I like to draw and make music, and I tell my friends “Hey, look at this. But please don't be generous because you're my friends. Be assholely brutal with me because I want to improve as an artist.” I do have a passion for art which I do try like to really excel at, but like when it comes to academics, not so much, and English, Spanish, History, Science, Math, like those are always in the back of my mind. I realized that's not what it's
supposed to be but I can't really pull myself out of that the same way (Personal Communication, 2016).

Participants also did not like overly-critical feedback, or feedback that was not deserved, no matter if it was positive feedback, or negative feedback. As an example, Mike, when asked how he felt if he received positive feedback to an assignment for which he did not put forth his usual effort, indicated that he would not be happy.

Ah, I'd feel, I wouldn't really take encouragement like, yes, they're trying to be compassionate but come on, I'm responsible for my own actions. I really didn't try I mean kinda do I really mean that, I don't want to say the word suck but do I really want to suck up to them [inaudible]? No. You need to put forth your effort. Because you know as Professor B said: “I care as much as you care.” That’s right, a professor should care as much as I care. He can't make you care (Personal Communication, 2016).

Inconsistency in received feedback was off-putting as well, causing respondents to have to decide on the accuracy and quality of the feedback, rather than just accepting it as constructive. George was concerned that professors would always find something negative, even in work that received good feedback. To him it was annoying. Don provided a concrete example for a class in which he had a large section and a secondary breakout group.

The way they have it set up is very similar to ‘comms’ where you have a major class with the actual professors and you have a breakout group with your GA. But the way they had the main paper set up, is you would write a rough draft, it would be evaluated by your GA and then you would get their feedback. And later on, you would write more rough draft. Consecutively, you would get evaluated by an off-campus professor, a third opinion. They would send you feedback on your rough draft and then, you would submit
your final draft. The actual professor had not seen any of your rough drafts. They will evaluate your final draft and it's all based on their personal opinion. They had no feedback on your rough drafts whatsoever. You don't know if you did what they wanted. As a result of that, what I was told I had what would be a 99-100 grade on my paper that turned out to be 69. That was frustrating because it was a system that doesn't take into account its own flaws. It's really not efficient. What I realized is that it happened to a lot of other people. It had happened to people who had taken the class with that professor before. I'm not going to have my work insulted like this and I left and I tested out of it and that's that (Personal Communication, 2016).

**Academic Program**

Most of the participants were very positive about their experiences at the university, although, yet when considering how their academic program was preparing them for their future careers, a relatively even division existed between being prepared and unsure if the program was preparatory. In the main, this was somewhat associated with the clarity the student had about the career path they were planning to take. For example, Mike, who is seeking a commission in the Army, was clear that his preparation was on track. Mike is leaning towards liberal arts, but he also participates in ROTC, and he saw his classes and his ROTC participation as singularly formative experiences.

Sue also feels prepared. Sue wants to teach and is always looking for information that she feels will prepare her for her future. When asked what a sense of preparedness meant to her, and if she felt she would be prepared to enter her career field, Sue’s sense of confidence in her future readiness came through as she answered.
I think that it's about your readiness to go into your occupation. I feel like I'm gonna be prepared because my professors challenge us and make us do the extra things to prepare us and be better than the people we're gonna be competing with for those interviews. So, I think I'll be very prepared (Personal Communication, 2016).

On the other end of the spectrum, Art was not so sure that anything he took at the university would prepare him for the future he imagined for himself. He did not think the coursework was a benefit, and felt almost that he was just checking a box for which he saw little value. In terms of finding a job in an artistic field, he thought it would be an easy transition. “It's like everywhere that's hiring, they want an artist. All I have to do is show them a portfolio and it's like you're hired” (Personal Communication, 2016).

Sam was unsure if he was being properly prepared. He shook his head and contemplated how he might find a position in investment banking, and if his course of study would get him there.

I don't know yet, but I have a few years left, so we'll see. We'll see how well-prepared I am. I've applied to some internships and they've denied me because I'm not prepared enough yet, but I am only a freshman (Personal Communication, 2016).

Sam expects a great deal of himself, and appeared frustrated with the topic. I asked him what his major was going to be: “I have four. They're all like pretty similar. It's like finance, economics, financial planning, and professional selling” (Personal Communication, 2016).

Theme Two: Difficulties in Social Acculturation

Without much dissension in the academic community, fostering a sense of belonging among first-year college students is a continuing challenge. More to the point, fostering students’ “subjective sense of belonging”, as researchers Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, and Woods
(2009) argue, is an important and “unique factor” supporting what is ultimately “a complex model of student achievement” (p. 665), and a fundamental factor in “intentions to persist and actual persistence” among students (p. 666). With such compelling perspectives on the role of sense of belonging at contextualizing persistence, it is interesting to consider how acculturation to a Christian college may influence sense of belonging among students of diverse backgrounds. This is interesting not just from the typical sense of diversity, which is often described along racial and ethnic lines, but from the theological diversity which exists inside the multi-faceted Christian worldview. Sub-themes which evidenced themselves in response to the difficulties in social acculturation are (a) fitting in – the sense of belonging that students’ share, their locus of place and purpose within the community. The discussion of how participants felt they were fitting in included their perceptions of (b) shared beliefs and values, or the lack thereof, and perceived differences in (c) worship style.

**Fitting In**

In this study, a question posed to student participants asked them how they felt they were fitting in to the campus community. The answers were contextualized by the Christian nature of the institution. The following are responses that represent a diversity of opinion, and which underscore the challenges students’ face as they attempt to find their niche in the community.

Mike had an interesting perspective, which exposed an area of contention, although he did not notice implied inconsistencies and value judgments. Nevertheless, he felt he was fitting in well.

I got common values. I mean, yes, I can talk to pretty much anyone. Yes, I am against abortion. Yes, I’m against things . . . I mean who you’re voting for? Who’s apart? Most everyone’s gonna say they’re Republican Independent, not many Democrats on the
campus, thankfully. But I think you fit in pretty well. I mean seriously I can find pretty much anybody in my hall and sit down, and have a theological-philosophical conversation we’re both gonna be on the same plain because we both draw information from the same book (Personal Communication, 2016).

I asked Mike if Republican equated to Christian, since he mentioned that not many attending the school were Democrats.

No, it doesn't equate to Christian. But the argument you can make is that the planks and platforms -- whether the representatives or politicians follow them or not – social platforms, it is a conservative platform. That is, it’s more congruent or compatible to Biblical principles. Just because you’re a Democrat doesn’t mean you’re not a Christian, but I don’t see how you could really be a Christian and really be doing . . . I don’t see how you could in good conscience be supporting the democratic party for all the things they support and call yourself a Christian that holds the values that they’re against, honestly (Personal Communication, 2016).

Mike was certain that similar values were ubiquitously held among students, notwithstanding the wide range of opinions that are apparent in student groups. For Mike, because values were widely held, barriers to inclusion were reduced.

Yes . . . exactly, it reduces the social firewalls until, you know, because it’s a Christian school, you all hold the same values, it’s much easier to make friends than it is in secondary school (Personal Communication, 2016).

Not every participant shared Mike’s sense of value centrality. Art was not so sure that everyone was on the same page in terms of beliefs.
Like what the question being what keeps me from like interacting with others and okay. Well, despite being a Christian institution, there are people who do not exhibit that kind of behavior and that represents a majority of us. And I'm not saying myself, like I'm probably in that same group being acknowledged (Personal Communication, 2016).

Alice, an avowed atheist, mentioned how she was on a sports club that prayed before workouts and competitions. When asked how that felt to her, she admitted that, although she was not of the faith, and had no plans to become a Christian, praying as a group was comforting to her. “We all pray before, like practice and . . . that feels good to me. Like, as a group, or family; we sort of take care of each other” (Personal Communication, 2016).

Despite Art’s sense that people exhibited behaviors which he considered uncharacteristic for Christians in a Christian school, and in keeping with the experience Alice shared, Mara pointed out that people she knows are accepted by the community even though they were not seen as, or did not self-identify as, Christian.

Because, the guy that’s not even Christian he’s so accepted here and like . . . Yeah, he’s accepting towards our acceptance. He’s open to it. He’s like, “okay, I’m surrounded by these people that I don’t generally agree with”, but he’s like “they love on me.” We can have a normal conversation. Every time we hang out we’re not gonna be quoting Bible verse to him or something. So, we’re open to him and he’s open to us about it. So, I could you know . . . That’s one person but there’s obviously more people here that are like him that I hope are getting the same experience. So, that would be like the only thing I could think of (Personal Communication, 2016).
Worship Style

Changing topics, slightly, Mara became quiet as she considered an area of personal discomfort regarding the differences in how people worship.

And then sometimes with the different denominations here like, some people just worship differently, and I know I’ve had a couple of friends that kinda question themselves, “Am I worshipping well enough?” And I’m just, you know like me I play an instrument so we’re going to convo and if I know the song I’ll sing it, but sometimes I’ll just stand there cause I’m just talking to God. I’m not gonna sit there and sing. And you know . . . yeah, like, raise my hands? At some points I kinda felt I needed to because everybody was or something. But there’s never a reason that I should’ve felt that way other than putting myself in that situation (Personal Communication, 2016).

As she continued to consider the social expectations of individual worship style, she wondered whether a certain style was required of her, or was she questioning a response from herself? She thought for a moment and then went on:

Sometimes, you kinda put (expectations) on yourself. They’re not really outwardly, like, this is how you should do it or this is how it’s gonna get to God or whatever. It’s just you look around and you’re, okay following the expectation of the school. ‘Cause, I had a religious background but I went to public school . . . half my family is not saved. The only interaction with Christian people I got was a conservative Baptist church. So, there’s not a lot of hand raising going on in there. So, I come here and I’m just like, ‘okay, how should I react? How do I feel like I’m connecting to God? So, but in a way, that doesn’t even discern or make me doubt anything, it just kinda helps me in a way. Kinda figure it out faster on my own independently -- this is how I’m gonna worship God
or this is how my peers worship God, I might do it differently but it’s going the same way (Personal Communication, 2016).

The challenges presented by worship style are much the same as those presented by the sense that common values exist. While a foundation of similarity may exist, the reports of participants indicate that those similarities are not altogether inclusive. Mara continued:

Well I mean here there's probably hundreds of different types of Christians like, denominations and everything here, like, I honestly believe if you're worshiping the right God, like the only God, that the label falls off in heaven. Like you don't fall to his knees and he like labels you to somebody else. You know? I completely believe that but like they even teach here that like your biblical world view is based off the Bible so like when they pick the professors, especially like at colleges like this, they are shaping them off of the [cross talk] standards that they hold super close to that because that’s what every professor teaches their students and I think they need to be ensured that they are all gonna have the same basis so new students like, okay well this professor didn't add up because like, I've had professors that you can kinda hint and they're like super conservative or Catholic but like they have the same beliefs I do like hey you know? Like we worship the same God you do it in a different way that’s completely fine. But at the end of the day it's all the same (Personal Communication, 2016).

Alternately, Anna’s sense that some are at the university who are not Christian, although they self-describe as Christian, adds context to the sense that a standard of acceptability exists. In terms of overt worship style, a common expectation was prevalent— at least in Anna’s perception – and created a condition where external behaviors serve to validate or invalidate internal beliefs variously across the community.
I thought it was going to be like, more Christian like, or people who really wanted to be here because they're Christians. And I have roommates that are not Christian and are just Christians that think they are Christians but they are not Christians (Personal Communication, 2016).

Mike had similar sentiments regarding those he might consider non-Christians, and how they integrate to the university.

. . . and then especially when it comes to things like the political atmosphere of this very particularly conservative school that measures things from a biblical standard -- so you can have you know, some Catholics or maybe some, I don't know, Jehovah's Witnesses or something or people who are liberals or who aren't Christians coming here but they're going to be taught things, I think, from a very factual basis . . . particularly from a biblical perspective. Like, "This is what the Bible says and this is how we can connect it."

Because we have to have a measuring stick of morality (Personal Communication, 2016).

**Theme Three: Self-Reported Intent to Persist**

Attrition, of all the metrics measured in higher education, is a measure of significant importance to the field. Attrition measures work towards quantifying the loss of students prior to graduation. Although many reasons exist for student attrition, understanding students’ intent to persist and the factors which influence that intent, both positively and negatively, can intuitively help higher education professionals craft programs and services that speak to the needs of students. Wellman, Johnson, and Steele (2012) in a project for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, point out that managing attrition to positive effect, reduces the credit costs of delivering education while ensuring that students realize “high-value learning outcomes” (p. 1). While this is intuitively true, and equally plausible that student identity structures, which are not
always attached to learning outcomes, influence attrition. How students fit in to the school environment rises in importance when the student experience is considered as central to the process of education.

While many factors attach to one’s intent to persist in the university setting, and which have been well described in the literature, these participants were first concerned with relationships, which were a positive support to their intent to persist, the perceived barriers to remaining in the university, for example, barriers which prevent transferring to a non-religious institution, and, finally, their over-arching sense of purpose in the scope of their plans for the future which are fulfilled by their association with the university.

**Relationships**

Despite significant conversation throughout the focus and interview protocols about negative aspects of the university, the sense that shared experiences and relationships, which ultimately allowed students to overcome perceived negatives, came through as a support to persistence. Don, for example, brought forth some of the challenges that the environment of the university created for him throughout the narrative. Despite those issues, his overall satisfaction with the school was very high.

I think this is where I belong. I've made some connections here that I'd rather not break, and it's hard for me to adjust to new social situations too. So, I prefer to keep this. But there are some concerns about housing, whether certain people are going to be able to afford. Good friends of mine are planning to move off-campus (Personal Communication, 2016).

Don shared some frustrations with the housing situation earlier. Despite those frustrations, he had no plans to leave the university prior to graduation.
Other participants were also vocal about the relationships they had with their peer groups. Alice, for instance, was happy with her relationship with her coach and with her teammates. So, and they have a like different perspective because they thought their team was a family and I love that . . . I decided more for sports (Personal Communication, 2016).

The aspect of family which describes Alice’s perception of her team is a significant symbolic interaction for her.

**Challenges to Persistence**

Challenges associated with remaining enrolled extended from Art’s sense that academics, generally, had no benefit for him, to structural issues with transferability. Art was unsure that he would stay. Art has a difficult time understanding how his degree program informs his true passion for creativity, and did not see a reasonable value proposition in a college education. Art was candid in response to questions about his intent to persist:

See, I'm not entirely sure because of what I want to do, like I described earlier that my passion for the arts, music, and design. It feels like nothing that I can -- of course I can get degrees in that but like nothing that requires academics. Nothing that you can get here is required for like a future career in that path. Yeah. It's more like action speaks louder than words on paper. And it feels like it's a lot of work to go through for something that I'm not going to need or use (Personal Communication, 2016).

Sue brought up an interesting point about the non-transferability of Biblical course credits, which she saw as a barrier to leaving the school. I asked her how she felt about continuing at the university: “Good. I kind of have to. You're here already. So, it's kind of hard to switch -- also with all your Bible credits” (Personal Communication, 2016).
Sam had similar perspectives on transferability, also mentioning the fact that many credits were not transferable.

Yeah. I actually looked into transferring -- I'm on an international -- on a visa, so I can't work, and I considered transferring to a Canadian school just so I can work while I was in school. You can work on campus but like there's limited hours and stuff like that. But then, yeah, you're pretty much limited by Bible credits (Personal Communication, 2016).

None of Sam’s Bible-based credits would have transferred if he went to the school he was considering in Canada, unless it was a Christian school . . . and he wasn’t interested in another Christian school.

George also had issues with the political position of the university, gun policies, and housing stereotypes, yet his goal was to graduate from the university as quickly as possible. I asked him about graduate school once he graduates: “Yes. After graduation, yes . . . but not at Higher Matters” (Personal Communication, 2016).

Other than these comments, most participants expressed that they were happy to stay at the university and complete their degree programs. The position that Art embraced was unfortunate, as he did not have a sense that anything he experienced at the university would inform his creativity. Two students mentioned transferability of religion credits as a barrier to leaving the present university for other educational venues. Alice was excited to finish at the school and stay in the sports department, but was sure that she would return to her country after graduation. Amy planned on completing at the university. She was generally very happy with the school. Mike was headed to the Army upon graduation, hopefully with a commission for his participation in ROTC. Will and Anna expressed confidence at staying in school but had no
specific idea about what the future would hold for them. They were just content to experience college life.

**Sense of Purpose**

Sense of purpose can be a tricky concept for students. Are students concerned with the higher callings of purpose, or with the applicability to one’s future work life, as Maier (2014) argues? In the current study, when participants spoke of their sense of purpose, it was the purpose inculcated in their Christian identity which was most descriptive. As Christians, students expressed a desire to make a difference in their world. Mike plans to exercise leadership in the Army as a Christian soldier, and to that end, he participates in ROTC. Sue has a desire to discover herself.

... so, you're really just testing yourself and kind of forming yourself into what you're going to be and what you're going to hold to whenever you are not any longer a student and you are actually on your own (Personal Communication, 2016).

Sam was interested in how he could influence the world of investment banking which still maintaining his Christian identity. He realized that banking has its own culture, and its own worldview, which he perceived to be vastly different than his worldview. Mara capped of her interview in a manner that reflected the general feelings demonstrated by participants, and which eclipsed those areas of challenge which were brought out by some.

When I go into the workplace I wanna show -- If I say I went to Higher Matters, I wanna show it, kind of a thing. It needs to add up. But, I could get the same degree at ODU down the street from my house, cheaper, probably a lot easier, but if I leave here - I’m gonna have the right basis of -- Okay, I know I’m supposed to be in my profession ‘cause now I have the God aspect of, this is how I’m supposed to do it (Personal Communication, 2016).
Summary

Chapter four presents the results of focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and observations which took place with 11 first-year university students in April 2016. The purpose of the research was to describe how students responded to inputs received from faculty and peers, and in response to the symbolic nature of the institution. The study was guided by the feedback loop of identity control theory (Burke, 2004; Stets 2006; Stets & Burke, 2014), and responded to three research questions.

RQ1. How do student participants report their perceived and evaluated inputs from the college community in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student?

RQ2. How do the inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as students?

RQ3. How do received and evaluated inputs, understood by the student to be reflected appraisals from the community, influence students' self-reported intention to persist as a student?

The final transcriptions were subjected to an analysis of themes which arose in keeping with the van Kaam method as described by Moustakas (1994). Additionally, frequency tables were employed to gain a sense of the weight of responses across the group. This helped to surface themes and sub-themes. At that point, once relevant statements were listed under each prompt or question for each participant, overlapping statements and other statements of little or no relevance to the themes which were identified became evident, and these were removed. The focus groups provided the themes of (a) challenges to expectations of coming to school (b) adapting to the role
of student; (c) perceptions of marginalization; (d) reactions to politicization, and (d) challenges to relationships

Interviews added to the list of themes, exposing the influence of (a) difficulties with academics, (b) challenges to social acculturation, and finally (c) self-reported intent to persist. Interview sub-themes under the main theme of academics included perceptions of academic capacity, the role of the student, the academic program, and participants’ perceptions of the nature and quality of the feedback they received from their faculty. The main theme of social acculturation was further described by the sub-themes of fitting in, the sense that common values existed (or did not exist), and worship styles. Finally, the theme of intent to persist was explicated through the discussion of relationships, challenges to persistence, and sense of purpose, all categories of student perception.

Study participants were frank and honest in their engagement with the protocol. Moreover, they were surprisingly adept at contextualizing nuanced replies to the research questions. Interviewing these participants was a joy.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

Higher educational institutions in the United States continue to experience attrition at increasing levels (NCES, 2014). This phenomenological study was undertaken to advance understandings of how identity processes are potentially involved in supporting students’ perceptions of their intent to persist in their educational programs. The study was purposed to describe how participants’ recounted perceptions of inputs they received from the university community about their output behaviors, and how these communal responses ultimately effect students’ perceptions of their identities as students. A fundamental assumption was that because perceptions influence a student’s sense of identity, they in some ways help, or hinder them as they work at negotiating the role of student. The theoretical basis for the study is founded on structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980), and the related identity theory which arose from interactionist perspectives (Burke, 1991; 2004; Burke & Stets, 2009).

The retention of students is a proximate concern for administrators in higher education. Over past decades, a significant body of research has been done focusing on retention issues (Bean, 1980; Bean, & Eaton, 2000; Berger & Lyon, 2005; Kalsbeek & Zucker, 2013; Panos, & Astin, 1968; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; 1999; 2000; 2004; 2007). Inquiry into retention delved into a variety of areas of inquiry including integration to the college community (Tinto, 1975), a students’ intent to persist (Bowman, & Denson, 2014; Concannon & Barrow, 2010; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012), self-efficacy as a factor in retention (DeWitz, Woolsey & Walsh, 2009), sense of belonging and sense of community as proximate areas supporting retention (Elkins, Forrester & Noel-Elkins, 2011; Haussmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007; O’Keeffe, 2013), academic engagement (Soria & Stebleton, 2012), and the influence of stress as a factor in persistence and retention (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim & Yonai, 2013; O’Sullivan,
While not a comprehensive list, the preceding gives some sense of the interest student retention has garnered from researchers. Withal, retention – and its inverse: attrition – continue to challenge institutional practice, as higher educational administrators seek to find new ways to retain students.

**Theoretical Frame**

Due to the relative dearth of qualitative academic literature focusing on retention, this study was purposed to raise the voice of the student to the ongoing debate. The study is founded on structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980) and aspects of identity theory (Burke, 1991), particularly those areas of the identity theory dealing with identity control (Burke, 2004; Carter, 2013; Stets & Burke, 2014), and is operationalized using phenomenology as a method (Husserl, 1965).

Within the theoretical frame, identity theory (Burke, 1991; 2004), borrowing its basic assumptions from structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980), holds that individuals enact various roles based on social requirements of a larger group to which they belong. Group interactions experienced in living help individuals to understand and value their places in the community using their own interpretations versus those of the group, of role requirements which attach to the relevant identities they are activating. Understandings of the intersections between a group’s standards for behavior and individual responses to those standards is described by the “identity standard”, a concept indicating the continuum of meanings describing possible iterations of a role (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 196).

Thus, as one enacts -- or as Carter (2013) suggests, “activates” (p. 249) -- a role, the behaviors one engages in are evaluated by the relevant reference group against commonly held norms, and are given back to the individual as “reflected appraisals” which indicate the
acceptability of the behaviors against the group held norms for the enacted role (Carter, 2014, p. 255). If role behaviors exist within an acceptable range, the reflected appraisals support the role through the process of “identity verification” (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 199). Behaviors which exist outside this verifiable range generate a discrepant response which causes negative emotions which Carter (2014) sees as a “disruption” to the processes of identity control (p. 256). Generally, disruptions cause a repair process to occur which may include moving behaviors towards the acceptable group based reference range, or abandoning the role altogether (Stets & Burke, 2014). The abandonment of the student’s role is at the nexus at which interactionist theories intersect with integrationist theories of retention.

Moreover, as Stets and Burke (2014) infer, overly positive and overly negative reflected appraisals, taken against the individuals view of acceptable role behaviors for his or her enacted role, cause “discrepancy effects” (p. 407) which can reduce the sustainability of the role. Discrepancy effects act similarly to identity non-verification, as Carter (2014) describes above, challenging identity salience. This brief overview of the “feedback loop” of identity control theory (Stets & Carter, 2011, p. 196) is explained in more detail in chapter two, and is a central system against which responses in the current study are evaluated.

In this chapter, interpretations of the research in concert with current literature addressing or influencing identity are presented, as mediators of student retention and attrition. I employed focus groups and semi-structured interviews, as well as classroom observations, to gather students’ perceptions of their lived experiences at a mid-Atlantic based Christian university. The study has limitations, both in construct and application. I discuss these to identify other perspectives from which to further investigations into how identity processes influence student
success. I also present a discussion of potential implications for the field of higher education and some suggestions and opportunities for future research.

**Summary of Findings**

Phenomenological inquiry is concerned with the perceptual lived experiences of individual actors (Schutz, 1970). It is subjective in nature, and requires that researchers take a stance in the interpretation of the evidences of research, a stance that Husserl (1983) admitted -- indeed, admonished those performing phenomenological research -- is a difficult process, however engaging that process may be. It was with this admonishment that I prepared myself to both engage in research and to let the data speak for itself. My purpose was to raise the voices of students to the center of the conversation . . . to let them speak, and to let their voices guide the value of the findings. My efforts operationalized three research questions:

**RQ1.** How do student participants report their perceived and evaluated inputs from the college community in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student?

**RQ2.** How do the inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as students?

**RQ3.** How do received and evaluated inputs, understood by the student to be reflected appraisals from the community, influence students' self-reported intention to persist as a student?

**Findings: Research Question One**

Research question one was examined through focus groups. The focus groups responded to the question:
RQ1. How do student participants report their perceived and evaluated inputs from the college community in concert with their pre-defined meanings of what it would be like to be a student?

Five themes arose from the focus groups which responded to RQ1. These are: a) challenges to expectations of coming to school; (b) adapting to the role of student; (c) perceptions of marginalization; (d) reactions to politicization; and (e) challenges to relationships. These themes represent realities students must negotiate as they move through the university experience. Each of the main themes was contextualized by students’ reactions to Christian values. Discussions of beliefs and values occurred in virtually every section of the study, and become the benchmark against which social and environmental factors were measured.

The ubiquity with which Christian values were presented by the group, underscored the role faith had at ordering the interpretations participants employed as they negotiated their environment. Nevertheless, wide disagreements about beliefs and values were reported by the study group, and not every participant identified as Christian. The extent of these disparities was surprising, although it is difficult to say why. A certain centrality of belief is expected given the Christian nature of the University. However, it is also a reasonable expectation that differences would exist in interpretation and in lived examples, as Small and Bowman (2011) clarified, suggesting that less mainstream denominations might get overshadowed in the more denominationally mainstream community. This result appeared to be the case among participants in the study.

The first main theme, that of the challenges to the expectations participants held regarding school attendance, concerned participants’ expectations of what life in the university would be like, and the subsequent challenges they would face once they began attending. This
theme was given color by participants’ reports that their experiences had a different quality than they had imagined. Additionally, students discussed what they saw as inconsistent expressions of what they held to be normal, expected Christian values and practice, as noted earlier. Christian values were also a proximate reason 10 of the 11 participants reported as important in their decisions concerning school choice.

The second main theme arising from the focus groups concerned how participants were adapting to the role they were required to adopt as students at the university. In describing their transitions, participants noted perceptions that an increased level of personal responsibility was required. Perceptions that academics would be more demanding was prevalent in discussions. This aspect of perceived university life was seen to be a challenge, however, not an unwelcome challenge. Additional concerns, which contextualized how they felt they were adapting, were directed towards rules and customs of behavior at the university. Many of the responses students gave in this regard underscored the challenges students faced in finding representative groups to which they felt they belonged. Dissonance students’ felt in interpersonal interactions gave rise to an undercurrent of emotionalism which contextualized their identity negotiation (See Stets & Burke, 2014).

The third main theme concerned perceptions of marginalization which participants described. An interesting reason for perceptions of marginalization were participants’ frustrations with what they felt were disingenuous people at the university. This result was surprising to some, and which arose in discussions of student housing at a facility called the Annex. Additionally, participants shared their experiences with both individuals and groups that they judged to be exclusive.
A lively discussion occurred of participants’ reactions to the challenges of the politicization of the university. Students’ felt that the administration often did not speak for them, nor did the administration represent their views in the political arena. Confusion existed about why certain candidates were brought to the university, which included their responses to what appeared to be candidates’ who lacked a Christian orientation. Additionally, several participants had negative reactions to the idea of the concealed carry of weapons on campus, which had been brought forward by a senior administrator. In one notable reaction, a student had been asked by his family to leave the university because of the administration’s position in favor of concealed carry.

Finally, focus groups identified challenges with maturing relationships. Relationships, in the context of a challenge, were initially presented by the group through a concept which they termed: a ring by spring. In all, “a ring by spring” indicates that one can find a life partner by spring of the first-year. The reactions of participants were varied. Some felt that such a commitment at their ages was not recommended, others had already found potential life partners in their first-year on campus. A wide disparity of maturity levels was evidenced regarding relationships by participants.

Participants responded to their perceptions of campus culture and their interactions with various aspects of that culture. Not all perceptions of culture produced positive responses. In some instances, significant emotional responses, both positive and negative, were evident. Positive and negative emotional responses in extremis, have been shown to cause role transformations as Musolf (2009) explicated. These areas are discussed in the forthcoming narrative.
Findings: Research Questions Two and Three

Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, along with my notes provided the substances of findings related to research questions two and three. While research question 1 was targeted to understand how students imagined life at the university would be prior to attending, with their actual lived experiences as students after they were attending, research questions two and three focused on students’ self-evaluations based on the inputs they received from the community regarding their success at enacting the expected role they are to play as students. Further, subsequent interpretations of these inputs were evaluated to ascertain how inputs from the community influenced their self-reported intent to stay at the university through graduation.

RQ2. How do the inputs students receive influence self-reported perceptions about their enacted role as a student?

RQ3. How do received and evaluated inputs, understood by the student to be reflected appraisals from the community, influence students' self-reported intention to persist as a student?

Three major themes emerged from the interviews: (a) difficulties in academics, (b) challenges in social acculturation, and (c) self-reported intent to persist. These intersections represent three poles of the perceived identity negotiation processes identified in the study that were directly tied to, and which explained the research questions. Participants’ role negotiations were influenced by interactions within these categorical divisions.

The first pole contained the provocative representations participants offered about the theme of perceived difficulties with academics. The findings within the category illuminated the essential confrontation of the student with the formal requirements of the curriculum.
Participants discussed their self-evaluations of individual academic capacities, and they brought out insights to the personal, institutional, and social requirements describing the role of the student which they were required to enact to be successful. An animated discussion of the importance of feedback to academic performance occurred, highlighting the necessity for consistent, fair, in depth feedback which students could operationalize. Finally, the category of academics confronted students’ perceptions of the academic program as it related to their perceptions of future preparedness.

The second pole included the social confrontation, typified by students’ interactions with other students. Significantly for Christian or other faith colleges, the intersections between worship styles, as a reflection of individuals’ perceptions of how to represent their faith beliefs came forward as a challenge. This topic variously caused the sense among participants of inclusion or exclusion. This very interesting finding corroborates past research (Sansom, 2012; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Small & Bowman, 2011), and was associated with evident emotional responses among participants.

The third pole concerned self-reported intent to persist, and dealt with participants’ perceptions of the values they confronted in the university experience. Participants responded with feelings regarding the influences of relationships throughout the community which they often reported as supports to persistence. As a competing context, responses also brought forth several challenges encountered by students which they needed to negotiate to remain at the university. As an example, the non-transferable qualities of Biblically-based course credits, were discussed as a barrier to their transferring to another college or university. One participant questioned the applicability of university programs to his future. Politics, particularly the universities positions on national politics, were cited by participants as a variable they identified
to be a distraction towards their integration to school. Finally, within the category of intent to persist, participants discussed their desires to have a well-crafted sense of purpose as they transitioned into their careers. This was represented as the need for professional and personal strength and for competent knowledge which they hoped would result from what was anticipated to be a transformative experience as they engaged with the university.

Participants’ responses to the three research questions ultimately described their confrontations with the culture of the campus. The ease associated with solving these confrontations is at the heart of students’ abilities to successfully enact their roles within the university. Moreover, when confrontations with campus culture disallow them from adapting to the community, their intent to persist may be directly influenced because those confrontations become a threat to identity by driving negative emotions, as Stets and Burke (2014) argued.

Discussion

The university at the center of the current study is intentional at mindfully creating interactive opportunities for community members. These opportunities engage the student community at the level of campus culture, for example, through activities that bring large groups of students together in directed activities. More broadly, however, the university is adept at creating an environment that reflects the symbolic culture which comprises the essential Christian foundation of the university. Thus, campus culture is present at the interactive physical plane described by campus based activities, while it engages, on a more esoteric level, with individuals’ intellectual, emotional, and spiritual selves. Thus, culture is seen to be at the symbolic heart of each of the categorical themes presented by participants.

For the purposes of this analysis, campus culture is understood to be derived from “a . . . coherent set of beliefs, rituals, symbols, myths, and language” (Billings & Terkla, 2014, p. 45).
As attractive as it is to assume that an intelligible sense of centrality regarding beliefs and values is dispositive to the culture of the host university, participant reports force one to consider Billings and Terkla’s (2014) admonition that not all community members will perceive the campus culture in the same way. Further, even when the culture is perceived similarly, not all will “express the same behavioral outcomes” (p. 44). My participants fulfilled that admonition, evidenced by the general feeling that prescribed activities, such as issues with convocation, and with housing, discussed previously, are perceived to work to exclude certain members of the community. The sense of exclusion, in various guises, described challenges to identity throughout the study.

The fundamental purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to begin to understand how participants reported perceptions of the direct and symbolic inputs they received from the community at large in response to the output behaviors they demonstrated in the enactment of the role they played in the university. Further, I was interested in understanding how perceptions influenced sense of identity in the role of a student. Finally, I had the desire to understand how perceptions influenced intent to persist in the university.

Participant responses to focus group prompts, interview questions, and observations in this study provided me with a view to areas of the student experience as it interacted with various constituencies within the community. Additionally, it was interesting to see how symbolic references, generated by the institution and its actors were reflected in the responses of participants. Participants’ responses reflected what they imagined they would find in the university experience versus the actuality of the lived experience, and the influences those experiences had on their thinking about the next few years at the university.
The theoretical frame of the study, and its reliance on identity control theory (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2009), make areas of behavior congruent with group expectations, relevant to their identity negotiation in the role of student. Additively, those areas in which discrepancies existed between their behaviors and the group’s acceptable reference range are also relevant in contextualizing the continuum of forces which are important in identity negotiation. Interestingly, the reverse is also true. Students provided their reflected appraisals to university based behaviors, some of which were within the interpretative parameters of their deeply held value structures, and other areas that were not congruent with their interpretations of acceptable performance. When these types of transactions exclude persons from the normative group, the transactions produce stress (Burke, 1991; Selye, 1975). Aspects of stress were evident throughout the narrative, particularly when participants felt they were excluded from the wider community. These forces, in toto, add to, or take away from an identities durability and salience in the identity hierarchy (See Stryker, 1980)

Generally, the participants in my study presented as happy, engaged students with excellent reports of intent to persist to graduation at the university. The host university offers well thought out, exciting, high quality, social, cultural, and academic experiences for its students, and most responses from participants indicated how much they valued the university’s programming. They were comfortable with the university in general, albeit, with notable exceptions, and they expressed pride in the education they were receiving from the university.

Most aspects of university were seen by participants to be supportive of students’ academic, cultural, and social formations. Nevertheless, interesting areas of perceived discontinuity existed in their responses which were worth noting. Participants interpreted various aspects of university life, measured against their beliefs and values, which often did not
incorporate the assumed intention of the university. Additionally, selected participants attributed congruence in beliefs and values across the community as important to their intent to persist. This was particularly apparent regarding interpretations of worship style, where perceptions existed that a similarity of opinion on how one was to express worship was not as ubiquitous as they had expected.

In the chapter four narrative, findings were discussed in detail as they evolved through participant interactions with each other and with the researcher. In the following paragraphs, however, I state these themes and sub-themes at a separate level of abstraction to reduce reported perceptions to a final textural-structural essence, following the methodology detailed by Moustakas (1994), and, to tie the themes to the extant literature in the field. Participant experiences in a community, such as a university, influence the negotiation of role identities which must be enacted for members of that community to be successful. Indeed, these experiences include the “reflected appraisals” that Carter (2014) explained, and which participants received from group members (p. 255).

Supports and Challenges to Persistence

The themes reported in focus groups were, a) challenges to expectations of coming to school; (b) adapting to the role of student; (c) perceptions of marginalization; (d) reactions to politicization; and (e) challenges to relationships. Interview responses were categorized as (a) difficulties in academics, (b) challenges in social acculturation, and (c) self-reported intent to persist. These themes, in terms of participants’ responses ultimately reflect two principal areas of interest:

1. The ubiquity of Christian values, and,

2. The positive and negative effects of campus culture.
The social, psychological, and emotional category with the most noticeable influences on participants began with their perceptions of campus culture, and the fundamental descriptor of that culture attached to the university: Christian values. Christian values also presented the most universal influences in school choice, in social interactions, in academics, and in university politics. The influence of Christian values was generally supportive to the role of student within the study group, and to persistence over-all.

However, aspects of the expression of Christianity also devolved into areas of specific challenges to consequential identities for members of the study group, particularly when denominational conflict was present in the expectations students shared regarding practice. This is a finding consistent with the argument presented by Woodford, Levy, and Walls (2013) suggesting that an undercurrent of tension comes to light as one considers the influence of differing religious viewpoints against an overarching perception of social expectation, regardless of the veracity of that perception. In this category, the sense that everyone believed the same thing in the same way became a challenge to those with competing views, as did issues regarding the sense that a perceived right way to worship existed in the community.

Academics was significantly discussed, recounting participants’ perceptions of their academic veracity, perceptions of the program itself, and importantly, perceptions of the means and effect of feedback on students’ perceptions of identity. Feedback was an area of challenge to students, based on consistency and messaging inherent in feedback to academic performance. Feedback was shown in participant responses to be personally challenging to several participants.

Marginalization arose as an important result of the interplay between competing perceptions in housing, in religiosity, and in social interaction, with interesting discussions.
Marginalization was largely a challenge to student success. Inconsistencies with the perception of housing quality gave rise to feelings of distress (Selye, 1975) resulting from perceived stereotyping (Rogers, Schröder, & Scholl, 2013). Additionally, participants reported perceptions that people and groups were often seen as disingenuous. This perception was supported by the discussions of marginalization that existed in housing, but also included typical group dynamics and differences in faith expression. Entrenched in this category were discussions of the power dynamics which exist in within group and between group conflict (Rogers, Schröder, & Scholl, 2013).

The politicization of the university occupied a good deal of one focus group, evidencing stress among participants. Students felt that the university administration did not speak for them, and wide disagreement existed regarding positions framed by the institution. This area also concerned the changing attitudes in how younger, evangelical Christians view social and political topics versus older evangelicals. A discussion of the organically grown tradition of ‘a ring by spring’ is included in the analysis, as an interesting offshoot of campus culture, albeit within the religious context of the university. This topic evidences attitudes regarding relationships as they are seen by this group of 18 and 19 years old participants. Of interest is the means in which participants framed sexual politics within their faith positions.

**Supports to Persistence**

Notable research has been done on the topic of the correlation between beliefs and group appraisals on behaviors. Among those researchers is Michael Carter (2014), who, in a study regarding how the moral identity influences behavior concluded, in part, that the moral identity was only influential at mediating behavior “when it was activated” (p. 219). Carter’s assertion is ambiguous, and that ambiguity is evident in students’ reactions to the sense that beliefs are the
same across the group, particularly when their experiences indicate a broad range of differences across the group. Carter (2014) clarifies, admitting that “when a competing identity is invoked and is more salient in a situation than a group identity, the competing identity is the more powerful agent of motivation” (p. 219). In this context, individuals deeply held beliefs have more sway over behavior than the “reflected appraisals” of groups (p. 255). As context, Carter noted that “an activated identity was found to be a stronger predictor of behavior than group expectations or group pressures” (p. 219).

Interestingly, despite participants’ discussions of their individual Christian values as central to their self-concept, areas of discontinuity existed in their perceptions of over-all group cohesion. While some participants found differentials in attitudes to be wholly acceptable, relying on their own identity, others experienced a discontinuity which resulted in experiences of marginalization. Nevertheless, findings in this study suggest that despite other stressors on identity which participants faced, including those within the horizons described by faith, their Christian values were generally supportive of their role negotiation.

**Christian Values**

The topic of values arose in several iterations. Mike believed that all students shared like values, attributing his understanding of centralized Christian values to all students at the university. At one point, he shared that he felt it easy to meet people with commonly held values:

I mean seriously I can find pretty much anybody in my hall and sit down, and have a theological-philosophical conversation we’re both gonna be on the same plain because we both draw information from the same book . . . because it’s a Christian school, you all
hold the same values, it’s much easier to make friends than it is in secondary school
(Personal Communication, 2016).

Mike’s reference to his Christian view of the world as significantly like those of others – if Mike’s view holds true -- reflects Goddard’s (2012) views of cultural scripts as the symbolic representations made by members of cohesive groups. At the same time, it became clear that these representations were not solidified across divergent groups at the university, nor even within Mike’s understanding. As an example, at another point Mike admitted that,

There are people here who aren’t quite like the others, just kinda like, you're in the Christian culture but you're not in the faith as much. But I think that . . . there's different denominations, there's different like, different spheres of it (Focus Group Communication, 2016),

Mike’s comment highlights the inherent intersectional difference – if not conflict--existing between various Christian groups on campus. The implied value judgment concerning others not being in the faith suggests an exclusive view of religiosity which in one sense requires a similar form of religious expression from others for that expression to be justified in Mike’s perception. The very different nature of these comments calls to mind Woodford, Levy, and Walls (2013) argument that a difficulty exists with the concept of “doctrine-belief congruence” (p. 106) across denominations, and even within individual actors within the same denomination.

Despite Mike’s sense of community among students regarding religious values, others expressed markedly differing positions more in keeping with Mike’s altered opinion that categories of difference exist. These observations ranged from differences in denominational worship style, to differences in the intent to reflect defined Christian values in students’ behaviors. As an example, Art observed that “despite being a Christian institution, there are
people who do not exhibit that kind of behavior and that represents a majority of us” (Personal Communication, 2016). While Art has the distinctive tendency to see things through contrarian eyes, his observation of the variability in values and beliefs is confirmed by other members of the group.

The alter reality to Art’s perspective is contained in Mara’s observation that although non-Christians exist, they are still made to feel a part of the community.

Because, the guy that’s not even Christian he’s so accepted here and like . . . Yeah, he’s accepting towards our acceptance. He’s open to it. He’s like, “okay, I’m surrounded by these people that I don’t generally agree with”, but he’s like “they love on me” (Personal Communication, 2016).

Mara’s observation that non-Christians are accepted by the community and are in turn receptive, is consistent with the experience Alice has with her sports team. Alice is an atheist, as she describes her religious standpoint, but participates in prayer with her team and finds that it is comforting to her. Prayer, for Alice, establishes a sense of community which is not consistent with the argument presented by Goodman and Mueller (2009) that atheists can be “invisible, stigmatized, and marginalized” because of their religious choices, and underscoring the sense that Kogler (2010) expressed suggesting that a person in a defined role relationship – as is characteristic of a sports team member – exhibits valid behaviors that attach them to the group as long as their outputs are socially recognizable as consistent with group expectations.

In Alice’s example, religion is not the modifier, rather it is the groups’ inclusion in sports that sets the stage for group cohesion. Additionally, Alice, despite her non-Christian beliefs, receives verifying inputs to her output behaviors – participation in prayer -- which support her inclusion to the group. This is consistent with the explanations offered by identity theory, yet the
incongruence between Alice’s internal beliefs, taken against her external output behaviors, suggest that the most important variable in group cohesion begins with external expression.

An observation arising from this context suggests that the exigencies of the sports culture overshadows the importance of beliefs as a mediator of group cohesion, at least in this iteration. Conflating both religious expression -- in this case prayer -- with group cohesion, reflects findings of a study by Galen, Sharp, and McNulty (2015) which found indications that a positive effect resulting from “religious participation is attributable to the secular factors of general group social participation rather than to religious content” (p. 425). With Alice, prayer, as a recognized religious behavior, is a competing reality with the sports related activities she engages in with the group. Nevertheless, the sharing of both realities with her team helps Alice to negotiate a role identity which works for her.

At the same time, Mara was conflicted by her sense that an expectation of a common worship style exists. Mara’s diagnosis of the generative nature of that understanding is evident in her remarks that, “you kinda put (expectations) on yourself. They’re not really outwardly like, this is how you should do it or this is how it’s gonna get to God or whatever. It’s just you look around and you’re, okay, following the expectation of the school” (Personal Conversation, 2016). Adding context, Woodford, Levy, and Walls (2013) suggest an undercurrent of tension comes to light as one considers the influence of differing religious viewpoints against an overarching perception of social expectation, regardless of the veracity of that perception.

**Effects of Christian Values on School Choice.** Christian values, as they were held by participants, were prevalent as factors in their school choice. An interesting initial finding, for example, suggested that a proximate reason students chose the university was because it was a Christian school. Normally, high school guidance counselors and parents would be seen to play
a large role in the college selection process. Pritchard and Swezey (2016), provide a perspective on parental involvement in school choice for younger children, suggesting that they do “not use a comprehensive decision-making process” as they contemplate schools for their children (p. 19), acknowledging that as a child aged, the student’s “preferences figured heavily in the process” (p. 13). In this study, it was evident that the students’ identities were salient factors, if not dispositive to the school choice. The Christian, faith based personality of the university were strongly considered by the students in their decisions. The fact of the Christian aspect of the university can be seen from two perspectives. First, it is the influence of the belief system on the individual. Thus, the influence of Christian faith itself is a precursor to joining a faith based group. Secondly, as identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) argues, an individual’s identity in the group is based on group interactions. When group members’ responses are congruent with parameters imposed by a person’s identity standard, the beliefs which underlie those behaviors are also normalized. The effect of congruence in “reflected appraisals” (Carter, 2014, p. 255) is supportive to the individual’s group based identity and to the common identity standard on which the group role is founded. As an example, Mara made a strong case that her faith community, including her youth ministers who were themselves graduates of the university, were fundamental to her decision to choose Higher Matters:

    My youth pastors had graduated like the summer before, and then she was my mentor, and then right when I was going to apply, I didn't want to go to ODU, so she was like, "What about Higher Matters?" and I had never heard of it so then that's how it kind of came up (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

    This choice was a departure from how many of her peers made their college decisions. In her descriptions of her home community, Mara recalled that many of her contemporaries went to
school locally: “I live near a lot of universities so everybody kinda goes to the same one” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). Mara’s recognition of the influence her faith partners had on her school choice underscores the role that faith based communities have on individual’s identity negotiations. In Mara’s example, as is evident in the case of other participants, a commitment to her faith community is demonstrated which is aligned with what Dafina (2012), referencing Fowler, describes as exercising a “commitment . . . through which all other commitments are analyzed” (p. 591).

This interesting condition Dafina (2012) references precisely explains the means in which a personal commitment to a faith based community can contextualize decisions in other aspects of life, becoming the lens through which other realities are viewed. This nuanced multi-part context exists at the intersection of the community, on an individual’s proximate faith related decisions, and on the internal identity negotiation individual’s go through in extended decisions-making. De Rijke (2012) explains that communities are created “symbolically, making [them] a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent for identity” (p. 279; citing Cohen). The symbolic interaction that occurs in this case for Mara, is a personal metaphor which is descriptive of her place in the community, and which is subsumed by her acceptance of the community’s inputs regarding school choice. It is the intersection of a groups shared beliefs and values on personal choice, and one’s personal descriptions of self, which describes what Carter (2013), explaining identity theory, called a “social identity” (p. 204).

Will was excited by the perception that the university did not put him into a position of potential moral conflict, such as Will’s sense that he would not be challenged by late night parties and other morally confusing activities. Will is concerned with being put into a circumstance where the potential for him to fall into sin is increased, and in which he feels more
assured that he can live up to the expectations which exist for him. Will’s choosing of Higher Matter’s University is a choice based on the perception that it is a safe course of action. This is a representation of his Christian consciousness.

In terms of the value based reasons for choosing a school, morality, responsibility, and academic perception was trumped by Christian identity. Per Davignon (2016) “Christian identity” was a proximate reason for choosing religious schools, with “70.5% of respondents indicating that religious identity was very important to their decision” (p. 84). Interestingly, this was only behind the category of financial assistance and one step above the reputation of the institutions academics.

In terms of supports to persistence, the sense that students shared Christian values was forthcoming as important to relationship building. It was also important to group inclusion. Christian values were a prevalent aspect of school choice, creating a bridge between the home community and the new community represented by the school. Finally, the culture of the university, in support of moral choice, was an important support.

**Challenges to Persistence**

Perceptions of positive and negative forces on participants’ experiences were not consistent across the sample. Challenges to identity existed in issues arising from academics, particularly in the area of communications surrounding feedback, in housing, in expectations regarding centralized values among Christian believers, and in campus culture. Additional discussions erupted regarding the politicization of the university. These areas garnered significant commentary. Finally, challenges associated with relationships arose with interesting perspectives.
Challenges of Academics

Communications between faculty members and students has long been known to influence retention both in terms of informal, out of class interactions as Pascarella (1980) described, with restatements of that hypothesis by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and the more formally constructed iterations argued for persuasively by Hoffman (2014), noting the need for both informal and formal communications. Hoffman identified limitations to faculty-student interactions in the university experience with which college professors and students often must contend. Hoffman (2014) explains that “boundaries, real and imagined, are firmly established in the personalities and expectations of both student and professor” and that these boundaries describe the contextual relationship between faculty and students (p. 18). These contexts, according to Hoffman, exist because students may have preferred means to engage with faculty. Moreover, faculty members are often pressed for time, and “may feel that student interactions impede their efforts to engage in service or scholarly behavior, a requirement of the promotion and tenure process” (p. 18). The indications are that certain conflicts come to bear in communicative exchanges that cross these boundaries. Nevertheless, the need for critical communications between teaching faculty and students is undeniable.

I was interested, during the design of this study, in feedback communications between faculty members and students. In this context, feedback is a formal appraisal of academic work, and is therefore an input which influences an individual’s perception of how their output behaviors reflect the formal requirements of the curriculum, and their adherence to the culturally accepted role of student. As identity theory argues, appraisals can be either positive or negative, and can either support the identity standard, or become non-verifying (Stets & Carter, 2011). Feedback that is non-verifying precludes emotions intrinsic to the maintenance of an identity, a
position causing Coleman and Williams (2013) to acknowledge the negative effects of emotions on the “feedback loop” as they influence “emotion profiles” (p. 216). Thus, while positive emotions support identity negotiation and maintenance, the effect of negative emotions, as Musolf (2009) argues, may simply transform the role, when the individual abandons the unconfirmed relationship. Burke (1991) argued pointedly about the effects of negative feedback leading to low self-esteem and efficacy and adding to the potential for negative role transformation because the identity standard is no longer seen as viable.

Questions exposing the effects of feedback on student identity produced several significant contexts. These contexts included the perception that feedback was impersonal, and that because of the size of the classes, the feedback received was less than sufficient to be motivating. Amy noted that her feedback often came just as a note on Blackboard, an electronic platform. Her desire was for a more personalized form of feedback.

Sue recounted a personally challenging example of feedback that was delivered in a comparative manner, holding up her and her work as an example for the class. Her reaction to that means of feedback was not positive, as she found that not only was she embarrassed, but the quality of her transactions with other students suffered as a result. Notwithstanding the intention of the faculty member to provide positive feedback to Sue, the structure and clarity of the intention was not received by the student. Sopina and McNeill (2015), addressing feedback, found that “more focused and structured feedback” is important to over-all feedback quality (p. 677) suggesting that far from being a means to compare an individual to a group, quality feedback involves engaging the person intimately.

Mike’s perspective brings identity theory to the fore. His perception is that while students do not necessarily like negative feedback, particularly when undeserved, positive
feedback that is unfounded – such as when an assignment was not done even to the expectations of the student – was also seen as a negative. In identity theory, this circumstance could lead to an abruption in identity control, as Burke argued (1991), and which was further explained by Stets and Burke (2014). Stets and Burke concluded that when reflected appraisal are not well-founded, “a positive discrepancy” occurs which challenges the identity standard (p. 406).

Don’s recounting of multi-modal feedback, which he received regarding a specific assignment, underscores the requirement that feedback not only be sound, but that it be consistent. Don received feedback from a graduate assistant that indicated his assignment was exemplary. Later he received a failing grade from the instructor. He was angry and confused, and thereafter abandoned the role as a student within that class. As Don reported, he dropped the class and shortly thereafter, tested out.

Feedback, as a symbolic gesture, is both a power interaction and a required and requested means to ensure student success. The foregoing narrative highlights the need for feedback to be personalized, addressing the individual in their lived experience. Additionally, the requirement for consistency in feedback quality exists, as Don’s example suggests, as a foundational assumption of effective communications. Finally, feedback can be irrelevant, as Mike’s example models. This is nuanced however, as is seen in the case where the student does not have a perception that he or she worked to capacity, therefore not expecting or deserving exemplary feedback, even though the faculty member might see the work as meeting the rubric for that assignment. What is clear is that feedback is fundamental to student identity negotiation.

**Challenges of Marginalization**

Circumstances existed in which participants reported experiences of marginalization, either as observers, or as victims. These examples occurred in the areas of perceived inequitable
conditions in student housing, and in the marginalization which resulted from the perception that
disingenuous people and groups existed. The challenges of marginalization arose from
circumstances that did not support identities, as they were held by participants. Group
normalized identities are a noted condition for identity maintenance (Burke, 1991).

Housing is one of the first criteria for the evaluation of programs and services specifically
for first-year university students. Gardner, Barefoot, and Swing (2001) argue that the “quality of
that housing and associated residence life” (p. 20) is an important element in fostering over-all
student satisfaction. The implication that the perceived quality of residence life is a factor in
student satisfaction was not lost on Brandon, Hirt, and Cameron (2008), who concluded that
student interactions are affected by the type of resident hall to which they are assigned. Further
evidence developed by Beattie and Thiele (2016) suggest that interpersonal interactions, seen as
a form of social capital, are important to student satisfaction, noting that “residence halls should
be structured to facilitate student peer networks that are broad and diverse” (p. 353, citing
Thomas, 2000). When social capital is eroded through stereotype and innuendo -- as happened
with students living in certain social groups on campus, such as the Annex -- a “negative
stereotype” is enacted against a social group, the result of which can be seen “as a threat to . . .
positive social identity” (Martiny, Roth, Jelenec, Steffens, & Croizet, 2012, p. 65).

In the current study, much was made of the marginalization of students who were, or
had been most recently in their first semester on campus, residents of the housing complex
called the Annex. The conversation that George initiated is an example of the incongruity
between what students felt was acceptable input from peers, and their experiences of a
perceived identity threat which resulted from attributes attached to the stereotyping which
Annex residents experienced as “reflected appraisals” from the community (Carter, 2014, p.
The data students received from the community about their living situation were founded on what they perceived to be generally held impressions of Annex residents as somehow less than their peers.

As one focus group conversation developed, George mentioned the Annex in a conversation he had recently had with a classmate:

So, I was like, “Yeah, I am living at the Annex.” And the look on his face was literally like, “Oh my God! You literally live in the pit or something.” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

George’s response was one of surprise because he had not realized that residents of the Annex were seen in that light. Don explained further, highlighting his understanding of the residents of the Annex as he understood them to be seen by the community:

Coming from the Annex, the generalization, as it was explained to me, was that mostly the people there were either foreigners or problem children in the East (dorm) on the Annex (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Since both participants were residents of the Annex, they felt marginalized, and set apart from the community at large. The stereotype caused emotional responses which both participants indicated were troubling to them. Burke (1991) had explained that negative emotions cause a change to behaviors individuals employ generally moving them towards the groups norms, as an effort to reduce negative affect. A danger arises when negative emotions cannot be reframed – a condition often leading to role abandonment – and, in response to which, a challenge to the role identity arises (Burke, 1991). In the sense that the living situation of those assigned to live in the Annex could not be changed, at least for a time, it became difficult for residents to accede to group norms. While important in understanding the influence of emotions
on identity strength, Burke’s conclusions give way, in part, to the manner in which the emotions of students living in the Annex might have been affected motivationally.

In considering aspects of identity and motivation, Jang, Kim, and Reeve (2016), examining self-determination theory and the concepts of engagement and disengagement among students, examined students’ senses of “perceived autonomy, support, need satisfaction, and engagement” versus the opposite condition in which a lack of control results in “need frustration” and “disengagement” (p. 36). The researchers note that these conditions exist in a relational manner which effects motivation. The reported effect negative responses from peers had on those living in the Annex highlights the loss of control that can exist when one is in a situation generally seen in a negative light by the larger group. When little ability to change either the situation or the interpretation is the reality for actors in response to a larger group, a threat is experienced. Thus, stereotyping underscores Burke’s (1991) admonition, similar to the Jang et al. (2016) contention fifteen years later, that an actor’s inability to remove negative perceptions can cause role abandonment. Perceived inequities in housing, seen in the light of the arguments proffered by Burke (1991) and by Jang et al. (2016), are a threat to persistence. This makes intuitive sense, and although Jang et al. (2016), are focused on interactions in the classroom, the extension of models of motivation with the main effects of autonomy, need fulfillment, frustration, and emotion, to other types of interactions typical for students, adds to the narrative concerning student engagement and disengagement. Recall the example given earlier by Rogers et al. (2013) that stereotypes create an interaction between individuals and the perceived “relative power and esteem” attached to groups (p. 130). In this case, the power and esteem of the group enacting the stereotype is a foundation for intersectional conflict with the receptor group of students living in the Annex.
Aside from the perception of marginalization reported by the Annex students, Don identified an additional class divide which he saw as inherent to housing choices. The stressor Don surfaced resulted from the pricing structure, which was perceived as different for some residence halls than others. In Don’s perception, he would have to eventually pay more to move to a new dorm upon the closing of the Annex – despite the fact, he admitted, that the institution provided an interim pricing benefit to Annex students -- and this further cemented Don’s feeling of marginalization: “Obviously, the pricing differences in the housing developments themselves is what kind of creates a class divide” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

More interesting, however, are responses about those from whom participants felt marginalized. This was described by Amy, highlighting the view that the fact of stereotyping was inherently distressing to her, suggesting that those who did so did not uphold generally accepted Christian values and behaviors. Amy suggested that those who activated stereotypes against the group of Annex residents were categorically different than the general population of the university: “I do though believe there are lot of great people here who are genuine and totally are Christ like, but then there are also other groups” (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

An expectation of a certain range of behaviors exists within groups, in this case derived from one’s association with a Christian university, which is inclusive and accepting. In the absence of acceptable performance to these behavioral standards, stress arises, particularly among those who feel that they are different from the more powerful reference group. The Annex situation, with its inherent perceptions of difference and of inter-group conflict, are examples of situational threats to identity. Identity threats can often lead to role abandonment (Burke, 1991). As Burke explains, highlighted earlier, when the feedback loop is broken, the result often finds an actor setting aside a role identity. Within this construct, the participant no
longer sees role behaviors as generating acceptable feedback that is sustainable to role negotiation within the referent identity standard (Carter, 2014). Thus, stereotyping behaviors become less than role and identity supportive, and, more to the point, such stereotypes, seen in George’s description of his interaction with a peer, lead to negative emotions because they are not consistent with the meanings associated to the identity standard (Stets & Tshushima, 2001).

As Carter (2014) observes, emotions are proximate tools in maintaining behavior within a role. Thus, George, in response to appraisals that are inconsistent with the range of appraisals required to sustain the role, is forced to first negotiate negative emotions before he can continue to negotiate the role identity. Since all appraisals are situational, based on behavioral outputs, George finds a sense of community -- which is different from the sense of community of other groups -- within the group of students living in the Annex, many of whom may have received similar marginalizing responses regarding the Annex, as Don and Amy previously reported.

Results of these perceptions includes a sense of a class divide between the students of the Annex and the perceived better class of students of other residence halls. Even with the closing of the Annex, as the institution put in service additional residence hall options, the pricing differential identified by Don for the new residence halls created a situation that sustains the perception of marginalization reported by George, Don, and Amy. An important observation regarding housing, and the resulting appraisals residents of the Annex received, is that the behaviors residents emitted were those of place rather than those of commission. It was their relative social situation that garnered inputs from colleagues, rather than anything overt that they were displaying.

**Disingenuous People: A Challenge to Acculturation.** For many of the students, their perceptions of the exclusivity of people and groups were distressing. Will noticed the apparent
dichotomy between his religious beliefs of acceptance and tolerance and the perceived reality of his exclusion from groups where he felt he would, and should belong. This thread was picked up by Don who noted his unfortunate perception that people were not altogether genuine. Don remarked, “Well most of my life I have come to understand that most human beings in this world are fake” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). Surprisingly, everyone in that focus group expressed their affirmation of Don’s observation. Amy added an example which supported Don’s contention.

I feel like a lot of people here who have their groups they’ll be nice to you but I feel like a lot of it's kind of fake. Last semester I had some friends I hung out with but once they got more people, I felt they were all really fake, they only wanted it to be them, they wouldn't really say that . . . (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

A seeming incongruity was expressed that the common point of religious similarity should bring people together, but the experience of students was that it was not a proximate factor in their acceptance within social groups. This was a distressing happenstance to participants in the group. The result is not without theoretical foundation however. Park and Bowman (2015) observe that “in the college environment, religion appears more conducive to ‘‘bonding social capital’’ than ‘‘bridging social capital’’” (p. 21, citing Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital refers significantly to bringing together like values and attitudes, and despite the sense of cross racial bonding that Park and Bowman (2015) present, it is equally likely that this phenomenon attaches to cross-regional actors as well. Although religious similarities tend to bond people together, in the face of categories of difference, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, educational background, or regional background, for example, religious values alone become less efficacious at bridging those divides.
A generally accepted foundation for this phenomenon is contained in Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of field and capital. Lin (2012), explaining how Bourdieu’s concepts might explain why students may or may not find an inclusive point of entry to dominant groups, suggests that a field – “a social space constituted by actors” (p. 2) – operates by “implicit and explicit rules” which are understood and enacted by actors within a field (p. 2). When these perspectives on actors within a field are interpreted through the lens of identity control theory (Carter, 2013; 2014), it becomes apparent that those outside a group who may be trying to gain entry and acceptance will only successfully do so if “reflected appraisals” from the group verify their identities (Carter, 2014, p. 255). When appraisals feel disingenuous to out-group actors, as identity control theory would have it, the tendency for petitioners is to remain outside the group. While this is a choice out-group actor’s make, the choice is well supported when appraisals received from the in-group do not verify their identities and role behaviors. Moreover, out-group members with similar experiences intuitively go on to create their own self-verified groups, as is implied in the discussion regarding the residents of the Annex.

Challenges with Politicization

Participants generally self-identified with republican politics, although the alignment seemed to be more a socio-cultural choice based on clearly defined hot button social beliefs and values. Examples of these issues include a proscription against abortion, and on the sanctity of marriage as an institution between a man and a woman. The range of values expressed by the participants was very narrow. None, for example, discussed concerns of a need to take care of those less fortunate, of providing relief in housing, food insecurity, or medical care for impoverished people.
Nevertheless, participants found themselves in a confusing position because the republican candidate endorsed by the university did not appear to hold similar values and beliefs as did the participants. As an example, Will remarked on the appearances at the university of both Democratic and Republican candidates for the presidency. He noted that, as a Christian, he identified with the Republican Party, but he did not think the Republican candidate for president was a Christian. The first implication of Will’s statement is his view that “as a Christian” he was a Republican, reflecting a more generalized acceptance of Republican politics by Evangelicals. This cultural assumption was contextualized secondly by the dissonance he felt at the differences between his religious beliefs and the dissimilarity of the Republican candidates demonstrated beliefs.

Don was frustrated, as well, with the university’s president and his endorsement of a Republican candidate, suggesting that the university leader had “put his foot in his mouth” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). Amy also saw the university as a Republican institution but was conflicted about the choices for president.

To me like majority of the college is Republican. Because usually it's Republican. I think for this time of the voting, a lot of candidates, they do not have the Christian values that would be ideal but it is important to know who best upholds our Christian values (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Amy’s last line is of interest: “It is important to know who best upholds our Christian values” (Focus Group Communication, 2016). In the context of participants’ well placed confusion over the adherence to Christian values by any of the candidates, an inherent personal bargaining emerges which suggests that one or the other may be closer to (my) values than another. Participants are faced with a choice between Christian values as they hold them, and a
candidate for the party to which they claim common ground who expresses ideology which, as Christians, they have trouble accepting. Their confusion is run up against the wall of the institutions embrace of a party whose candidate espouses positions evangelical theology does not necessarily accept, even though evangelicals culturally embrace the Republican party.

Explaining the origins of participants’ confusion, Steensland and Wright (2014), argue that of three competing streams of conservative politics – the social, economic, and foreign policy agendas -- evangelicals are animated more forcefully by social politics than by other concerns. In response to this leaning, the Republican party’s’ platforms tend to “bundle” economics and social platforms together (p. 709). In that model, a position easily accepted by the evangelical electorate can be linked to another position not so easily digested. Leading social issues, such as anti-abortion sentiments and sexual politics, can be packaged with economic positions which are less appealing to evangelicals, but which might be overlooked by voters.

Participants in this study are faced with a significant dissonance between the historical Republican values with which they were raised, the symbolic and actual political behavior of the institution they attend -- both forces representing the emplaced symbolic contexts of “dominant cultural standards” Ukaosoanya (2014) described -- and perceptions that the messages they are receiving do not pass the muster of their own moral compasses (p. 153).

Pelz and Smidt (2015) provide the beginnings of an explanation to the conflict participants reported, suggesting that political positions are shaped by “distinct historical circumstances” which give rise to generational change in terms of embedded political views (p. 37). Moreover, they argue that historical circumstances are “substantially different” for millennials than they had been for other generations, and this difference sets the stage for political understandings and behaviors which “deviate from the patterns exhibited by older
evangelicals” (p. 37). Perhaps millennial evangelicals do not so easily accept a message that is bundled without noticing the cognitive dissonance which may surround the positions encapsulated within the bundles. The perceived dissonance results from inputs which do not work to verify their current identities. Unless participants can work through these dissonant stressors positively, they become an area of significant confusion. From the identity control perspective, as Stets and Carter (2011) emphasize in their discussion of the moral identity standard, when one’s identity is not accepted by the group, expectations of likely negative emotions prevail. Thus, as Stets and Tshushima (2001) explain, “a general incongruence of input” precipitates negative emotions, and negative emotions are antecedent to behavioral change (p. 284).

**Challenges of Relationships**

As an entry point to a discussion of participants’ negotiations of emerging relationships, participants made note of what they called the tradition of “a ring by spring”. Emerging relationships issues and common coming of age pressures which students face were understood by participants to be both a support and a challenge to identity negotiation. It would be fallacious to think that the Christian values these students share, and which has been described by them as central to how they understand themselves and to their world views, protects them in some ways from issues of relationships and the negotiations inherent to developing a mature sexual identity.

The tradition of “a ring by spring” essentially describes a pressure students face, however self-inflicted it is, to find their mates by the end of the spring term. Responses from participants -- most of whom knew of, and named, the tradition -- ranged from acceptance to dismay. Sam found what he considered to be his potential wife, and was in a committed relationship with her.
Don was certain that college students were too young to shoulder the responsibilities implied by the tradition. Amy was more to the point in explaining the origin of the tradition:

Part of it is also that a lot of people here are coming from a Christian background, so you are always learning about how God has your mate for you. If they're gonna find them here, so when they find someone that they think lines up with everything they think like, I suppose, this is the one. Yeah. And, also, since they believe you cannot have sex till marriage, that’s another reason they do get married quickly is because, oh, we don’t want to sin, but we wanna do everything (Focus Group Communication, 2016).

Amy’s insights are multi-faceted. From the religious side, the sense that God has a mate for everyone is embedded in Christian social teaching. Additionally, teachings on purity and sexual abstinence are ubiquitous within the Christian community. Taken against those teachings are biological drivers which underscore Amy’s frank observation that students face coming of age pressures; they seek relationships; they may want to, or may be pressured to engage in sexual behaviors consistent with the age group, but against their moral codes. They do not want to sin. It is precisely this dichotomous pressure on Christian college students that is evident in Amy’s response. Interestingly, as Williams, DeFazio, and Goins (2014) noted, the larger attitudes among students towards maturing relationships and pre-marital sex may also be a driver towards students attempting to find committed partners.

Seeking to uncover the possible perspectives related to relationships issues, including those related to pre-marital sex among students at religiously affiliated institutions, Earle, Perricone, Davidson Sr., Moore, Harris, and Cotten, (2007), working at a religiously affiliated university, examined students longitudinally regarding changing attitudes and behaviors towards pre-marital sex at time periods from 1981, 1991, and 2001. Their findings concluded that little
change in sexual intercourse among students had occurred at those time spots. The rates of pre-marital sexual intercourse among women college students was approximately 56% over the time period, having risen some 8% from 1981 to 2001. For men, the stable result of those having had pre-marital sex was approximately 65%. Age of first intercourse for women was just over 17 years of age, and for men, just under 17 years of age. Earle et al. (2007) concluded that despite the result, the prevalence of sexual intercourse among these students was “significantly lower” than the results reported by other studies they used for comparison, suggesting the influence of religious values on overt behaviors (p. 50). The results are nevertheless surprising considering the nature of the university at which Earle et al. conducted their studies.

While the Earle et al. (2007) study presents interesting data, largely due to the longitudinal perspective the study provides, it does not speak to the changes which occur in attitudes and behaviors over the years’ students spend in college, nor does it reflect current attitudes. Identifying current attitudinal trends, Penhollow, Young, and Denny (2012) studied religiously affiliated college students’ sexual attitudes and behaviors in the context of religious beliefs finding that “67% of females and 78% of males” in their study reported having had sexual intercourse (p. 16). Moreover, for females the “interaction of personal and organizational religiosity” – not just organizational religiosity – was significant at influencing sexual participation or abstinence (p. 19). The results for males in the study was inconclusive. Thus, for women, as personal religious commitment increases, sexual activity can be expected to decrease.

More specifically, research at a Christian university by Williams, DeFazio, and Goins (2014) found a growing acceptance of sexual activity among students as they matriculated. Freshmen were more likely to abstain from sex as more than 75% “completely embraced
abstinence” (p 554). That percentage dropped year by year, and less than half of seniors claimed abstinence as a core value.

The preceding studies offer insights to the actuality of the issues facing college students in a Christian college setting regarding relationships and the pressures of pre-marital sex. Despite commitment to one’s religion, a good number of students move their opinions regarding pre-marital sex from abstinence to acceptance through their college years (Williams et al., 2014). As acceptance of sexual participation rises, sexual behaviors do as well, as was described in the study by Earle et al. (2007).

Of interest to the current study are the potential effects relationships pressures and increased sexual activity might have on college student persistence, although relatively little information was found in the literature answering that question. Nor did participants in the current study indicate that relationships pressures were challenging to their identities as students, beyond the acknowledgement that such pressures existed for students. Nevertheless, a range of responses occurred describing the activities associated with finding a mate. Given the potential for relationships pressures to influence intent to persist, studies targeting romantic relationships and sexual activities as factors in the retention of Christian college students throughout the college lifecycle can prove fruitful.

**Intent to Persist**

Despite students’ reports of significant areas of distress in negotiating institutional and interpersonal relationships, every participant expressed a desire to complete their studies at the university. Two students had considered transferring, but this was deemed impractical due to the loss of Bible-related credits. One student remained on the fringes of the community, but in his case, it was a self-elected marginalization. Several students expressed pride in their involvement
with the university, and a desire to represent the values instilled by their programs to the community at large. Others were impressed with the level of formation they experienced generally and were happy in the community.

These good reports are not without several significant areas of concern as are discussed above. These areas include cultural insensitivities resulting in between group conflicts. Additional pressures resulted from differences in worship style, as Woodford et al. (2013) argue is a threat to group cohesion. The pronounced problems participants reported with housing, with disingenuous people and with stereotype behaviors provided a backdrop to participants’ feelings of marginalization. Additionally, the political position of the university did not sit well with several students, underscoring the changing attitudes and values of this generation versus older cohorts of evangelicals, a perspective provided by Pelz and Smidt (2015). Despite these areas of concern, students remained committed to persist, however, questions loom about the veracity of that commitment should problem areas in student experience remain over the following few years. These are variables which bear watching.

Implications

A focus on student identity, and the processes which support role negotiation and enactment (Stryker, 1980; Burke, 1991; Stets, 2006; Stets & Carter, 2013) serve as a foundation for the perspective that administrative policies, campus culture, and programmatic designs must provide a productive opportunity for interpersonal interactions between individual students, faculty, and peers which verify the identity constructs associated with students. It is incumbent on administrators to craft policies that effect campus culture positively and which are received by students as intended. Additionally, administrators must ensure that the effect of those policies drive the desired outcomes. The following suggestions arise from the current study.
Influences of Corporate Religion, Spirituality, and Identity Formation

Fundamentally, as seen in the challenges participants faced with worship styles in the college environment, studies on the influences of corporate religion versus, or in league with, personal spirituality rise in importance. Furthering the example, Yocum, (2014) indicates that spirituality describes a personal attribute of belief which helps people address life’s challenges, find their “purpose” in life, and create their unique personal description (p. 81), while corporate religion becomes the means in which actors “practice that belief system with those who are like-minded” (p. 82). This topic gets to the heart of the difficulties participants experienced with differing types of worship, which occurred in a campus-sponsored event, and exposes the influence of denominational practice on an individual’s positive or negative sense of their own set of spiritual beliefs.

If one’s sense of their unique spirituality – their spiritual identity – is verified by the accepted expressions of denominational practice, identity verification occurs (See Stets & Carter, 2011). However, when one’s sense of spiritual identity, expressed in their practice, is confronted by corporate religious practices they do not recognize, their choice is to moderate their behaviors to comply, or to reduce the discord they feel about the disparity in practice by changing the practices, and perhaps the role itself. Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, and Colwell, (2006), argue that students recognize that their “spiritual identities required intentionality to cultivate” indicating the intense personal nature of one’s spirituality (p. 1276). At the same time, participants realized that their spiritual selves would require “great effort to protect from encroachment by the demands of adult life” (p. 1276). A proximate adult demand for new college students derives from moving from the relative safety of the home to the wider expanse
of the college community. The variety of cultural triggers inherent to the college experience prompts a continued re-negotiation of their identities.

**Polling Student Perspectives**

As was seen in the discussion regarding the Annex, housing price benefits for those leaving the Annex were not received by participants in the manner potentially intended by administration. Additionally, most participants were not happy with the prescribed attendance at convocation and especially the monetary fine which accompanied non-attendance, although the benefit of convocation was apparent to them. Moreover, the position of campus leadership on politics was distressing to students based on their reports. These brief examples, and others discussed in the findings, offer views into student perceptions of administrative policies, which despite the good intentions on which they are founded, either miss the contemporary value structures of modern students, or are not effectively communicated. Although it is not practicable at every turn, every effort should be made to gather and incorporate a wide divergence of student perspectives on policies which directly affect the collegiate experience. Additionally, efforts should be accompanied by significant messaging to the general community to ensure students are aware that their voices matter.

**Communications from Faculty**

Generally, faculty were not a part of this study. Several were observed during classroom observations, but no targeted efforts to elicit faculty perspectives were used. Faculty members which were part of classroom observations in this study demonstrated an elevated level of interpersonal and instructional skill, communicativeness, and caring. Indeed, faculty behaviors and associated perspectives regarding their students are central to creating a campus culture of inclusion. Despite the obvious engagement of faculty, participants were largely underwhelmed
with feedback about their academic work. Feedback to academic work is an example of an area in which faculty/student interactions can become problematic. Feedback quality and style were issues participants responded to quite forcefully, and it was apparent that no two professors identified by students used a common rubric for feedback, although such rubrics may exist. Feedback to students regarding the work they do can be encouraging or distressing, as seen in participant responses. Feedback can also be too negative, or too positive, both of which are challenging to sustainable role identities (Stets & Burke, 2014). The situation in which Don received feedback from a graduate assistant that indicated his work was good only to have the professor’s subsequent feedback overturn the initial assessment shows how feedback can generate frustration and a lack of clearly defined expectation for students regarding their work. On the other end of the spectrum, Sue’s experience of being held up before the class as an example for others to emulate was distressing to her. To the extent possible, the development and dissemination of standardized feedback protocol may make feedback more useful to the student, drive positive student engagement, and create positive communications networks.

Reducing Marginalization

Participants in the current study discussed specific areas they experienced as excluding, often to their surprise. As students are the lifeblood of the institution, every effort must be made to ensure that those who are either self-marginalized or excluded due to stereotype or other reactions to categories of difference, are protected, encouraged, and embraced. This is a function of the general community: administrators, faculty, and student peers.

As the study was conducted at an evangelical university, it was interesting to witness how differences in worship style became a means of comparison among participants. Several comments were heard which inferred that one or another might be a Christian, but that they were
somehow different than those in the mainstream. This was observed from the inclusive point of view, that although a worshipper was different in their style, they were still accepted into the community. However, the differences in worship style were also observed as a negative phenomenon, where ones differing worship style was met with remarks suggesting that the individual was somehow different in their beliefs and values. Worship style is an area in which progressive Christian schools can act to create bridges between categories of difference that exist within the Christian community. An early effort at normalizing various forms of worship may reduce dissonance among students.

Lastly, public perceptions describing key university leaders also reflect on students. Students were mixed in their responses to the political platform the university embraces. Several expressed a dissonance between their embedded beliefs and representations by the political party embraced by the university. While this may reflect students’ efforts at trying to negotiate their own beliefs and values separate from the views of the generation which raised them, an area exposed by Pelz and Smidt (2015), administrators may do well to moderate the force with which they take on the various platforms of one political party or another. Doing so would not only expose the university to a wider audience, but would allow the messaging of the university to center on religious tenets rather than on political winds.

These areas are those of student/community interaction, which in their most supportive iterations – such as when agreement exists between a category of expression and the student – enhance identity. However, in the most destructive sense, marginalization from any source works to reduce student identity resources, particularly psychological resources, which work towards strengthening group processes (Ida & Christie-Mizell, 2012). Even though participants reported a good deal of what Andersson (2012) called “dispositional optimism,” evident in their
responses regarding intent to persist, Andersson’s admonishment that some interactions, in this case those which result in a perception of otherness, attach negatively to self-esteem (p. 291).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The study is limited by the private, evangelical Christian university setting. It is difficult to think that similar responses would be elicited in a public institution, or even in another Christian university. Moreover, the study is delimited by participants’ status as first-year college students, and by the anecdotal nature of their self-reports, which may be grounded more in perception than in fact. Intuitively, attitudes and values can be expected to change somewhat as students’ progress through their university experiences, and it is likely that students at more advanced levels would respond differently. The study is also delimited by the volunteer nature of the participants, and limited by the nature of qualitative research itself, which in this case employed a small participant pool. Additionally, the study only targets the attitudes of selected students, and does not include those of faculty and administration.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

It became apparent to me while implementing the study protocol, that additional avenues of research may be fruitful. The proximate reason for employing qualitative research in this study was to raise the voice of the student to the discussion of retention and attrition in college and university settings. My experience confirmed the benefits derived from listening to student perspectives about how university policies and practices affected their perceptions of the institution.

First, it can be beneficial to engage students further along in their college experiences in similar types of studies to gain insights into the changes in values and attitudes which occur throughout students’ university experiences, and the effect these changes have on intent to persist
and actual persistence. Such studies can focus on lynchpin areas of the student experience which, in themselves, have the potential if not the propensity to influence student satisfaction, community, and commitment, and which may prove to contextualize how students enact sustainable student identities. Based on the results of the study, targets for research include topics focused on how students negotiate campus culture, perceptions of marginalization, exclusion, and the interaction of students with decentralized values, even within a culture defined by Christian beliefs. Topical areas such as these are important to understand how students integrate in the community, a circumstance Tinto (1993) maintained was central to persistence.

Additional studies regarding the pressures students face regarding relationships should continue. Values and attitudes change as new generations emerge. With that, opportunities exist to engage students of faith from varying perspectives to support their transitions to adulthood.

Moreover, additional studies centering on university and college administrators, particularly regarding their thinking about the types of programs and services they provide, and how they believe it to benefit students, versus student reports about their experiences with same services, would be informative in terms of intent and reception. Faculty members often provide the bridge between administrations’ policies and students’ experiences. It can be informative to gather research regarding faculty attitudes towards university policies, and faculty members’ experiences with how specific policies are received by students.

Lastly, future research in retention and attrition, within the theoretical frame of structural symbolic interactionism, articulated by Stryker (1980; 2007), and the method contained in identity theory can be useful. A deeper understanding of how students negotiate multiple roles, and multiple identity standards (Stets & Carter, 2011) can be fruitful in further explaining how the availabilities of varying resources (Stets & Cash, 2007) might influence students’ perceptions
of their places in higher education. Of interest is the way community-based interactions add to, or reduce, the psychological resources necessary for student persistence in the higher education environment.

**Summary**

The preceding chapter presents the findings of the study considering relevant theoretical perspectives contained in the literature. Since the findings of the study contain the perceptual responses elicited from first-year student participants, they must be seen in the context of participants’ ages and experience levels. Participant responses are nevertheless a window into the joys and frustrations students face as they negotiate what for them is a new role identity, that of university student. To that end, as was seen in their responses, several unique areas of their experience proved to be challenging to them.

As example, the area of perceived marginalization due to stereotyping by peers, and in at least one case, generated by a policy of the university, was problematic for many participants. The policy reported by students regarding university housing prices was likely intended by the administration to be a benefit to students in transition from the Annex to newer residence halls, yet students perceived this to be a further means to single them out. This indicates that what was intended, was not received fully by students. Administrators not only make policy, but must work to ensure that policies reflect the greater good of the community and are fully communicated to students. The housing policy, for example, fulfilled the requirements of working towards the greater good of students, but missed ensuring that communications were sufficient to disseminate information, to communicate intent, and to ensure that reception was consistent with that intent.
Further, the differences students noted in worship style caused several to experience a self-consciousness regarding their means of religious expression. The feelings they reported suggesting they were not worshipping in an acceptable were apparently self-imposed. It was, nevertheless, an area of challenge for those students. This outcome provides an opportunity for worship leaders to communicate the points of similarity which exist in the Christian community, despite inter-denominational competition which may be perceived.

These examples provide a perspective upon a complex process, that of role and identity negotiation for students with limited experience, and offers a view into the frustrations they face. When marginalization occurs in any form – real or imagined – the impact on sustainable role identities can be injurious. In practice, elements which cause a perception of difference between an individual and the group are inputs which do not verify identity, and which can cause the movement to role transformation. Such a transformation can move either towards the community, or completely away from the role the student must accept as a member of that community (Stets & Carter, 2011). Although the participants in this study were solid in their expressed commitments to remain at the university, it is likely, according to identity theory, that a continued experience of dissonance can result in a negative impact to the intent to persist, if not in persistence itself.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Institutional Review Board Application/Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 28, 2015

Jonathan Lyle Butler
IRB Approval 2374.122815: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of First-Year College Students’ Perceptions of Direct and Symbolic Inputs Influencing Sense of Identity

Dear Jonathan,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School
Appendix B – Participant E-mail

Dear Student,

My name is Jonathan L. Butler, Ed. S, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University. I invite you to participate in a research study of identity processes employed by new university students. You were selected as a possible participant because you meet the criteria as a first term student in the School of Education at Liberty University. The study is targeted to add to the literature on student retention, a central aspect of student success. If you agree to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Respond to this e-mail with the intention to participate, or to ask related questions
2. Fill out a short intake questionnaire, which I will provide
3. Participate in an audio recorded focus group with other study participants
4. Participate in an audio recorded one on one interview about the topic
5. Allow me to observe your class with the School of Education’s consent
6. Review my conclusions for accuracy as the study concludes

The study is completely voluntary. There are no associated costs attributed to participation, nor are there any penalties for not participating.

Please email me at [jbutler9@liberty.edu](mailto:jbutler9@liberty.edu) if you agree to participate.

May God continue to bless you in your studies!
Appendix C - Faculty Information Letter

Dear Faculty Member,

My name is Jonathan L. Butler, and I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. I would like to invite students in your class to participate in a qualitative, phenomenological research study investigating the ways in which new, first-year university students who have graduated from high school in the immediately preceding school year respond to the direct and symbolic inputs received from the college community. My interest extends to the influence on their self-reported intent to persist. Additionally, I am requesting your permission to observe one class section selected participants attend.

I am writing to ask if you would assist me by informing students of the impending study and answering questions students might have about the potential importance of participating in academic research as a part of the student experience. In the event that you have questions or concerns, I can be contacted at jbutler9@liberty.edu or by phone at 704-641-9995. In addition, an invitational email will be sent to you to forward to members of your class if you choose to assist me with my study. Those interested in participating can respond to the prompts in the email.

Thank you very kindly for your anticipated support.

With God’s Grace,

Jonathan L. Butler, Ed.S.
Liberty University
Appendix D – Presentation to Students

Notes of Research Presentation to Students in Introductory Computer Classrooms

The following is a template of the presentation used to recruit students in classrooms identified to contain a cohort of first-year students.

1. Purpose of Research: The study focuses on direct and symbolic inputs you receive from the collegiate community, and your feelings and perceptions regarding those inputs.

2. Required Participants: I am requesting 10 to 15 participants who can commit approximately 2 hours during the current week.

3. How to Participate: To participate, all you need to do is see me after class and provide your name and email.

4. Student Questions
Appendix E- Intake Survey (Example)

Student Demographic Intake Survey

Thank you for participating! The following demographic survey asks for responses to questions related to your background as it relates to a proposed research study. There are no personally identifying questions included, such as name, address, social security number, etc. If you wish not to answer, simply select NA.

Q1: What is your Gender?
☐ Male       ☐ Female

Q2: What is your age?
☐ 17  ☐ 18  ☐ 19  ☐ 20  ☐ 21 and over  ☐ NA

Q3: In what city and state were you raised (ex: Valdosta Georgia)?
City____________  State____________

Q4: Are you the first in your family to attend college?
☐ Yes  ☐ No  ☐ NA

Q5: What is your religious preference?
☐ Christian- Non denominational  ☐ Denominational Christian
☐ Catholic  ☐ Jewish  ☐ Mormon
☐ Muslim  ☐ NA
☐ Other (please specify) ______________

Q6: What is your Ethnicity?
☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
☐ Black or African American
☐ Hispanic or Latino
☐ White/Caucasian
☐ NA
☐ Other (please specify) ______________

Q7: Please indicate approximate family income level
☐ NA / I don't know
☐ $5,000 - $9,999
☐ $10,000 - $19,999
☐ $20,000 - $29,999
☐ $30,000 - $39,999
☐ $40,000 - $59,999
Appendix F - Consent Form

The Institutional Review Board at Liberty University has approved this document for use from 12/28/15 to 12/27/16

CONSENT/ASSENT FORM

A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF DIRECT AND SYMBOLIC INPUTS INFLUENCING SENSE OF IDENTITY

Jonathan L. Butler, Ed.S.
Liberty University
School of Education
Jbutler9@liberty.edu

You are invited to be in a research study of the identity processes students use as they become a university student. You were selected as a possible participant because you meet the criteria as a first term student in the school of Education. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Jonathan L. Butler, Ed. S, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand how students respond to the direct and symbolic inputs they receive from the larger community as they integrate to the college community.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a short demographic survey
2. Participate in a 45 minute to one hour audio-recorded focus group with other study participants
3. Participate in a 45 minute to one hour audio-recorded, one-on-one interview about the topic
4. Allow me to observe your class for one class period
5. Participate in a final review of your transcribed responses to ensure accuracy and clarity

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has risks; however, the risks are no more than you would encounter in everyday life.
There are no anticipated direct benefits to participants.

**Compensation:**

Participants are not compensated.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

I will personally store records on a password protected laptop, in a secure password protected file. Only I will have access to the records. Recordings will be kept in a secure audio file under the same security criteria. However, with regard to focus groups I have no control over how other participants may share your information. At the conclusion of the federally mandated three year holding period for research data, records will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**

In the event you choose not to continue participating once the study begins, please email me at jbutler9@liberty.edu.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Jonathan L. Butler, Ed.S. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at jbutler9@liberty.edu.

Additionally, you may contact my faculty advisor, dlkeith@liberty.edu with any questions or concerns you may have.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.*
The Institutional Review Board
at Liberty University
has approved this document for use
from 12/28/15 to 12/27/16

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

( NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record, me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Investigator: ___________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix G- Focus Group Prompts

Focus Group

Q1: Prior to coming to the university, how did you imagine the experience would be?

Q2: How did you decide between the various institutions you had an interest in attending?

Q3: How similar is your overall experience of the institution, now that you are attending, with what you had imagined your experience would be prior to attending?

Q4: Are there other topics that anyone would like to discuss as we wrap up the focus group?
Appendix H – Semi-Structured Interviews

**Responding to RQ2**

Q5: Considering yourself as a student, how would you characterize your academic capacity?

Q6: What does it mean to you to be a student?

Q7: Can you describe the feedback you receive from faculty regarding your academic work?

Q8: How important is it to you to receive excellent feedback from faculty regarding your academic work?

Q9: How do you feel about yourself as a student when you receive excellent feedback from faculty regarding your academic work?

Q10: When you receive feedback that is less than you expected, how do you generally react?

Q11: How well do you feel you are fitting in with other students in the campus community?

Q12: What types of interactions with other students make you feel included and a part of the community?

Q13: What types of interactions cause you to feel uncomfortable in the campus community?

Q14: What aspects of the institution do you feel most closely speak to your core beliefs and values?

Q15: What aspects of the institution do you find challenging to your core beliefs and values?

Q16: Are there any other areas about your experience as a student that you want to share?

**Responding to RQ3**

Q17: In what way would you describe your feelings about your association with the institution?
Q18: When you consider your academic program and your future goals, in what ways do you feel that your academic program is preparing you for your future occupation?

Q19: When you contemplate the next several years, how comfortable do you feel with your academic program?

Q20: Again, contemplating the next several years, how comfortable do you feel with the prospect of continuing in the current institution?

Q21: In what ways would you describe changes to your goals which have occurred as a result of your experiences at the host university?

Q22: Are there any other items you would like to discuss regarding your association with the university?
## Appendix I - Field Notes Template

### Field Notes Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Circumstances: Class Name:</td>
<td>Number of Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Study Participants:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Consensus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Example Field Notes Template
Appendix J - Classroom Sketch

Example:

Figure 2. Classroom Sketch and Observations Notes