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Part-Time Enrolled Community College Students: A Case Study Examining the Experiences of the Invisible Majority

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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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School of Educational Leadership

Part-Time Enrolled Community College Students:

A Case Study Examining the Experiences of the Invisible Majority

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Janelle M. Green

December 2021

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to students and educators who are striving toward empowerment of self and others, who are showing up each day believing in a kinder and more equitable tomorrow, and who encourage others to dream about what could be regardless of what has been.

Acknowledgments

I was pulled toward this journey by an unavoidable call, and I thank God for divine provision, strength, discernment, endurance, and for filling my life with incredible people. This journey was not traveled alone, and I am grateful for the tribe of people who supported and guided me in a multitude of ways. Family, friends, and colleagues, thank you for loving me, believing in me, encouraging me, and praying for me. You breathed life into me when I was breathless and reminded me of a higher calling when I wanted to quit. You offered me grace and patience and reminded me through your calls, texts, emails, cards, walks together, meals shared, and conversations over coffee that I was not alone and that I had a tribe of people walking with me every step of the way. Finally, to the students who trusted me with your stories … thank you.

Dr. Ausburn, I am thankful for your incredible support, your valuable feedback, and your wisdom in guiding me along my journey. You gave me room to be creative and passionate in my work, present in other facets of my life, and find my way as a scholar. Dr. Bailey and Dr. Williams, thank you for your timely guidance and support and for providing feedback that challenged me to think deeper. You each provided insight and resources that contributed to a stronger body of work and a contribution to the field I am proud of. I am eternally grateful to each of you for serving on my committee and investing your time and energy in me. A special thank you to Dr. McMichael and Katrina Kelly, who took time to connect with me and encourage me in very personalized ways; Dr. Lumpe, Dr. Self, and Melissa Atkinson, who provided resources and insight that helped me refine my study and navigate the dissertation experience; and to my ACU friends Danielle Phillipson and Lorena Freeborough who crawled through the trenches and walked alongside me throughout this transformative journey—you both inspire me.

Abstract

This qualitative research used multiple case study methodology to explore the perceptions and experiences of part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. Of particular interest was how students defined success and their perception of what it took to achieve success, the utilization rate of student success resources, challenges encountered that caused a student to consider stopping out, the quality of relationships and connections part-time students had with faculty and staff, and the experience students had navigating institutional systems and processes. This study was conducted at a large, public, urban, multicampus community college in Texas. Participants in the study included part-time enrolled students who had earned 50% of the credits required to complete their identified academic goal. The data collection steps included setting the boundaries for the study, collecting survey questionnaire responses, conducting semistructured interviews, reviewing documents pertaining to institutional student academic progress rates, and maintaining a researcher journal for reflexive journaling. Deductive and inductive coding was utilized to organize data and identify themes. Key themes that emerged in this study's findings included sense of purpose matters for persistence; time constraints and lack of information prevent utilization of resources and involvement; connections to faculty were crucial; seeing others similar to self was validating and motivating; COVID had negative impacts on connection, sense of belonging, and educational experience; advisors were heavily relied on for guidance and connection to resources; flexibility, support systems, and time management were critical for success; and personal life, exhaustion and burn out, finances, and lack of direction were challenges that impacted persistence.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine a student who is in their mid-20s and likely a person of color. Their household income is most likely at or below the poverty level, and they are the first in their family to pursue higher education. This student juggles family and work responsibilities while going to school, which is part of the reason why they chose to enroll in their local community college. Other contributing factors to their choice of enrolling at their local community college are the affordability, the accessible location, and a student population that looks like them. This student has been encouraged, even pressured at times, to enroll as a full-time student because of the evidence that it contributes to higher completion rates. However, to balance all of their roles, this student has discovered that part-time enrollment works best. Unfortunately, part-time enrollment presents some unique challenges and obstacles that contribute to low persistence and completion rates. This chapter makes a case for the importance of studying the experiences of part-time enrolled students at community colleges to understand these experiences better and ultimately impact the level of success for this population of students.

U.S. community colleges provide access to upward economic mobility because of their ability to reach a large population of low-income, first-generation, and minority students. The accessibility and affordability of community colleges contribute to decreasing the racial gap in postsecondary college enrollment, providing a pathway to make up for inequities in opportunity and reducing the income and wealth disparity (Thoma, 2013). However, community college completion rates, defined as degree attainment or certificate completion, are alarmingly low. Bailey et al. (2015) indicated that fewer than 40% of community college students earn a certificate or degree within six years of enrollment. Instead of closing gaps and decreasing wealth disparity, failure to persist in a timely manner and complete a degree or certificate leads

to unmanageable student debt (Hittepole, 2017; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2015; Thoma, 2013). With community colleges positioned to provide students with multiple pathways into good-paying jobs, noncompletion dramatically reduces a student's opportunity to improve employment outcomes, increase earning potential (Belfield & Bailey, 2017; Carnevale et al., 2017; Holzer & Baum, 2017; Oyserman, 2012), and achieve upward mobility and increased life satisfaction.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2018), 7.1 million students enrolled in public two-year colleges in credit-bearing courses during fall 2016, while 5 million students enrolled in noncredit courses. Of the students who enrolled in credit-bearing courses, about 2.6 million (37%) were full-time students, and 4.5 million (63%) were part-time. Additional demographics of the fall 2016 student cohort included 36% who identified as the first-generation in their family to attend college, 12% who identified as a student with a disability, 17% who identified as single parents, and 7% who identified as non-U.S. citizens. Demographic representation of students enrolled in credit-bearing courses in 2016 was 24% Hispanic, 13% Black, 47% White, 6% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American. Additionally, 51% of community college students are 21 years old or older, with an average age of 28 and the median age of 24. Finally, an analysis of data from the 2002–2006 Education Longitudinal Study (ELS) and follow-up surveys collected in 2006 and 2012, compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), showed that 44% of low-income students attend community colleges as their first college after high school, compared with only 15% of high-income students.

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), community colleges are especially important because 18 of the 30 fastest-growing occupations between 2016 and

2026 require some level of postsecondary education. Projections suggest that by 2020, 65% of Texas jobs will require a degree or certificate; however, only 39% of Texans are expected to meet these requirements (Groves & Helmcamp, 2015; Paredes, 2017). The increased number of jobs requiring a career certificate or college degree has resulted in added pressure from federal agencies, state governments, college systems, and individual institutions for community colleges to increase college completion rates. One response to the pressure on Texas institutions is the *60X30TX* higher education plan, with a stated goal of having 60% of the 25- to 34-year-old Texas population hold a certificate or degree by 2030 (THECB, 2015).

Institutional challenges in responding to the added pressure and producing significant completion results include navigating national, local, and institutional measures of success; understanding how students define and measure success; serving the needs of nontraditional part-time enrolled students; and most recently, the current and future impact of COVID-19 on student persistence and economic support for higher education. Community colleges across the United States, per the Student Right-to-Know Act (1990), use retention and completion rates to measure and report student and institutional success. The required measures assess and report the percentage of first-time full-time enrolled undergraduate students who return to the same institution of initial enrollment the following fall and who complete their program at the same institution of initial enrollment within 150% time of the normal time of completion (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). These measures do not capture the experiences of nontraditional students who enroll part-time, transfer to another institution, or leave an institution and later reenroll (NCES, 2019).

Changing student demographics and enrollment patterns point to the need to reexamine the metrics that define and assess community college student success and institutional

effectiveness. In fall 2015, 75.4% of students in Texas community colleges were enrolled part-time, 45.6% were working while enrolled, and 29.1% were 25 years and over (NCES, 2019; Paredes, 2016). Only 20% of the students who start their college career part-time in Texas institutions complete their bachelor's degree within six years (E3 Alliance, 2020). To meet the needs of the state economy, support the success of all students, and ensure that students graduate with no debt or manageable debt relative to their incomes, the unique needs of the growing nontraditional student population must be understood and accounted for (Hittepole, 2017; THECB, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Low completion rates of nontraditional part-time enrolled students are a significant problem for community colleges. There is limited research focusing on retention and timely completion at community colleges, particularly as it relates to the needs and motivations of nontraditional students (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Suleman et al., 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). The experiences and expectations of nontraditional part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States, including how they define success, challenges to achieving success, and factors that contribute to success, are not fully understood or assessed. There is a need to look closer at the community college student experience, redefine success, and determine measures to assess and evaluate student and institutional success. Addressing this problem may help community college administrators provide well-informed support services and institutional resources for nontraditional students that lead to the successful completion of a workforce certificate or degree program and a prepared workforce in Texas.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study's purpose was to explore the experiences of nontraditional part-time enrolled students who attend multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate and explore the perceptions and experiences of students who enrolled part-time with the goal of earning a certificate or degree or transferring to a four-year university. The findings of this study are intended to contribute to the larger body of knowledge and inform practices, programs, and policies that could have a meaningful impact on student success and completion, opportunities for upward mobility, developing a prepared workforce in the Southwest region of the United States, and managing debt relative to income for graduates.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to explore how students define success and their perception of what it takes to achieve success, the utilization rate of student success resources and gaps in services, challenges encountered that cause a student to consider stopping out or dropping out, the quality of relationships and connections part-time students have with faculty and staff, and the experience students have navigating institutional systems and processes to understand better the perceptions and experiences of part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States.

RQ1: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges describe their experiences related to academic resilience, persistence, and utilization of academic and social support services and programs?

RQ2: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges describe their interactions with agents of the institution and sense of belonging?

RQ3: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges explain their ability to persist toward their academic goals or their decision to stop out/drop out?

Definition of Key Terms

Academic year. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) defines an academic year as a 12-month period of time, generally extending from September to August (THECB, 2017).

Associate degree. The THECB defines an associate degree as an award that normally requires at least two but less than four years of full-time equivalent college work in courses grouped and designed to lead directly to employment in a specific career or to transfer to an upper-level baccalaureate program (THECB, 2017).

Certificate. The THECB defines a certificate as a formal award certifying the satisfactory completion of a postsecondary education program. The THECB further identifies level one, level, two, and level three certificates, which are awarded through workforce education programs and range from at least 15–42 credit hours for level one, 43–59 credit hours for level two, and up to 87 credit hours for level three certificates (THECB, 2017).

Community college. A community college, for the sake of this study, is a publicly funded educational institution that provides open access to postsecondary education, workforce development and skills training certificate programs, two-year associate degrees, college transfer academic programs, noncredit continuing education programs, skills retraining, and community

enrichment programs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018; United States Department of Homeland Security, 2012).

Community college completion. Community college completion is defined as completing an associate degree or certificate from the initial institution of attendance within 150% of the normal time (NCES, 2020). As an example, this would be completing a two-year degree within three years.

Full-time student. The THECB defines a full-time student as an undergraduate student enrolled in 12 or more semester credit hours in a long semester (THECB, 2017).

Nontraditional student. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) identifies nontraditional students based on information related to enrollment patterns, financial dependency status, family situation, and high school graduation status. In this study, a nontraditional student is one who has any of the following characteristics:

- delays enrollment—does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year of finishing high school;

- attends part-time for at least part of the academic year;

- works full time while enrolled—full-time defined as 35 hours or more per week;

- is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;

- has dependents other than a spouse;

- is a single parent—either not married or married but separated and has dependents; or

- does not have a high school diploma—did not finish high school or completed high school with a general educational development (GED) diploma (NCES, n.d., 2002).

Part-time student. The THECB defines a part-time student as an undergraduate student enrolled for either 11 semester credits or less than 24 contact hours per week each term (THECB, 2017).

Relational turning points. Baxter and Bullis (1986) introduced relational turning points as any event or occurrence associated with a change in relationship. These events and occurrences can be either positive or negative in nature.

60x30TX. The THECB defines *60x30TX* as a higher education plan that focuses on a common goal of striving for 60% of the 25- to 34-year-old Texas population to hold a certificate or degree by 2030 (THECB, 2015).

Traditional student. A traditional student is a student who is typically between the ages of 18 and 22, lives on or near campus, is full-time enrolled, and receives financial support from parents (Pelletier, 2010).

Undergraduate student. The THECB defines an undergraduate student as a student enrolled in a four- or five-year bachelor's degree program, an associate degree program, or a vocational or technical program below the baccalaureate (THECB, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

The theories that influenced this study fall into three categories: persistence theories, motivation theories, and theories of belonging and validation. Each theory is relevant to the experiences of nontraditional part-time enrolled community college students.

Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of integration, Astin's (1999) theory of involvement, and the engagement theory attributed to Kuh (Kuh et al., 2008) fall under the umbrella of persistence theories and are often discussed together in studies related to persistence in higher education (Olivas, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). While these theories have strong validity with

traditional students at four-year universities, they are less relevant to the experiences of nontraditional, part-time students attending community colleges. Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model presents a framework directly related to nontraditional commuter students and their decisions to persist or drop out.

Persistence theory provided the primary theoretical framework for this study, guided by Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model. Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model postulated that "nontraditional students experience an environmental pressure that includes more interaction with external environmental factors and less interaction with the members or activities of the environments of their academic institutions" (Aljohani, 2016, p. 10). Bean and Metzner (1985) stated that social integration within the academic institution has less of an impact on persistence for nontraditional students. Instead, they asserted that environmental factors such as family commitments and external responsibilities seem to affect persistence for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The conceptual framework is based on four sets of variables, emphasizing external variables that interact to influence whether a student will persist at an institution or depart. These four sets of variables include (a) academic performance, which is based on grade point average (GPA); (b) intent to leave, which is influenced by psychological outcomes and shaped by the quality of students' interactions with the college environment; (c) background and defined variables, which include demographic information, high school performance, and educational goals; and (d) environmental variables, which include finances, working hours, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer (Aljohani, 2016; Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The theory of intersectionality provided a lens through which to approach background and defined variables in Bean and Metzner's framework. The theory of intersectionality is

grounded on the assumptions that there are multiple systems of social stratification, systems of oppression and domination are interlocking, and that an individual's worldview is shaped by their standpoint in a system of privilege and oppression (Kaushik & Walsh, 2018). The interlocking systems of social stratification were referred to as the "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1999, as cited in Kaushik & Walsh, p. 31) and "vectors of oppression and privilege" (Ritzer & Stepniski, 2013, as cited in Kaushik & Walsh, 2018, p. 31) and asserted that an individual might simultaneously hold positions of privilege and oppression, which shape life experiences (Duran et al., 2020; Kaushik & Walsh, 2018). Intersectionality as a lens facilitated an analysis of student experiences that fully considered their standpoint within a matrix rather than a single system of stratification. The intention was that by looking at intersecting identities and how those identities fit within systems of privilege and oppression, I would gain a more complete and accurate understanding of students' experiences within the community college system.

Secondary theoretical frameworks that supported this study include attribution theory and validation theory. Attribution theory, first proposed by Heider (1958), focuses on the events and experiences ordinary people encounter and whether they attribute the outcomes of the events and experiences to internal or external factors (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Self-determination and self-efficacy were discussed in relation to attribution theory as they relate to a student's intrinsic motivation and beliefs about whether or not they can perform actions and behaviors that result in desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Validation theory asserts an asset-based view of nontraditional and culturally diverse students related to persistence and academic success (Rendón, 1994). The theory asserts that validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by agents of the institution that facilitates a sense of

belonging and fosters academic and interpersonal success and development (Rendón, 1994; Yosso, 2005).

Chapter Summary

Higher education's understanding of how to serve low-income and part-time enrolled college students in a way that effectively impacts persistence and completion is limited (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). A majority of the existing research regarding student persistence and completion focuses on students enrolled at four-year universities and routinely examines the roles of gender, race, and academic readiness. There is a gap in research related to retention and completion at community colleges, particularly as it relates to the needs of part-time and nontraditional students and the impact of nonacademic strengths and abilities (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Suleman et al., 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). A deeper understanding of the nonacademic factors that promote successful completion for part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges could inform decisions regarding programs, services, and initiatives provided to ensure they align with the needs of part-time enrolled students. This understanding and alignment can guide community college administrators and educators in developing, leveraging, and capitalizing on success factors to increase completion rates for these students.

Preliminary research suggests the potential impact of strategies that foster relationships and connections on campus, help students develop clear goals and identify purpose, enhance emotional intelligence, foster self-empowerment and agency, leverage community and family connections and cultural wealth factors, and promote perseverance and resilience on student success and completion. Nonacademic success factors are connected to attaining educational goals and increased academic resilience (Hurd et al., 2016). Further research is needed to explore

the unique needs and experiences of nontraditional part-time enrolled community college

students and understand which facets of student success services and programs offered at four-

year institutions translate into effective outcomes in the community college environment.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Low completion rates of nontraditional part-time enrolled students are a significant problem for community colleges, and the experiences and expectations of these students at urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States, including how they define success, challenges to achieving success, and factors that contribute to success, are not fully understood or assessed. A majority of the existing research regarding student persistence and completion focuses on students enrolled at four-year universities and routinely examines the roles of gender, race, and academic readiness. There is a gap in research related to retention and completion at community colleges, particularly as it relates to the needs of part-time and nontraditional students and the impact of nonacademic strengths and abilities (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Suleman et al., 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). A deeper understanding of the nonacademic factors that promote successful completion for part-time enrolled students at urban community colleges could inform decisions regarding programs, services, and initiatives provided to ensure they align with the needs of part-time enrolled students.

This qualitative case study's purpose was to explore the experiences of nontraditional part-time enrolled students who attend multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate and explore the perceptions and experiences of students who enrolled part-time with the goal of earning a certificate or degree or transferring to a four-year university. This study's findings are intended to contribute to the larger body of knowledge and inform practices, programs, and policies that could have a meaningful impact on student success and completion, opportunities for upward

mobility, developing a prepared workforce in the Southwest region of the United States, and managing debt relative to income for graduates.

Literature Search Methods

A literature review was conducted to increase familiarity with and understanding of the current knowledge about the topic of interest (Fry, n.d.; Machi & McEvoy, 2016) and to document a need and justification for future research (Fry, n.d.; Roberts, 2010). The online Margaret and Herman Brown Library at Abilene Christian University (ACU) was utilized to conduct literature research for this study. Relevant journal articles were identified through the ACU library, SAGE journals, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Keywords that were used for the literature search included *part-time enrolled students*, *persistence*, *community college completion*, *nontraditional students*, *nonacademic success factors*, *socioemotional learning*, and *student success*.

This literature review is constructed in four parts. The first section describes the theoretical frameworks used to guide the study. The second section describes the current understanding of the concerning community college completion rates. The third section describes barriers to persistence and completion for part-time nontraditional community college students. The fourth section describes nonacademic success factors that impact persistence and completion of educational objectives for part-time enrolled nontraditional students.

Theoretical Framework Discussion

Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model (see Figure 1) presents a framework directly related to nontraditional commuter students and their decisions to persist or drop out. Persistence theory provided the primary theoretical framework for this study, guided by Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model (see

Figure 1). Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model postulated that "nontraditional students experience an environmental pressure that includes more interaction with external environmental factors and less interaction with the members or activities of the environments of their academic institutions" (Aljohani, 2016, p. 10). Bean and Metzner (1985) stated that social integration within the academic institution has less of an impact on persistence for nontraditional students. Instead, they asserted that environmental factors such as family commitments and external responsibilities seem to affect persistence for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The conceptual framework is based on four sets of variables, emphasizing external variables that interact to influence whether a student will persist at an institution or depart. These four sets of variables include (a) academic performance, which is based on GPA; (b) intent to leave, which is influenced by psychological outcomes and shaped by the quality of students' interactions with the college environment; (c) background and defined variables, which include demographic information, high school performance, and educational goals; and (d) environmental variables, which include finances, working hours, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer (Aljohani, 2016; Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Figure 1

Bean and Metzner's (1985) Nontraditional Student Attrition Model
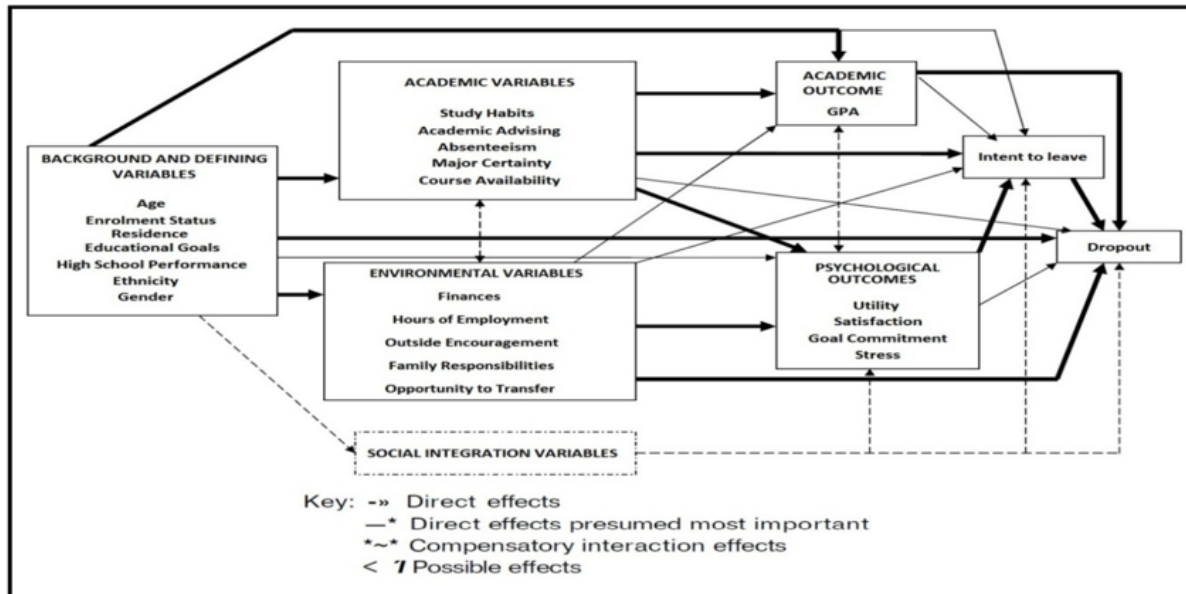
Note. Reprinted from "A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition,"

by J. P. Bean and B. S. Metzner, 1985, *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), p. 491

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permission (see Appendix A).

The theory of intersectionality provided a lens through which to approach background

and defined variables in Bean and Metzner's framework. The theory of intersectionality is

grounded on the assumptions that there are multiple systems of social stratification, systems of

oppression and domination are interlocking, and that an individual's worldview is shaped by

their standpoint in a system of privilege and oppression (Kaushik & Walsh, 2018). The

interlocking systems of social stratification were referred to as the "matrix of domination"

(Collins, 1999, as cited in Kaushik & Walsh, p. 31) and "vectors of oppression and privilege"

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individual might simultaneously hold positions of privilege and oppression, which shape life

experiences (Duran et al., 2020; Kaushik & Walsh, 2018). Intersectionality as a lens facilitated an analysis of student experiences that fully considered their standpoint within a matrix rather than a single system of stratification. The intention was that by looking at intersecting identities and how those identities fit within systems of privilege and oppression, I would gain a more complete and accurate understanding of students' experiences within the community college system.

It is important to be familiar with other frameworks considered, namely Tinto's theory of integration (1975, 1993) and Cabrera et al.'s (1993) integrated model of student retention, to appreciate and understand the guiding framework selected for this study. Tinto's theory of integration (see Figure 2), also referred to as the theory of student departure or theory of attrition and persistence, asserts that colleges consist of an academic and a social system and that students need to be integrated into both systems to successfully persist in their academic institutions (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto identified three stages of passage that students experience as they integrate into an institution's academic and social systems. These stages are referred to as separation, transition, and incorporation (Aljohani, 2016). During the separation stage, students detach from their old communities, which have different values, norms, and behaviors from the new communities in their academic institution (Aljohani, 2016). While a student moves from disassociating from their old communities toward acquiring the norms and values of the new college community, they are in the transition stage (Aljohani, 2016). Once a student connects and integrates with the values and norms of the academic and social systems, they experience the stage of incorporation (Aljohani, 2016). Tinto identified six variables that interact to influence whether a student will persist at an institution or depart. These six variables include (a) pre-entry attributes (prior schooling and family background; (b) goals or commitment (student aspirations

and institutional goals; (c) institutional experiences (academics, faculty interaction, co-curricular involvement, and peer group interaction); (d) integration (academic and social); (e) goals or commitment (intentions and external commitments); and (f) outcome (departure decision: graduate, transfer, dropout; Metz, 2004, p. 192).

Figure 2

Tinto's Theory of Integration (1975, 1993)
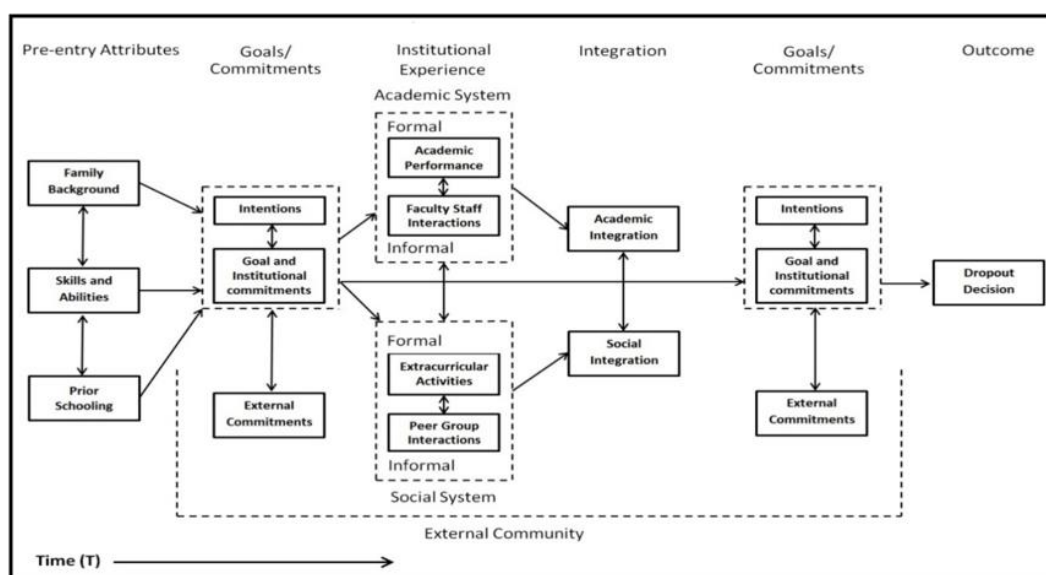
Note. Reprinted from "Dropout From Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research," by V. Tinto, 1975, *Review of Educational Research*, *45*(1), p. 95 (https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089). Copyright 1975 by SAGE Publications. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix A).

Cabrera et al. (1993) proposed and tested an integrative framework that merged variables from Tinto's (1975, 1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) retention models (see Figure 3). Empirical studies supported the convergence of the two models, and all of the statistically confirmed variables from both theories were merged, while variables that were not validated were excluded (Aljohani, 2016). Cabrera et al. (1993) found that the integration model provided

a better explanation and understanding of the student attrition process. It is important to note that while the integrated model of student retention (Cabrera et al., 1993) has provided a broader understanding of the student attrition process in some studies, the framework does not explicitly include or consider important factors such as background and defining variables or environmental variables.

Figure 3

Cabrera et al.'s (1993) Integrated Model of Student Retention
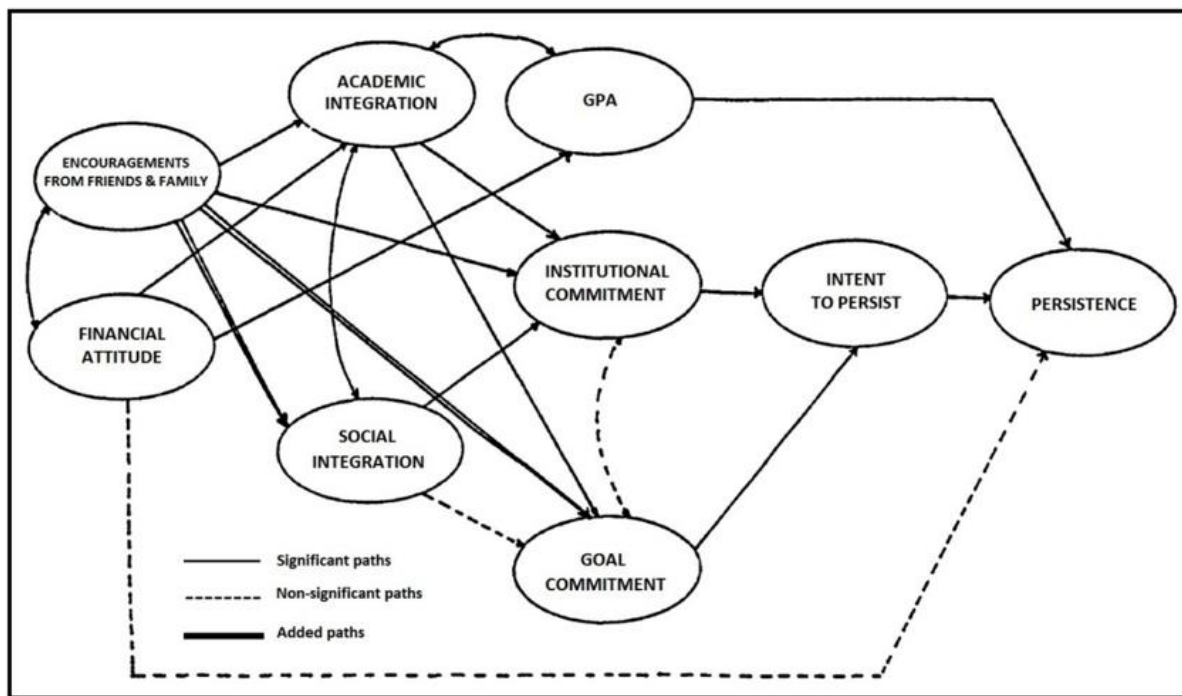
Note. Reprinted from "College Persistence: Structural Equations Modeling Test of an Integrated Model of Student Retention," by A. F. Cabrera, A. Nora, and M. B. Castañeda,1993, *Journal of Higher Education*, *64*(2), p. 134 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/2960026). Copyright 1993 by Taylor & Francis. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix A).

Concerning Community College Completion Rates

Research indicates disparate postsecondary education completion rates across varying student demographic populations, most notably race and family income (Barber, 2018). In the United States, there are disparities in educational outcomes between first-generation and continuing-generation students (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). First-generation students are less likely to enter college and more likely to stop or drop out than students with college-educated parents (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). Murphy and Murphy (2018) stated that the number of Latino(a) students entering college continues to rise, yet attrition for this student population remains a challenge. Community college completion and transfer rates are consistently low, with only one-third of students earning a credential within six years (Fong et al., 2017; Murphy & Murphy, 2018). Ensuring success and college completion among first-generation and minoritized students is critical for achieving social equity in the United States.

Potential challenges that are consistently identified for first-generation and underrepresented students include low-income family backgrounds, the lack of family experiences in higher education, and inadequate academic preparation (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). Community college students often enter without the requisite skills to enroll in credit-bearing courses (Fong et al., 2017). About half of entering community college students require remediation in mathematics, while one-third require developmental coursework in reading (Fong et al., 2017). Barber (2018) noted the impact of structural, institutional, and economic forces and the stratification of postsecondary pathways on persistence and attainment of educational objectives for underrepresented students. Barber (2018) proposed the importance of validation in shaping a student's successful transition into college and facilitating academic and personal self-efficacy leading to successful educational and personal outcomes. Fong et al. (2017) asserted the

need for additional research related to using prescriptive measures that assess students'

cognitive, motivational, and behavioral variables and the effect of those variables on access,

success, and retention.

Barriers to Persistence and Completion

Common characteristics have been identified as barriers to completing a degree or

certificate program at community colleges. These common characteristics identified by multiple

authors are that students attending community colleges are primarily nonwhite, enrolled part-

time, working full time, raising families as a single parent, low income, academically

unprepared, and often first-generation (Astin, 1993; Burns, 2010; Community College Survey of

Student Engagement, 2005; Fong et al., 2017). Fagioli et al. (2020) described barriers to

completion as frictions that challenge student momentum and potentially impact student

outcomes. The frictions identified as being relevant to community college students include

"students' academic preparation and experiences, various out-of-school demands students must

juggle, the uniquely complicated curricular and bureaucratic structures of community colleges,

and a potential lack of community and sense of belonging" (Fagioli et al., 2020, p. 729).

Low Income

A high percentage of community college students work full-time jobs and support

families, often on a single income at or below minimum wage. College students from households

with incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty level have increased from 28% in 1996 to

39% in 2016 (Freudenberg et al., 2019). A recent survey of 33,000 students at 70 community

colleges across 24 states revealed that two out of three students attending community colleges

are food insecure (Ilieva et al., 2019). In a study of 600 young adults who had at least some

college experience, nearly six in 10 students who did not complete their degrees reported having

to bear the full financial responsibility of their education rather than being able to rely on their families (Johnson et al., n.d.).

Previous generations of college students who typically enrolled in college after high school, received financial support from family, and worked part-time or not at all now represent less than a third of college enrollment (Freudenberg et al., 2019). In 2016 nearly half of all undergraduate students were financially independent, and a third attended community colleges (Freudenberg et al., 2019). More than 20% of college students have dependent children, and about 14% are single parents. Additionally, employers are increasingly dividing full-time positions into part-time positions to avoid paying for benefits, resulting in students working multiple part-time positions and often having to choose between work and school demands (Freudenberg et al., 2019).

Institutional Oppression

Often, underserved and underresourced communities, which include many individuals of color or low socioeconomic status, are not aware of how to access or navigate the process of higher education. People who are marginalized in higher education often struggle with a sense of self-doubt and lack of academic self-efficacy (Rice et al., 2013; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). These feelings result from a legacy of institutionalized oppression in higher education, which causes some people of color to internalize the feelings of not belonging (Yosso, 2005). Community colleges with a vast array of classes and programs can be difficult to navigate with inefficient course pathways, program structures, and major requirements (Bailey et al., 2015). While there are academic and social support services such as advising, career services, tutoring, transfer programs, coaching, and mentoring to assist students, navigating them can also be confusing (Bailey et al., 2015). Additionally, a majority of the offices and areas that provide

student support services operate during standard business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., which creates another layer for nontraditional and part-time enrolled students to navigate.

Academic Preparedness

Recent enrollment trends indicate that the community college student population is increasingly low-income and minority students who have often attended schools that do not have the resources needed to adequately prepare them for college (Burns, 2010; Wimberly & Noeth, 2005). More than 50% of community college students require remedial coursework, which lengthens the time it takes to complete a degree and exacerbates the cost of attaining their educational goals (Luna-Torres et al., 2018). Students needing to take two or more developmental courses are 65% less likely to complete their degree than students who do not require developmental courses (Luna-Torres et al., 2018).

Many researchers believe that academic preparedness, coupled with student motivation, is the main factor in determining college success (Kuh et al., 2005). This belief leads us to consider the implications of a lack of academic preparedness and explore the factors that must be leveraged to compensate when a student is underprepared for college.

Balancing Roles and Responsibilities

Compared to students at four-year universities, community college students are more likely to be nontraditional aged and enrolled part-time. Research indicates that part-time students have a higher risk of stop out and noncompletion than full-time enrolled students. While full-time enrollment shows a positive impact on persistence and completion, many part-time enrolled students find taking a reduced course load essential for maintaining a school, work, social, and family life balance (Lee, 2018). Fambely (2020) discussed role conflicts that emerge for students due to competing pressures of childcare, household responsibilities, financial obligations, work

commitments, and school commitments. Because community college students typically take on many different roles, they often do not view themselves primarily as students (Fagioli et al., 2020). Trying to balance roles and responsibilities often leads to stress, anxiety, and depression. Students name manifestations of stress as the biggest reason for absenteeism from class and work and the number one factor affecting individual academic performance (Thomas & Borrayo, 2016).

Nonacademic Success Factors

While the literature reviewed regarding factors contributing to student success did not all identify the same nonacademic success factors, there were five general themes into which the 19 specific factors can be organized. The general themes found to be associated with student persistence and success included (a) emotional intelligence, (b) relationships and connections to others on campus, (c) self-empowerment, (d) persistence, and (e) connections to community and family. Each theme will be discussed further with support from reviewed literature. The five themes associated with nonacademic student success factors are not presented in any particular order.

Emotional Intelligence

The theme of emotional intelligence includes factors identified in literature such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-management, emotional stability, managing relations, and self-development. Muenks et al. (2017) and Rogers-Shaw and Carr-Chellman (2018) discussed effort regulation, cognitive self-regulation, self-awareness, and self-management in impacting achievement outcomes. Muenks et al. (2017) asserted that self-regulation factors overlap conceptually and empirically with grit and engagement factors and therefore need further research. The authors suggested that future research be focused on ensuring that measures used

to assess factors accurately align with factor definitions and that interventions address variables aligned with desired outcome improvements. Hotchkins and Dancy (2015) cited a connection between emotional intelligence and protective factors that led to Black male students' positive academic resilience. A study by Suleman et al. (2019) indicated the positive correlation, based on multiple linear regression analysis, of emotional intelligence, particularly the variables emotional stability, managing relations, self-development, and altruistic behavior in predicting academic success.

Relationships and Connections to Others on Campus

Students who participated in research interviews done by Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2014) spoke to three major themes that contributed to their success. Those themes were (a) relationships with faculty, (b) family support, and (c) campus engagement and support. These themes repeatedly emerged throughout the literature on student success. Margarit and Kennedy (2019) discussed the importance of faculty-student interactions, and Buskirk-Cohen and Plants (2019) discussed the impact of caring pedagogy and connection to faculty on student success. Meaningful relationships with faculty and staff, personal connections, a sense of belonging, caring relationships, feeling valued, and on-campus supports are all extensively cited as nonacademic factors that lead to student success (Acevedo & Zerquera, 2016; Bauman et al., 2019; Bickerstaff et al., 2017; Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019; Rogers-Shaw & Carr-Chellman, 2018; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). Acevedo and Zerquera (2016) highlighted enhanced availability and quality of advising and connection to advisors, as well as connection to peer communities, as strong points of connection for students who show progress toward successful completion.

Karp et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between social and academic integration with persistence and found that social connections for community college students were more

likely connected to academic experiences such as study groups and information sharing networks rather than the more traditional extracurricular experiences of students at four-year universities such as clubs and student organizations. Schreiner et al. (2011) reported that community college students who were considered high risk for dropping out were more likely to persist when they perceived their faculty members as respecting them, having faith in them, and believing they could succeed. Clark (2012) added that when community college students form deep connections with college employees, they are more likely to persist. Clark (2012) noted that connections organically become opportunities for mentorship and students that describe college employees as "family" (p. 515). Finally, on-campus work opportunities have been found to contribute positively to student engagement, retention, and higher GPA than students who work off-campus (McCormick et al., 2010; Ocean, 2017).

Self-Empowerment

The theme of self-empowerment includes factors identified in the literature, such as having a purpose, self-determination, self-efficacy, competency, locus of control or agency, and motivation. As it relates to purpose, research indicates that when a student is clear on their goal for attendance and sees a path toward completion that appears to be attainable, they are more likely to persist toward completion (Bailey, 2017; Bailey et al., 2015). León et al. (2019) asserted the importance of supporting students around finding purpose, discovering strengths, recovering from setbacks, and setting and meeting challenging long-term goals for academic success. Quinn et al. (2019) discussed the impact of social self-confidence and knowledge of how to become engaged as factors that contribute to student persistence and completion. Acevedo and Zerquera (2016) and Bickerstaff et al. (2017) supported these findings and elaborated on the critical role of developing navigational skills in supporting a student's sense of agency, confidence, and feelings

of competency. Results in studies done by Martin et al. (2014) showed that students who lacked cultural capital or academic preparedness were able to compensate with self-direction, motivation, and the development of new support systems. Hotchkins and Dancy (2015) asserted that identity development and leadership experiences contributed toward student motivation, sense of agency, and clarity of purpose.

Persistence

The theme of persistence includes factors identified in literature such as resilience, hard work, motivation, grit, behavioral engagement, and perseverance. Buzzetto-Hollywood and Mitchell (2019), Quinn et al. (2019), and Muenks et al. (2017) identified grit as a nonacademic success factor that led to favorable student outcomes. Buzzetto-Hollywood and Mitchell (2019) found a significant positive correlation between grit, GPA, and persistence to graduation at a minority-serving institution that primarily serves low-income and first-generation students. Personality attributes of grit studied by Buzzetto-Hollywood and Mitchell (2019) included self-regulation, self-discipline, resilience, dutifulness, conscientiousness, and low impulsivity. The researchers concluded that grit alone might not be enough if the students' energies are not exerted appropriately, which makes clarity of purpose, positive self-efficacy, and a growth mindset important factors in grit's impact on student performance and success (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Mitchell, 2019). Quinn et al. (2019) identified grit as a success factor for attaining long-term goals such as college completion and acknowledged the limited representation of grit within first-generation student research. Muenks et al. (2017) described persistence as perseverance of effort and connected this factor to grit and engagement as factors that contribute to better grades and overall attainment of educational goals. Sourdot and Ausburn (2015) highlighted the critical role of resilience in retention and graduation and asserted that fostering

resilience in students requires the attention and effort of multiple higher education stakeholders. Fong et al. (2017) asserted a strong correlation between motivation, self-perceptions, attributions, and self-regulation to community college persistence and achievement. Margarit and Kennedy (2019) and Sáenz et al. (2017) further supported the strong correlation between persistence and timely graduation.

Sáenz et al. (2017) asserted that resilience, hard work, and motivation are factors rooted in community cultural wealth and significantly impact Latino men's progress and success in the college pipeline. These authors further asserted that all students, especially the community college student demographic, can benefit from identifying and acknowledging various sources of capital they possess early in their college experience and understanding how to maximize those sources for successful college connections and completion (Sáenz et al., 2017).

Community and Family Connections

In a study of students who identified with one or a combination of factors, including first-generation, economically disadvantaged background, first-year, or from an underrepresented racial or ethnic minority group, indicated retaining natural mentoring relationships across the first year of college was associated with increased academic performance and decreased symptoms of depression and anxiety (Hurd et al., 2016). Maintaining connections to community and retaining natural mentoring relationships across the first year of college has indicated positive results in supporting the emotional and psychological needs and challenges of students in transitioning to college and providing support and expectations toward achieving academic goals (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Hurd et al., 2016; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). In a study by Mitchall and Jaeger (2018), parental involvement and family support played a key role in fostering feelings of competence, relatedness, and autonomy, which contributed to student

motivation. Parent and family roles reported by students that supported motivation included serving as a supportive sounding board, figuring out how to navigate college processes and systems together, reassuring the student that they were "college material" (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018, p. 594), and validating decisions. Students also reported parent behaviors that challenged motivation, which included worrying about finances and family obligations, lack of parent help with navigating college processes and systems, and the inability to relate to and understand college expectations (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Tolliver and Miller (2018) and Sáenz et al. (2017) discussed the positive impact of engaging parents, families, and community members on developing students' familial, aspirational, and navigational capital, leading to success throughout their college experience. Sáenz et al. (2017) indicated that further research is needed for community colleges to explore and understand how to engage families in the college-going process and leverage and promote cultural community wealth. Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) recommended that colleges and universities make greater efforts to remove the barriers of parent and family participation in their students' college experience. Strategies such as making college knowledge more accessible to parents and families, offering family orientation programs and resources, and providing parent support and information networks can expand the social and cultural capital, particularly of low-income, first-generation students and families (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Nontraditional Students

College students have historically been discussed in research and practice as recent high school graduates who are typically 18 to 24 years old, attend school full time, live on campus, and are likely to financially depend on parents (Ellis, 2019). Therefore, students who do not fit this description have come to be referred to as nontraditional students. The National Center for

Education Statistics (n.d.) identifies nontraditional students based on information related to enrollment patterns, financial dependency status, family situation, and high school graduation status. Nontraditional students are typically defined in research as being 24 years or older, part of a minoritized ethnicity, having dependents, low socioeconomic status, and employed part-time or full-time (Forbus et al., 2011). Nontraditional and part-time student enrollment is projected to grow faster than full-time student enrollment, which will shift the overall student demographic toward an older, more diverse, part-time enrolled student population (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Ellis, 2019; Woods & Frogge, 2017).

Reasons indicated by both traditional and nontraditional students for attending college include "furthering a career, achieving a personal goal, obtaining a higher salary, fulfilling expectations from parents, and responding to positive peer pressure from friends" (Woods & Frogge, 2017, p. 96). Factors identified as challenges to academic success and completion rates for nontraditional students include increased family responsibilities, being dependent on personal income for all expenses, and managing time constraints and work responsibilities (Woods & Frogge, 2017). A study conducted by Woods and Frogge (2017) revealed that nontraditional students indicated a preference for online courses because of their flexible format, work and study more hours than their traditional student peers, earn similar grades to traditional student peers despite studying more hours, and have higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning. Ellis (2019) indicated that while nontraditional students show higher levels of intrinsic motivation and are often more engaged in their learning than their traditional student peers, degree completion rates are lower.

Donaldson and Townsend (2007) suggested a substantial bias in higher education research, policy, and practice toward traditional students and a lack of equitable treatment toward

adult learners in "public policy, institutional programming, and institutional mission" (p. 28). A content analysis of literature, which included 3,219 articles from seven peer-reviewed higher education journals conducted by Donaldson and Townsend (2007), revealed that only 1.27% (41 articles) were about adult undergraduate students. Based on themes from the analysis conducted, four institutional perspectives about adult undergraduate students were proposed: invisible, acknowledged but devalued, accepted, and embraced (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). According to Donaldson and Townsend (2007), the invisible perspective treats traditional student experiences as universal and adult undergraduates are invisible; the acknowledged but devalued perspective portrays adult students as "deficient, problematic, and different" (p. 37) and uses traditional students as the norm implicitly devaluing adult students; the accepted perspective treats traditional and adult students as two separate groups and aims to provide programs and services that meet homogenous adult needs; and the embraced perspective values adult students for what they bring to an institution, recognizes intragroup differences, and seek to serve unique needs of diverse learners.

Chapter Summary

Low completion rates of nontraditional part-time enrolled students are a significant problem for community colleges, and the experiences and expectations of these students at urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States, including how they define success, challenges to achieving success, and factors that contribute to success, are not fully understood or assessed. Higher education's understanding of how to serve low-income and part-time enrolled college students in a way that effectively impacts persistence and completion is limited (Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). A majority of the existing research regarding student persistence and completion focuses on students enrolled full-time at four-year

universities and routinely examines the roles of gender, race, and academic readiness. There is a gap in research related to retention and completion at community colleges, particularly as it relates to the needs of part-time and nontraditional students and the impact of nonacademic strengths and abilities (Fong et al., 2017; Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Suleman et al., 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). A deeper understanding of the nonacademic factors that promote successful completion for part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges could inform decisions regarding programs, services, and initiatives provided to ensure they align with the needs of part-time enrolled students. This understanding and alignment can guide community college administrators and educators in developing, leveraging, and capitalizing on success factors to increase students' completion rates.

Nonacademic success factors are connected to the attainment of educational goals and increased academic resilience (Hurd et al., 2016). Preliminary research suggests the potential impact of strategies that foster relationships and connections on campus, help students develop clear goals and identify purpose, enhance emotional intelligence, foster self-empowerment and agency, leverage community and family connections and cultural wealth factors, and promote perseverance and resilience on student success and completion. Further research is needed to explore the unique needs and experiences of nontraditional part-time enrolled community college students and understand which facets of student success services and programs offered at four-year institutions translate into effective outcomes in the community college environment.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This study was designed to investigate and explore the perspectives and experiences of students who enrolled part-time at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States with the goal of earning a certificate or degree or transferring to a four-year university. Baxter and Jack (2008) indicated that methodology pertains to the frame of reference that informs the method of inquiry and the guiding principles to which that method is typically subjected. Guba and Lincoln (1989) defined methodology as the "overall strategy for resolving the complete set of choices and options available to the inquirer" (p. 183). This chapter describes how qualitative research and case study methodology align with this study's purpose. The research design selected for this study, sampling techniques that were used, data collection and analysis methods, and the researcher's role are also described in this chapter. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations, trustworthiness, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Research Design and Method

This qualitative study used exploratory research with multiple case study methodology to understand better the perceptions and experiences of part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. The research questions were designed to explore how students define success and their perception of what it takes to achieve success, the utilization rate of student success resources and gaps in services, challenges encountered that cause a student to consider stop out or drop out, the quality of relationships and connections part-time students have with faculty and staff, and the experience students have navigating institutional systems and processes. This case study aimed to discover actual

experiences and perceptions of a particular group of people at a particular point in time (Terrell, 2016).

This study was guided by a constructivist research paradigm which asserts that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective, a relativist ontology that assumes multiple realities, and a subjectivist epistemology in which the researcher and the participants cocreate understandings (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Terrell, 2016). The study was bound by the life cycle of a part-time enrolled community college student beginning with the initial action taken toward applying for college admission and ending with attaining the identified academic goal. While each individual student case was unique, themes of greater and lesser similarity across cases were found. Conducting a collective or multiple case study was appropriate because I was interested in discovering similar themes that cases have in common (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). Stake (2006) uses the term quintain to refer to the common components of each case that make them a group, category, or phenomenon of interest. In this study, the interest or quintain was the experience of part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States, and each student participant represented a case in the group of interest.

Qualitative research involves the intentional collection and study of various empirical materials that are woven together to describe moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Exploratory research seeks new insights into phenomena and sheds light on ambiguous situations (Mayer, 2015). A case study, used as a methodology (see Figure 4), explores and critiques a phenomenon in context using multiple data sources and collection methods (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Patton (2015) stated that case study research is a method of inquiry for examining "depth of a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals,

using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time" (Patton, 2015, p. 259). Yin (2012) stated that case study research supports the "aim to produce an invaluable but complex understanding hopefully resulting in new learning about real-world behavior" (p. 142). Additionally, Yin (2012) advocated that a case study design should be considered when the researcher aims to answer "how" and "why" questions, the behavior of study participants cannot be manipulated, the researcher believes and wants to cover contextual conditions because they feel they are relevant to the phenomenon being studied, or there are unclear boundaries between that phenomenon and the context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013b) asserted that case study research identifies a "problem, concern, challenge, or tension that warrants study to better define and understand the causes of the issues at hand" (p. 162). Baxter and Jack (2008) asserted that rigorous qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources. The strengths of case study research fall into six themes, which include the following: they help us understand complex inter-relationships, they are grounded in lived reality, they can facilitate the exploration of the unexpected and unusual, multiple case studies can enable research to focus on the significance of the idiosyncratic, they can show the processes involved in causal relationships, and they can facilitate rich conceptual or theoretical development (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001; Murphy, 2014).

Figure 4

Case Study Methodology
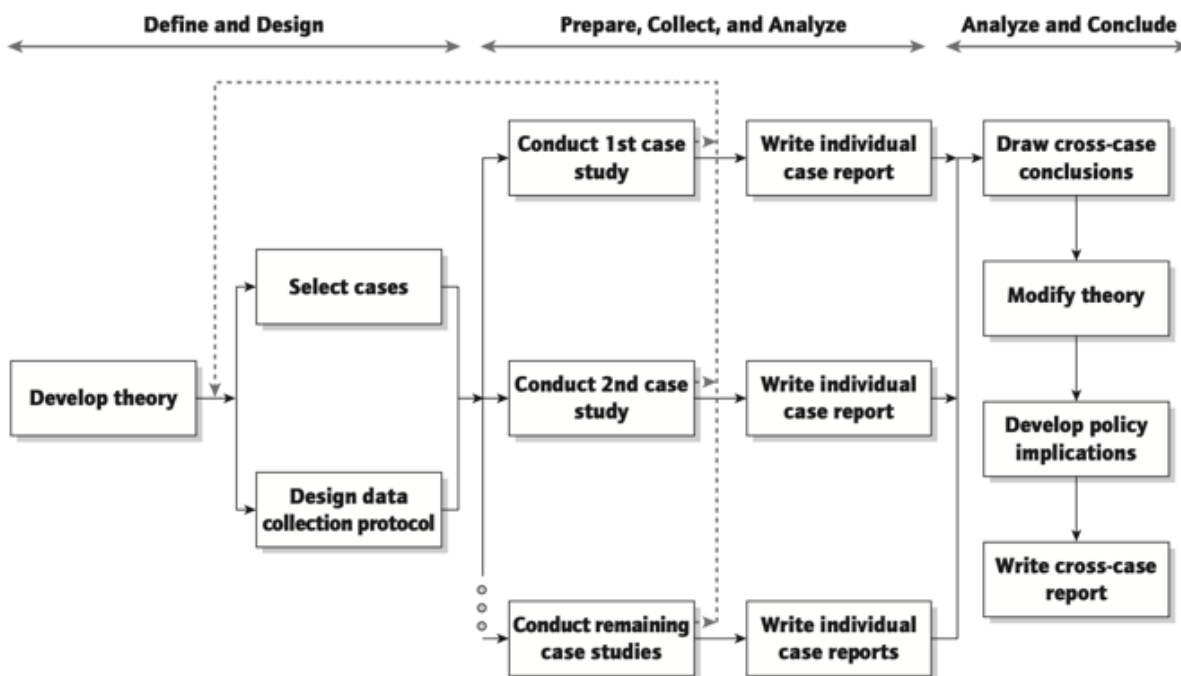
Note. Reprinted from "Designing Case Studies: Identifying Your Case(s) and Establishing the Logic of Your Case Study," by R. K. Yin, 2017, in *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (6th ed.), p. 57 (https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/24736_Chapter2.pdf). Copyright 2017 by SAGE Publications. Reprinted with permission by COSMOS Corporation.

While there are many philosophical approaches to conducting case study research, Stake and Yin are cited most extensively and are attributed with the two key approaches that guide case study methodology (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018). Both approaches are based on a constructivist paradigm and aim to thoroughly explore the topic of interest and reveal the essence of the phenomenon being studied. A constructivist approach provided the advantage of a close collaboration between the participant and me, enabling participants to tell their stories and

describe their views of reality (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018). Through the telling of stories, I gained a better understanding of participant actions (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The two key approaches to case study research differ in the strategies they employ to determine and describe types of case studies and the techniques prescribed for data analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018). Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) use different terms to differentiate types of case studies. Yin (2003) categorizes case studies as explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive, while Stake (1995) defines case studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018). Yin also differentiates between single, holistic, and multiple case studies (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018). Techniques for data analysis described by Yin (2014) include pattern matching, linking data to propositions, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis, while Stake's (2006) approach describes categorical aggregation and direct interpretation as types of analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018).

Low completion rates of nontraditional part-time enrolled students are a significant problem for community colleges. There is limited research focusing on retention and timely completion at community colleges, particularly as it relates to the needs and motivations of nontraditional students (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Suleman et al., 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). There is a need to explore the community college student experience for nontraditional part-time enrolled students and understand the complex inter-relationships and factors, as well as the lived realities, that impact persistence and completion of certificate or degree programs or successful transfer to a four-year university. Given the attributes and strengths of case study research previously discussed,

exploratory research with multiple case study methodology fits the purpose of this qualitative research and the problem being studied.

Population and Sample

The study's target population included nontraditional part-time enrolled students who attend a multicampus urban community college in the Southwest region of the United States and have earned 50% of the credits required to complete their identified academic goal. For example, if a student has a goal to complete an associate degree, they will have completed 30 or more credits to meet the criteria for the study. If the student's goal is to transfer to a four-year university, they will have completed 21 or more credits from the core curriculum requirements. For this project, participants were selected from a single site using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was chosen for participant selection because the nature of the research questions required insight from participants with specific positions, experiences, and identity markers (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Additionally, purposive sampling is based on the premise that seeking out the best cases for the study produces information-rich data, which informs research results (Leavy, 2017). Finally, Stake (1995, 2006) and Yin (2003) both recommended purposive sampling for multiple case study research. Stake (2006) emphasized the importance of having each case selected represent the research question and the quintain. According to Stake (2006), three questions can be asked when choosing cases: "Is the case relevant to the quintain? Do the cases provide diversity across contexts? Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts?" (p. 23).

To access potential student participants, I worked with the Division of Student Affairs and the Student Development and General Studies department at the study site to identify students who were currently enrolled part-time with intentions of completing a level 1 certificate,

an associate degree, or transferring to a four-year university and who had met the criteria of having completed 50% of credits required for completion of the identified academic goal. Completion of an associate degree typically requires 60 semester credits. A full-time enrolled student typically enrolls in 12–15 credits per semester and completes their degree in four to five semesters. A part-time enrolled student typically enrolls in six to nine credits per semester, which would take seven to 10 semesters to complete. Given this information, the study sought out students who were either currently enrolled in a community college or had been enrolled at some point dating back to January 2016.

Student participants were recruited through emails or personal invitations from me, staff in the Division of Student Affairs, or faculty in Student Development or General Studies to part-time enrolled students who were persisting in degree or certificate-granting programs (see Appendices B & C). As an administrator and adjunct faculty member at the study site, after receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval (see Appendix D), I anticipated having the ability to gain access to recruit for student participants or have others in the institution partner to invite students to participate in the study, as permissible by the vice president of Student Affairs and the Institutional Research Review Committee.

Ideally, I hoped to have 30 participants respond to a survey questionnaire, with 10–12 agreeing to participate in face-to-face or video conference interviews. Of the 10–12 interviews, I intended to select four to seven that met the criteria and quintain for use as a case for full data collection and analysis. Selecting cases that support research goals was an essential part of the research design. Because case study research involves intensive data collection, multiple case designs typically include two to 10 cases (Mills et al., 2010). Because of the limited number of cases compared for variation and the inductive research design, cases are screened and selected

based on "empirical considerations and that maximize opportunities for developing hypotheses or theories that explain the social phenomenon" (Mills et al., 2010, p. 61) being studied. Yin (2014) discussed the selection of cases for multiple case studies stating that "each case must be carefully selected so that it either predicts similar results or predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons" (p. 54). Yin (2014) indicated that a multiple case study design could be effective with as few as two cases and as many as 10. Stake (2006) recommended using four to 10 cases in a multiple case study and does not consider them validation for one another but rather a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

The goal with the number of participants was to achieve data saturation where any additional data did not contribute to additional learning or insights (Leavy, 2017; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Therefore, a data saturation point as related to learning about the experiences of part-time enrolled students at urban community colleges would need to be reached. As a researcher, it was important to be cognizant of reaching data saturation to avoid generating unnecessary data and redundancy from additional data (Coffey, 1999, as cited in Leavy, 2017, p. 78).

Instrumentation

In line with case study methodology, which explores and critiques a phenomenon in context using multiple data sources and collection methods (Baxter & Jack, 2008), this study utilized a combination of cross-sectional survey questionnaires, interviews, participant journals, and relevant institutional reports and documents to collect data in efforts to answer the research questions. In addition to being aligned with the methodology, using multiple data sources builds trustworthiness into data collection (Maxwell, 2005).

Survey Questionnaires

Cross-sectional survey questionnaires seek information to make inferences about a population of interest or a sample at one point in time (Lavrakas, 2008; Leavy, 2017). The survey questionnaire (see Appendix E) used in this study was developed by referencing examples of demographic questions for survey projects provided by the University of Wisconsin La Crosse Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning (2019), Moody et al.'s (2013) ACPA standards for demographic questions, and the work of Hughes et al. (2016) on updating demographic questions to improve descriptions of research samples.

Interviews

Semistructured, in-depth, inductive interviews conducted through video conferencing or phone conferencing (Leavy, 2017) were utilized to explore participants' experiences and viewpoints and gather thick and rich qualitative data (Turner, 2010). The interview questions used for this study (see Appendix F) were developed to explore the variety of experiences a part-time enrolled student has throughout the life cycle of their time at a community college in pursuit of their academic goal. The interview questions were developed to gather qualitative data that will provide insight into the study's research questions. The interview protocol for this study was informed by reviewing interview protocols from other studies exploring student barriers to success, student success factors, and the experiences of nontraditional students were reviewed.

Participant Journals

Participant journals were provided to each participant interviewed as an option for documenting and reflecting on participation in the research project or perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs of lived experiences. The journals were intended to serve as a tool for participants to reflect on their experiences, capture postinterview thoughts, or respond to my follow-up

questions. The journal was provided digitally through a password-protected document once the participant had agreed to participate in the study and had signed the informed consent form. I created individually protected documents, and the password was only shared with the participant and me. In the initial conversation with each participant, I discussed the value of reflection in learning and meaning making and encouraged the participant to jot down any thoughts or questions they had after the interview with me as a way to more fully share and appreciate the experiences they have had and are having. While the journal was provided and encouraged, it was not required as a condition for participation.

Institutional Reports and Documents

Relevant institutional reports or documents were utilized to provide secondary data and contextual information for the case study. Reports that provided general retention and persistence data, enrollment data, and demographic data were accessed through the study site's website. Publicly available reports and documents available through the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the U.S. Department of Education were also utilized to provide context for data analysis.

Data Collection

Potential study participants were invited by me, staff in the Division of Student Affairs, or faculty in the Student Development and General Studies department at the study site to participate in the research study and to complete a survey questionnaire. All participants completed a signed consent form acknowledging they were aware of their voluntary involvement in the research project and any risks associated with participation (see Appendix G). Upon review of questionnaire responses, predetermined criteria guided me in inviting respondents who

met the criteria to participate in an interview as a method to explore the participants' experience more thoroughly and be included as one of the cases in the quintain for the multiple case study.

The survey questionnaire initially used to collect participant data had a combination of fixed-choice and open-ended questions (see Appendix E). Fixed-choice questions provided the respondent with a range of response options and were used to collect objective data such as demographic information (Leavy, 2017). Open-ended questions allowed participants to provide short responses and were used to collect subjective data related to their attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and experiences at their community college (Leavy, 2017; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The survey questionnaire asked if the individual was interested in being contacted to participate in an interview for the study and collected personally identifiable information, including email and phone number, that allowed for participant follow-up as needed. The data from the questionnaires was used to gain initial insights on experiences that were commonly identified by respondents and to identify respondents who met the predetermined criteria for semistructured interviews. The respondents who met the criteria and indicated an interest in participating in an interview were invited to participate in a follow-up interview to gain more in-depth insight into the themes, patterns, and experiences of study participants. Questionnaires used in conjunction with interviews in case study research can work effectively to provide the researcher with both a broad understanding of a particular group or groups and depth of understanding and insights into beliefs, attitudes, and opinions (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013a).

Interviews allow a researcher to ask participants directly about their personal experiences related to the study's topic; their values, attitudes, and beliefs; their knowledge or understanding of various topics; or any other matters pertinent to the study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Semistructured interviews have a degree of structure but also offer significant latitude to adjust

course as needed to attend carefully to both the participants' answers or absence of answers and other cues such as nonverbal gestures and tone (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013a; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). COVID protocols prevented face-to-face interviews; therefore, all participants completed digital consent forms in advance of the interview (see Appendix H) and connected with me remotely from their home either through Zoom or by phone. Video conference and phone interviews were audio recorded and video recorded when given permission by the participant. Interviews began with general questions to establish rapport between the participant and me and gain basic participant information. The interview continued with in-depth, open-ended questions about participant experiences at urban community colleges as a part-time enrolled student working toward completing a degree or certificate program. Additional probing questions were asked of the participant, if needed, for clarification or to gather rich data about participant experiences and perspectives (see Appendix F).

Relational turning points and the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) informed the exploration of participant relationships and level of commitment to their academic goal and the institution. Baxter and Bullis (1986) introduced relational turning points as any event or occurrence associated with a change in relationship. These events and occurrences can be either positive or negative in nature. Harmeling et al. (2015) discussed relational turning points in the context of relationship life cycles and customer engagement. Their work asserted two assumptions. First, a person simultaneously holds product expectations and relational expectations, influencing their interpretation of exchange events (Harmeling et al., 2015). Second, relational expectations are dynamic and evolve throughout the relationship life cycle based on confirming and disconfirming events experienced (Harmeling et al., 2015).

Assuming that students have product and relational expectations when pursuing higher education, the relational turning points framework is relevant to this study. Participants were asked to share experiences they have had with pursuing their academic goals and interacting with the institution and agents of the institution. These experiences and decision points represent the life cycle of a student beginning with the initial thought of attending college and continuing through the student's current status (see Appendix I). Using RIT, the student participants' experiences, perceptions, and emotions were intended to be graphed out across the student life cycle to gain insight into experiences that enhance or detract from their level of commitment to their education and sense of belonging to the institution. Retrospective Interview Technique aims to determine the relevance of turning points by identifying turning points along the trajectory of an experience and interviewing individuals to gather information about the impact of the experience on commitment level at each turning point (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

The identified experiences and turning points were intended to be graphed along the x-axis, and the perceptions and feelings about commitment level were intended to be graphed along the y-axis. The graphs were intended to show a visual representation of significant events as they occurred over time and the impact that those events had on various relational outcomes (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

Data Analysis

Saldaña and Omasta (2018) suggested that data analysis methods chosen by researchers depend on the forms of data collected, methodological genre employed, types of research questions posed, types of participants studied, parameters for investigation, researcher's comfort level with analytic approaches, and the form a final presentation takes. Yin (2014) and Stake (2006) describe various techniques appropriate for analyzing case study data. Techniques for

data analysis described by Yin (2014) include pattern matching, linking data to propositions, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis, while Stake's (2006) approach described categorical aggregation and direct interpretation as types of analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018). Creswell (1998) and Stake (1995) outlined a typical format for data analysis in case study research, which includes a description of each instance of a case and its setting, categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, and interpretation.

With a desire to gain new insights into the experiences of part-time enrolled students, I was interested in identifying themes. Therefore, categorical aggregation, within-case analysis, and cross-case analysis were employed to analyze data. Categorical aggregation involves seeking a collection of themes from the collected data, while within-case analysis and cross-case analysis involve looking at the connections between or among themes in each case and across cases (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995). Various coding passes, including in vivo coding, process coding, and emotion coding, were used to reduce data from survey questionnaires, in-person interviews, and institutional documents into working themes. Coding is a cyclical process with the goal of reducing large amounts of language data (Ford, 2014) to keywords and then to themes from which to analyze and derive meaning. Data reduction in qualitative analysis occurs continuously during the analysis. The main objective is to reduce data without losing information and to preserve information within its context. Strategies for reducing data vary throughout stages of research and include editing and summarizing in the early stages, coding and memoing in the middle stages, and conceptualizing and explaining in the later stages (Mayer, 2015).

In vivo coding utilizes the participant's own language as a symbol system for data analysis (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This coding pass is an elemental coding method that

provides basic, focused filters that lay a foundation for additional coding cycles (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). In vivo coding involves multiple readings of the interview and journal transcript and notation of words that seem to stand out to the researcher as significant or relevant to the topic they are studying. In vivo coding is useful for discovering and highlighting participant-generated words that provide insight into a group, culture, or subculture. Choosing to use this coding pass for this project was appropriate because I was interested in gaining insight into the experiences of one subgroup within the community college environment.

Process coding utilizes gerunds as codes to identify forms of participant action, reaction, and interaction as suggested by the data and describes in realistic or conceptual terms what participants are doing or what is happening (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This coding pass, like in vivo coding, is an elemental coding method, which provides basic, focused filters that lay a foundation for additional coding cycles (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). Process coding is useful for identifying responses to certain situations or problems (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). Choosing to use this coding pass for this project was appropriate because I was interested in identifying part-time enrolled students' perceptions and behaviors that contribute to the successful completion of a degree or certificate program.

Emotion coding labels the emotional states experienced or recalled by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This coding pass is an effective coding method that explores the subjective qualities of human experience by directly labeling and naming those experiences (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). Emotion coding is valuable for exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Choosing to use this coding pass for this project was appropriate because I was exploring the intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences of part-time enrolled students at urban

community colleges and the interactions they have that shape their experience and contribute to their success.

Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (1981) stated that for research to be considered worthwhile, it must have truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. They suggested that trustworthiness strengthens the value of a research study and involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria correspond to the criteria of internal validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity employed by the positivist investigator in quantitative research (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Credibility is confidence in the truth of the findings and can be established through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is an indication that the findings have applicability in other contexts and can be facilitated through the inclusion of thick description (Amankwaa, 2016; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description involves details such as setting, atmosphere, participants, participant attitudes and observed reactions, and feelings of the investigator that give the reader a vivid picture of the research study (Amankwaa, 2016). Dependability shows that the findings are consistent and could be reproduced (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested inquiry audits where a researcher who is not involved in the research process examines the research study's process and product as a practice to establish dependability. This audit is intended to evaluate for accuracy and determine "whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data" (Amankwaa, 2016, p. 122). Confirmability is the extent to which respondents shape the study's findings rather

than researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested using triangulation, reflexivity, an audit trail, and a confirmability audit to establish confirmability. Triangulation is a method for ensuring that findings test for validity and that qualitative research is rich, robust, comprehensive, and well-developed (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Methods triangulation, source triangulation, theory or perspective triangulation, and analyst triangulation are four types of triangulation identified by Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999).

This study established trustworthiness in several ways. First, participants were purposely recruited based on set criteria relevant to the research questions and the quintain. Second, all interviews were audio recorded and several were video recorded. Third, interviews were transcribed initially by an external transcribing service; then checked and edited by me for accuracy; and finally sent to participants for review, edits, and confirmation of accuracy. Fourth, multiple coding passes were used with a repetitive review of themes generated from each coding pass utilized. The first coding cycle was deductive coding of the raw transcripts using codes from each research question to organize participant responses into research question categories. Three inductive coding cycles followed my deductive coding and included in vivo coding, process coding, and emotion coding. I then did a deductive analysis to review how the themes that emerged connected to Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model, which was used as a guiding theoretical framework. Triangulation of the data enhances confidence in the findings and demonstrates the reliability of research findings (Bryman, 2004). Triangulation of data sources and types also supports the principle in case study research that multiple perspectives be used to explore the phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Finally, a process of member checking was utilized to share my interpretations of the data with the participants for

them to have an opportunity to clarify the interpretation and contribute additional perspectives as appropriate (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted with integrity and guided by a process that considered the ethical implications of my behaviors and attitudes before, during, and after the research study. Leavy (2017) detailed research design and three levels of ethical substructure, including (a) philosophical dimensions, which address values, beliefs, and attitudes; (b) praxis dimensions, which address procedural, situational, and relational ethics; and (c) reflexivity dimensions, which address personal accountability and the role of power in research practice. An overall attitude of benevolence and integrity guided my research decisions and interactions with people and information. I demonstrated dignified and responsible treatment of all human subjects involved. This included being transparent with participants about the purpose of the research and intended use of results, the time commitment expected, the risks involved, and the benefits they may receive. Informed consent forms were used, and participants were told that their participation was voluntary, was not compensated, and could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Finally, data was handled with confidentiality, and participant identities and views were protected.

Additional considerations that had ethical implications for this study were that I disclosed my positionality and connection to the problem being studied and bracketed personal assumptions about the phenomenon not to influence the participants' constructions and the analysis of their responses (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Assumptions

This study assumed that Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model was relevant to nontraditional part-time enrolled students enrolled in urban community colleges. The model was selected because it places a high degree of consideration on external environment factors impacting student persistence and acknowledges the nature of a commuter college and the challenges that factor presents to integrating students into an institution's academic and social systems. An assumption was made that intersecting identities contribute to the experience students have attending community college and that part-time enrolled and nontraditional students experience college differently than full-time enrolled and traditional students. This study also assumed that participants had a degree of self-awareness and could appropriately and accurately verbalize their perspectives and lived experiences of pursuing a certificate, degree, or transfer program at an urban community college.

Limitations

The small sample size in case study research and using a single site of study were limitations to this study because conclusions drawn and findings discovered may or may not apply to other part-time enrolled students pursuing certificates, degrees, or transfer at community colleges in the Southwest region or other regions of the United States. This study was designed to explore the depth of experiences students had; therefore, generalizability is limited, but the results may be transferable. Another limitation of the study was the impact of COVID-19 safety protocols on interview quality. While participants were able to participate in interviews from the comfort of their own homes, virtual or phone interviews did impact the quality of interactions with participants. Internet connectivity strength impacted clarity of communication, virtual interviews limited my ability to observe nonverbal communication, virtual interviews with

participants in their homes resulted in more distractions and interruptions for participants, and phone interviews felt less personal. Finally, the timeframe was a limitation that likely impacted the depth and richness of the study results. Since the study is a dissertation project, it had to be completed in a comparably short amount of time. The timeframe impacted the frequency of interactions with study participants to gather qualitative data. The specific ways this limitation impacted my study were using participant journals and applying the relational turning points framework (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

Delimitations

Baxter and Jack (2008) identified one pitfall of case study methodology as the tendency for researchers to attempt to answer a question that is too broad. It is recommended that boundaries be placed on cases to ensure that the study's scope is reasonable to address this common pitfall. Boundaries of a case indicate the depth and breadth of a study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Options for binding a case include by time and place (Creswell, 2013), time and activity (Stake, 1995), and definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

This study was bound by time and activity. The time was the life cycle of a part-time enrolled community college student, and the activity was the experience part-time enrolled students have pursuing a certificate, degree, or transfer programs at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. This study was limited to participants who were pursuing their academic goals as part-time enrolled students at a multicampus urban community college in the Southwest region of the United States. It did not include students who were pursuing their academic goals as full-time students.

Researcher's Role and Positionality

My role in this research was that of a reflexive scholar. By engaging with the study participants, together we navigated a process of elaborating and collectively understanding the perspectives and experiences of the participants. This is in alignment with the subjectivist epistemology discussed in the research design.

As a middle-level manager in Student Affairs and an adjunct faculty member teaching a student success course in the Student Development and General Studies department at the study site, which is a multicampus urban community college, I am closely connected to the topic of study. I have been working in higher education for over 20 years and have served in a variety of staff roles in Student Affairs at diverse types of institutions. Additionally, I have taught as an adjunct faculty member at both a community college and a Tier I research institution. Finally, I have been an entrepreneur in the fitness industry for about eight years. I am a NASM (National Academy of Sports Medicine) Certified Personal Trainer with experience coaching groups and individuals toward their fitness, nutrition, and wellness goals.

I am the first in my family to have attended college and began my college journey at a community college in Michigan. I started college wanting to be a physical therapist and transferred to a four-year university where I completed my bachelor's degree with a major in Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Administration and a minor in Psychology. I worked as a recreation therapist for several years prior to returning to school to pursue my Master's degree in Business Administration (MBA) while working full-time with the hopes to work in healthcare administration or nonprofit management. This research was conducted and submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for my Doctorate degree in Organizational Leadership with a focus in Higher Education.

Ethnically, I am a White, European American. I am a child of divorce and was raised by a single mom in the Midwest. I grew up in a trailer park in a low socioeconomic status family at an income level below the poverty threshold. While my family struggled financially, we had a safety net of extended family, friends, and church community who assisted in different times of need, and therefore, I did not experience persistent homelessness or hunger that often accompanies poverty. I briefly experienced homelessness when my family lost our home and were waiting to transition to a new home. During this time, our extended support network provided us with a place to stay.

I had access to a strong education and attended private Catholic schools from first to 12th grade on scholarship from our church. I was sponsored by scholarship because of my mom's involvement in the church community. This opportunity provided me with a strong educational foundation that prepared me for the academic rigor of college. While I was academically prepared for college, I was not navigationally prepared. Being the first in my family to attend college, I stumbled my way through figuring it out. I was offered a work-study job at the community college I attended, and the staff in that office quickly became my guides and mentors who helped me navigate community college and transfer to a four-year university. When I transferred to a four-year university, I lived on campus, and the residence life staff became my network of support to connect me to resources and people who helped me figure my way through college. I worked 20–30 hours a week as a waitress while going to school, which helped cover the costs of tuition, fees, books, and housing.

Chapter Summary

Higher education's understanding of how to serve low-income and part-time enrolled college students in a way that effectively impacts persistence and completion is limited

(Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). A majority of the existing research regarding student persistence and completion focuses on students enrolled full-time at four-year universities and routinely examined the roles of gender, race, and academic readiness. There is a gap in research related to retention and completion at community colleges, particularly as it relates to the needs of part-time and nontraditional students and the impact of nonacademic strengths and abilities (Fong et al., 2017; Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Suleman et al., 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2018), 7.1 million students enrolled in public two-year colleges in credit-bearing courses during fall 2016, while 5 million students enrolled in noncredit courses. Of the students who enrolled in credit-bearing courses, about 2.6 million (37%) were full-time students, and 4.5 million (63%) were part-time.

To create environments, provide services, and offer resources that support student learning and success, it is vital that we understand who our students are. The experiences of traditional age and full-time enrolled students are treated as universal, and their behaviors have been presented as the implicit norm in the discussions about student success, retention, and persistence (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007). This case study aimed to discover actual experiences and perceptions of a particular group of people at a particular point in time (Terrell, 2016). A multiple case study approach allowed me to utilize multiple data sources for exploring multiple perspectives and lived experiences of students who enrolled part-time at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States with the goal of earning a certificate or degree or transferring to a four-year university. A deeper understanding of this student population could inform decisions regarding programs, services, and initiatives provided to ensure they align with the needs of part-time enrolled students. This understanding and

alignment can guide community college administrators and educators in developing, leveraging,

and capitalizing on success factors to increase students' completion rates.

Chapter 4: Results

Chapter 4 presents the results of this study and discusses the following topics: (a) summary of the research design, (b) an overview of the study institution and participant profiles and demographics, and (c) the study's findings. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of nontraditional part-time enrolled students who attend multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States with the goal of earning a degree or transferring to a four-year university. Completion rates for part-time enrolled students in this region are low (E3 Alliance, 2020), and there is limited research regarding the experiences and perceptions of part-time enrolled community college students as it relates to factors that lead to completion or attrition.

Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges describe their experiences related to academic resilience, persistence, and utilization of academic and social support services and programs?

RQ2: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges describe their interactions with agents of the institution and sense of belonging?

RQ3: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges explain their ability to persist toward their academic goals or their decision to stop out/drop out?

Summary of the Research Design

This qualitative research study used exploratory research guided by a constructivist research paradigm, which asserts that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective, a

relativist ontology that assumes multiple realities, and a subjectivist epistemology in which the researcher and the participants cocreate understandings (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Terrell, 2016). A multiple case study methodology was utilized to explore and better understand the perceptions and experiences of part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. The steps for data collection included setting the boundaries for the study, collecting survey questionnaire responses, conducting semistructured interviews with part-time enrolled students who had completed at least 50% progress toward their identified academic goal, reviewing documents pertaining to institutional student academic progress rates, and maintaining a researcher journal for reflexive journaling. Prior to collecting data for the study, approval from Abilene Christian University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix J) and Sigma Community College's (pseudonym) Institutional Research Review Committee (see Appendix D) was obtained.

Data Collection Process

After receiving approval from both Abilene Christian University's IRB in March 2021 and Sigma Community College's Institutional Research Review Committee in April 2021, faculty and staff contacts were identified with the assistance of the study site's institutional faculty liaison for the study. Once contacts were identified, they were contacted by phone, email, or Google chat to request their assistance with identifying potential participants. Information provided to the contacts included a description of the study, which included the purpose of the study, criteria for involvement, and an invitation for students to participate (see Appendices B & C). Faculty and staff contacts shared study information with potential participants. Additionally, I emailed the description of the study and an invitation to participate to former students who had been enrolled in my effective learning strategies course between fall 2017 and spring 2019.

Participants who completed the survey questionnaire and indicated interest and willingness to be interviewed were contacted initially by email and followed up by phone (text), if needed, to schedule a date, time, and modality for the interview. Because of COVID-19 protocols and safety concerns, all interviews were either conducted via Zoom or over the phone. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant for confidentiality and used throughout the study to refer to participant responses, data analysis, and study findings.

This study utilized multiple methods of data collection. In qualitative case study research, the researcher is the primary tool for data collection (Creswell, 2013); therefore, I was the primary data collection tool for this research, with data collected primarily through semistructured interviews. Data was also collected from survey questionnaires, documents, reflexive journaling, and participant follow-up communication via email to assist with the triangulation and trustworthiness of data. Documents reviewed were obtained through the study institution's publicly available website and included (a) reports completed through the Office of Institutional Research and Analytics, (b) information from Sigma Community College's website, and (c) presentation slides from Sigma Community College institution-wide staff and faculty development and training workshops.

The semistructured interviews consisted of 10 primary questions with possible subquestions depending on how the participant answered the primary question (see Appendix F). The interviews lasted approximately 32 to 70 minutes, and with the permission of each participant, were recorded using Zoom video recording, a digital audio recorder, and iPhone voice memo recording to ensure multiple back-ups. The digital audio files were uploaded to a paid data transcription service and received within 24 hours of being uploaded. Upon receipt of the data transcript word files, I reviewed them while listening to the audio recording and edited

them for accuracy. Once I was confident of transcription accuracy, member checking took place, and each participant was emailed a copy of their interview transcript with a request to review it for accuracy and submit any edits. All participants responded to affirm accuracy or indicated edits needed. Edits were made as appropriate to ensure valid data collection.

An interview protocol was used to maintain consistency for all interviews and included the following steps:

1. Greeting and thanking the student for sharing their time to participate in my study.

2. Providing an overview of the purpose of the study and asking if the student had any questions.

3. Asking the student how they were made aware of my study so that I could thank the person who made them aware of it.

4. Asking the student if they had a pseudonym they would like to use.

5. Letting the student know they could skip any questions or stop the interview if they felt uncomfortable proceeding.

6. Beginning the semistructured interview.

7. Concluding the semistructured interview, thanking the student for their involvement, and asking the student if it was ok to follow up with them if I had additional questions and to request that they review their interview transcript.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted manually and utilized the constant case comparative method, which involves ongoing comparison of data sources while reflecting (Merriam, 2009). Reflexive journaling was used to record any thoughts, biases, and feelings related to the interviews and analyze the transcripts from the interviews. Prior to interviews,

deductive coding was used to identify codes from Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional

student attrition model, which were used to shape the research questions asked of students as it

related to their experience being a nontraditional part-time enrolled community college student.

These codes included (a) interactions with institutional agents, (b) social integration and

belonging, (c) educational background and demographic variables, (d) environmental variables,

and (e) academic variables to include the use of support resources.

Once all interviews were completed and transcripts and my researcher's journal were

reviewed, coding of my collected data began. The first coding cycle was deductive coding of the

raw transcripts using codes from each research question to organize participant responses into

research question categories. When reviewing interview transcripts, I made notes in the margins

that indicated which research question a phrase related to, what code or subtheme of the research

question the phrase most connected with, and terms that summarized the phrase. Once this was

complete, I created an Excel spreadsheet for each of my three research questions. Each

spreadsheet had tabs for the subthemes of the particular research question, and I transferred each

participant's response that related to one of the three research questions and subthemes to the

appropriate sheet. Reviewing the data in this way and separating it into each research question

allowed me to organize participant responses into research question categories and then begin to

identify codes and themes that emerged from participant responses through inductive coding.

Three inductive coding cycles followed my deductive coding and included in vivo

coding, process coding, and emotion coding. I created columns on my spreadsheet for each

coding pass, reviewed each participant's response, and manually coded the responses for each of

the three coding passes mentioned. In vivo codes, extracted from participants' exact quotes or

paraphrased responses, provided the greatest insight into the themes that emerged. Process

coding and emotion coding provided additional context and depth to participant responses and helped me understand not only what students experienced but how they reacted and felt about those experiences. Inductive coding allowed for the experiences and perspectives of the participants to emerge, and my ongoing reflection ensured that I did not impose my own thoughts or experiences onto those of my participants. The codes identified from the three inductive coding cycles were compiled and analyzed, resulting in a cluster of themes that were relevant to each of my three research questions. I then did a deductive analysis to review how the themes that emerged connected to Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model, which was used as a guiding theoretical framework.

Survey questionnaires and documents provided supplemental data for review and comparison. This triangulation of data contributed to the trustworthiness of the data. Responses to survey questionnaires and documents from the institution's website and various training and development workshops were reviewed for keywords, and those keywords were compared to the codes that emerged from inductive coding.

Study Institution and Participant Profiles

Study Institution Profile

Sigma Community College, a large, public, urban, multicampus community college in Texas, was the study site institution. Sigma Community College is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) to award associate and baccalaureate degrees. Additionally, Sigma Community College offers academic and workforce certificate programs. Sigma Community College has 11 campuses that operate as a district with a single accreditation for all of its campuses within the district.

According to the college's website, in the fall of 2019, Sigma Community College enrolled just over 41,000 students. Of the total headcount in fall 2019, about 32,000 (78%) were part-time enrolled, about 9,000 (22%) were full-time enrolled, and slightly over 12,000 (30%) were distance education students. In the fall of 2020, according to the college's website, enrollment was just below 40,000 students. Of the total headcount in fall 2020, nearly 31,000 (77%) were part-time enrolled, just under 9,000 (23%) were full-time enrolled, and slightly over 39,000 (99%) were distance education with the increase due to COVID and the need to transition the majority of classes to virtual learning. In-district tuition and general fees per credit for the 2021–2022 academic year is slightly below $90.00, and out-of-district tuition and general fees per credit is slightly below $290.00. According to the college's website, in-district tuition rates have not increased in eight years, and fees for out-of-district and out-of-state students were decreased for the 2021–2022 academic year.

Participant Profiles and Demographics

Sixteen Sigma Community College students responded to the survey questionnaire, and of the 16, 15 indicated an interest in participating in a video conference or phone interviews. All 15 students who indicated an interest in participating were contacted by email or phone to schedule an interview at a time most convenient for them. Of the 15 students who were contacted and invited to schedule an interview, 12 currently enrolled part-time students scheduled and followed through with being interviewed as participants for this study. Upon verification of credits completed and review of participants who most closely matched the study inclusion and exclusion criteria, eight students were selected as final cases for the multiple case study.

All 12 initial participants interviewed were offered the opportunity to choose their pseudonyms to use within the study to protect their anonymity. If a participant opted not to

choose a pseudonym, they were assigned one. Table 1 provides additional information about all 12 initial participants and denotes the eight participants selected for inclusion in the multiple case study and data analysis.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participants	Age	Gender	Race	First semester at SCC**	Credits earned
Alejandro*	21	Male	Hispanic	Fall 2018	52
Shelly*	30	Female	White	Spring 2018	90
Jay*	41	Male	White	Spring 2000	33
Dee*	28	Female	Black	Summer 2019	52
Lia*	34	Gender nonconforming	White	Fall 2005	89
Ben*	29	Male	Black/Hispanic	Fall 2016	54
Elle*	45	Female	White	Fall 1996	65
Kay*	34	Female	White	Spring 2004	165
Elisa	19	Female	Hispanic	Fall 2020	23
Layla	30	Female	Black	Fall 2020	30
Payton	21	Female	White	Fall 2016	34
Thia	29	Female	Black	Spring 2021	6

*Included in multiple case study data analysis.

** Sigma Community College (SCC)

Of the eight participants included in this multiple case study, four were women, three were men, and one was gender nonconforming. Seven of the participants were pursuing an associate degree and one participant was pursuing university transfer. At the time of interviews, all eight selected students had earned at least 50% of the credits needed to obtain their identified academic goal. Five participants identified as White, one participant identified as Hispanic, one participant identified as Black, and one participant identified as Hispanic and Black.

Alejandro was a 21-year-old Hispanic student who identified as male. His first semester enrolled at Sigma Community College was fall 2018, right after graduating from high school, and his degree program is engineering. Alejandro is a first-generation college student with the academic goal of transferring to a local four-year university to study aerospace engineering. He is interested in working for NASA or with planes and possibly studying the environment. He had completed 52 credit hours at Sigma Community College and has financed his education with money earned from working various jobs, scholarships, and the Texas State Guard. He anticipated transferring in fall 2021.

Shelly was a 30-year-old White student who identified as female. Her first semester enrolled at Sigma Community College was spring 2018 to pursue an associate degree in English, and in fall 2020, she changed her major to radio, television, and film. Prior to Sigma Community College, she had attended the Art Institute of Delta online. Shelly has gone through two divorces and sees her education as a way to get her independence and some control back. She has been involved with the Honors Student Organization in varying capacities and works as an honors ambassador for the Honors Department. She had completed 50 credit hours at Sigma Community College and has financed her education with student loans, money earned from working, and money earned from a paid internship. She anticipated graduating in fall 2022 or spring 2023.

Jay was a 41-year-old White student who identified as male. His first semester enrolled at Sigma Community College was fall 2000, right after graduating from high school with an undeclared major and a plan to transfer to a four-year university. After two semesters of attending part-time, he stopped out and moved to Dallas for a relationship and to work full-time. After about four years working in Dallas, he enrolled at another community college and earned six credits. He moved and returned to Sigma Community College with an academic goal of an associate degree in Business Administration. Jay is recently divorced and a single dad with shared custody of his son and sees education as finishing what he started and a path to a better future and more career options. He had completed 27 credits at Sigma Community College, transferred his six credits from Dallas, and had a combined 33 credits completed toward his degree. Jay has financed his education with money earned from working, using his credit card, and employer tuition assistance. He was unsure of his anticipated graduation date.

Dee was a 28-year-old Black student who identified as female. Her first semester enrolled at Sigma Community College was summer 2019 to pursue an associate degree in health sciences and nursing. Prior to Sigma Community College, she had attended a local four-year university for one semester in fall 2011 before withdrawing for financial reasons. Dee tried enrolling at Sigma Community College in fall 2012 but was unable to get transcripts sent from her four-year university because she had a hold for a balance on her account. She spent 2012–2018 working to pay off her balance to get transcripts sent and continue her education at Sigma Community College. She had completed 35 credits at Sigma Community College, transferred 17 credits from the four-year university she attended, and had a combined 52 credits completed toward her degree. Dee has financed her education with Pell grants, Texas Public Educational Grant (TPEG)

program grants, loans, and money earned from working. She anticipated graduating from nursing school spring or summer 2024.

Lia was a 34-year-old White student who identified as gender nonconforming. She first got connected to Sigma Community College as a dual credit student while in high school. Her first semester enrolled at Sigma Community College as a part-time student was fall 2005 to pursue an associate degree. She indicated that college was an expectation because her family had all attended college and that was the assumed thing to do, although she was not sure what she wanted to study. Lia ended up stopping out of Sigma Community College to work and then re-enrolled to pursue a certificate in medical coding. After working in part-time jobs that she did not like, she decided to pursue an associate degree in Health Information Technology with hopes of expanding her career options. Lia shared that she receives accommodations for her autism and is allowed to take a lower course load. She had completed 89 credit hours at Sigma Community College and has financed her education with tuition assistance from Capital Idea and money earned from working. She anticipated graduating in fall 2022 or spring 2023.

Ben was a 29-year-old Black and Hispanic student who identified as male. His first semester enrolled at Sigma Community College was fall 2016 to pursue an associate degree in health sciences as a premed student. He stopped out in spring 2017 because he did not feel a connection to the material he was studying and thought maybe he would save money, figure out what to study, and return in fall 2017. During this break, he sustained a spinal injury and re-enrolled at Sigma Community College in fall 2018 to pursue an associate degree in Business Administration. He has been involved with the Honors Student Organization as an officer and Phi Theta Kappa and LatinX Student Union as a member. Prior to Sigma Community College, he had attended a four-year university in California and completed 19 credit hours before

relocating to Texas with his family. He had completed 35 credits at Sigma Community College, transferred 19 credits from the four-year university he attended in California, and had a combined 54 credits completed toward his degree. Ben has financed his education with Pell grants, loans, Veteran's benefits, scholarships, and money earned from working. He anticipated graduating in fall 2023 or spring 2024.

Elle was a 45-year-old White student who identified as female. She indicated that she did not have a desire to go to college when she was in high school and had told her parents she wanted to do missionary work. Her parents did not approve of this and told her she had to go to college. She chose a private four-year college in Kansas where she attended after high school for one year and then left because she felt she had no direction. She transferred to a four-year university in Texas and attended for a semester before becoming depressed and wanting to go home. When she moved home, her parents would only continue providing financial support if she was in school, so she enrolled in Sigma Community College in fall 1996 to pursue an associate degree in psychology and ended up withdrawing from all of her classes. Elle returned to Sigma Community College in fall 2005 after having been through life-threatening health issues but still battling chronic pain and enrolled in 18 credits hours and ended up withdrawing from them. At that time, she was married and had one child; she has since had a second child. Elle battled depression and addiction to pain medications and ended up seeking treatment and connecting with a recovery community. She returned to Sigma Community College in spring 2020 feeling like she had direction, maturity, and the ability to focus. Elle had completed 29 credits at Sigma Community College, transferred 36 credits from the four-year colleges in Kansas and Texas, and had a combined 65 credits completed toward her degree. She has

financed her education with parent support, Pell grants, and loans. She anticipated graduating in spring 2022.

Kay was a 34-year-old White student who identified as female. She attended a large four-year university in Texas right after high school but ended up dropping out after completing 84 credits because she felt it was too big, she did not fit in, and she was just not happy. She began volunteering with a hospice care center and was hired as a nursing care assistant, which led to her completing a certificate program through Sigma Community College's Continuing Education program in 2004. Between 2004 and 2018, Kay took a variety of classes trying to figure out what she wanted to do as a long-term career. The birth of her child prompted her to look into nursing school programs to further her career and also make more money to support her son. She decided to focus on pursuing an associate degree in nursing in the spring of 2018. Kay had completed 81 credits at Sigma Community College, transferred her 84 credits from her four-year university, and had a combined 165 credits completed toward her degree. She has financed her education with grants, scholarships, loans, and money earned from working. She anticipated graduating in spring 2022.

Findings

Experiences Related to Academic Resilience, Persistence, and Utilization of Resources

Research Question 1 was designed to explore how part-time enrolled community college students describe their experiences related to academic resilience, persistence, and utilization of academic and social support services and programs. The four themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) general awareness of resources exists but students are unclear about what they do and how to utilize or access them fully, (b) time constraints prevent utilization of

resources, (c) internal drive and sense of purpose matters for persistence, and (d) previous learning environments shape expectations and experiences.

Theme 1: General Awareness of Resources Exists but Unclear About What They Do and How to Utilize or Access Them Fully. The first theme that emerged was that students had a general awareness that Sigma Community College (SCC) provided extensive support resources, but they did not really know how those resources could help or how to access them. Participants were made aware of support resources either through an advisor or by a department representative who did a class presentation to share about resources available. Elle, Shelly, Jay, and Ben learned about resources in their effective learning strategies class and were surprised to find out how many resources were available to students. Elle expressed, "It was hugely eye-opening to hear about all that was available for support. There are so many helpful resources, and for me, advising was huge."

This theme emerged for all eight participants who reported two or more personal and academic resources that they would find useful but were unsure how to access or did not exactly understand what the service was supposed to do. Shelly stated:

> There's got to be a better way to inform everyone of all the resources available, how they can help, and how to access them. We're paying for the services, but we don't know what they are and how to fully utilize them. So, I can't think of anything that isn't offered; my main issue is that we just aren't informed and reminded on what is offered.

Jay shared that he stumbled across tutoring because his coworker, who is also a student, mentioned it to him. He pointed out, "Tutoring is a good program, and hardly anybody knows it's there." Jay's follow-up statement was, "It's not 100% free, or maybe it is for a few sessions, but whatever it is, it was great." Finally, Lia indicated that she was aware that a lot of support

programs and resources were available, but many times she was "just too scared to try to use them." Lia said tutoring was a resource she is interested in but was "just not sure how to access it and how it works." She mentioned that with things being online now, maybe it would be a little less scary, but she was just not sure.

One of the resources desired and mentioned by every participant was scholarships. Participants unanimously agreed that they were either unaware of how to access scholarships, only knew about scholarships because an SCC advisor shared it with them, or they had tried accessing scholarships and were frustrated by the experience. Students also articulated that the scholarship process is a mystery and lacks transparency and access. The mystery and lack of transparency lead to frustration, confusion, and ambivalence. Elle, Dee, and Ben said they all attempted to get scholarships and "for whatever reason hadn't received any." Ben's perception was that it was difficult to obtain scholarships with part-time student status and nontraditional student attributes, and those factors were partly why he had not received any. He expressed frustration, saying, "While I may not be enrolled full-time and therefore my tuition is lower, I still have a lot of life and educational expenses that I could use help with." Dee was frustrated and confused about not getting any scholarships that she had applied for. She shared that "it's frustrating and sad because I meet the qualifications, and I think and have been told that my essays are good, so it makes me just want to give up on doing scholarships." Shelly talked about not even knowing how to find scholarships. She shared:

> I know that there are some (scholarships) out there. I just wish I understood them better. I wish I knew good resources to find them or things like that. I've never really had any help there. Granted, I haven't gone looking for it. Um, but I don't really understand how that works at all.

Kay and Alejandro received scholarships through the SCC Foundation, and both students noted that awareness of the scholarship opportunity was due to direct contact with an advisor who encouraged them to apply. Kay articulated:

> I got a scholarship through SCC and didn't know it was a thing that you could apply through one application and be considered for various scholarships. I was like no one is going to give me a scholarship because my GPA is terrible, but I applied anyway because my advisor encouraged me to.

Theme 2: Time Constraints Prevent Utilization of Resources. The second theme that emerged was that time constraints prevented the utilization of resources for students at Sigma Community College. Participants who were generally aware of resources available, shared that they either did not have time to utilize resources, learn more about how the resources could support their success, or figure out how to access the resources. Five of the eight participants identified one or more resource(s) that would be helpful to take advantage of if they had more time. Students reported that the top resources of interest for use, if time permitted, included tutoring, academic coaching, counseling, and attending various events and programs offered on campus. Two of the participants discussed the amount of work and time it took even to access resources and said that it just becomes too overwhelming to try and fit it in with everything else. Dee articulated:

> Using the resources provided takes work. It's another thing to balance and to fit in with other responsibilities. Not just actually using them but figuring out how to reach people, what their schedule is, what campus the service you need is at … it's just a lot.

Lia shared that she was part of a program that provided financial support toward tuition and fees and a mentor who checked in on her periodically and served as an accountability person. She mentioned it was very helpful but a lot of work to get connected to. She stated:

It's a grueling process, and you have to fill out an application, prove financial need, and show them that you will keep [your] grades up. It's a great resource, but it takes a lot of time to access it, so that was hard.

Alejandro, Elle, and Jay all expressed interest in being a bit more socially connected on campus and said they would be open to the idea of attending social activities or events where they can interact with other people. All three indicated that a barrier to attending events was time and the challenge of having to rearrange schedules to attend most things offered. Alejandro captured this theme by saying, "Yeah, I have [an] interest in attending things, but really I have to evaluate the level of commitment and time involved because it's really hard to find any extra time in my schedule." Overall, students accepted the fact that time constraints limited their utilization of resources and ability to get involved but did express general disappointment about that. Ben articulated this by saying, "I feel robbed of my experience because I don't have time to utilize the resources and connect with my professors in the ways I would like to."

Theme 3: Internal Drive and Sense of Purpose Matters for Persistence. The third theme that emerged was that internal drive and sense of purpose contributed to persistence for students at Sigma Community College. Six of the eight participants shared that their first attempt at college was unsuccessful primarily because they had no direction, did not really know what they wanted to do as a career path, or did not want to be in college but enrolled because of family expectations. These six participants expressed feeling more purpose, direction, focus, and relevance between their coursework and their academic and life goals in their return to college.

Each of the eight participants had very personal reasons for continuing with their education in spite of the many challenges experienced and sacrifices made to do so. Six of the eight participants expressed the desire to finish something they had started, five of the eight participants indicated a desire for a better life for themselves and their families, and six of the eight participants noted that finishing their degree would be empowering and give them a sense of pride in what they were able to accomplish.

Kay shared that when she began college, she enjoyed learning but was undecided about what major to study, was uncomfortable being in classes with so many people, and did not like the huge campus. She did not feel like she fit in, and since she also was unclear about what she wanted to do, "Being there seemed pointless." Kay went on to share that now, "very practically, I need to have a good job to financially support my son." She also indicated that she "wasn't happy with how college went for me before and knew I could do better." She said she had to regularly remind herself of the goal she has for her and her son and that college is the right thing to do to reach that goal. Jay also shared the sentiment that he did not like the fact that he had not yet finished a degree. He noted that many of his family members had finished college, he feels bad about not finishing college yet, and he would have a sense of pride upon graduation. He shared:

> The first time I went to college, I had no clue what I wanted to do. Life kind of happened, and I didn't finish. I want to finish this for personal reasons, plus certain avenues of my career would open up with a degree also.

Elle also described her return to college as an opportunity to finish something she had started, but this time with more direction and focus. Elle shared her memory of telling her parents she did not want to go to college and instead wanted to do missionary work. She continued to say:

They didn't approve of what I wanted to do, so I kind of was forced to go on to college. So, when I chose a college, I was like, okay, I'm going to go to Kansas. I went to the middle of nowhere Kansas, to a private college for a year, which was a great experience. But my issue was that I had no direction of what I wanted to do, none. So, I went there for a year and decided to leave and come back to Texas and go to the college my friend was at. That lasted a semester before I just was like, this is not for me. I got really depressed, and I remember just wanting to go home. So now, years later, and by affirming that my calling is to help people, I'm back in college and want to be here. I think maturity, ability to focus, feeling like I had direction, and seeing other people do it that were my age made me think I can do this again.

Shelly and Ben indicated deeply personal reasons that fueled their drive and sense of purpose for persisting through college. Shelly cited relationships that left her feeling not good enough, and Ben cited life experiences that tested his resilience as factors that contributed to their internal drive. Shelly shared having been through two divorces that left her feeling "not good enough, not smart enough, not capable enough, et cetera, et cetera." She continued to share her story and said:

So, a lot of this was for me, not only to prove to myself but to prove to other people that I was very capable. So that's really what drives me is I'm finishing this. Returning to school has been a big personal journey to finding my independence. I needed to get my independence back, and school was a big way for me to do that. As a woman who grew up in a conservative family where it was expected of me to be the homemaker and raise the kids and do all that stuff, um, as much as I didn't hate the idea of doing that, I didn't like the strings that it came with. When they were the provider and I was doing all the

other stuff, they were in charge, and that wasn't okay with me. So, me going back to

school and being successful was me taking charge back into my hands and taking control

back.

Ben shared that he had experienced homelessness and food insecurity and had experienced some

things he never hoped to experience again. He said:

I experienced a lot of really hard things in life. So now, no matter how much pain I go

through, no matter how grueling the process, no matter how obscure the journey has to

be, and even if I've got to walk a mile in groveling stones on my hands and knees, I don't

care. I don't care because what I've gone through has been hell. And once you've walked

through hell, nothing is ever going to compare to that. And now, because you came out of

hell, you have like this profound level of resilience that I don't care if there's a wall in

front of me, I'm going to run through that damn thing. I am going to finish this degree

and make a better life for myself.

Finally, Lia indicated that she was driven by the hope that an associate degree would expand

career options and opportunities because she had worked in places that were not ideal for her.

She said:

I figured if I have a full associate's degree, I will have more choice of locations to work

at, and I can work at a place that I actually like instead of hating and maybe a place that

provides health benefits. So that's the main goal, and also, I just feel like I'd feel better

about myself if I have a full degree instead of just the certificate.

Theme 4: Previous Learning Environments Shape Expectations and Experiences.

The fourth theme that emerged was that previous learning environments shape expectations and

experiences for students at Sigma Community College. Five of the eight participants began their

college experience at an institution other than SCC, and one participant attended a college

preparatory high school. Whether it was learning experiences at other higher education

institutions or at the college preparatory high school, previous experiences shaped and impacted

the way participants were able to navigate the systems at Sigma Community College,

expectations of what the experience should be in the classroom, and perceptions of faculty and

staff at Sigma Community College. Participants with previous college experience or who

attended a college preparatory high school were more likely to be able to confidently navigate

systems and processes such as applying for enrollment, registering for courses, setting up a

payment plan, and communicating with faculty members better, regardless of how they felt about

those systems and processes.

Lia indicated that returning to college was "less challenging because I knew what to

expect." She also shared that she is more mature, had her own car now to transport herself, and

had some experience with working so it was easier to see the connection between what she was

learning and how she would be using it in her career. Shelly acknowledged the potential

advantage of having attended a different college previously and said:

I felt pretty confident navigating through the systems at Sigma Community College

because, overall, they are pretty easy. That may also be because I had to figure it out my

first time in college. As far as getting back into classes, at first, considering I hadn't been

in school for about five years, it knocked me off my feet. Two classes pretty much was

like what? And so, getting back in the swing of things was difficult. But once I got back

in the swing of things, it was what I expected and much more. Because of my experience

with the art institute, the bar was low. I was very nervous about transitioning online due

to my previous experience, but this time I was happy that it was completely different in a good way.

Alejandro reflected on his experience attending a college preparatory high school and indicated that the expectations were high and that he felt, overall, it prepared him for the transition into college. He shared:

> I went to a fancy higher-up middle school and kind of struggled but then went to a fancy high school, and expectations were high. Everyone ended up going to really fancy colleges … like Rice or the Ivy Leagues. But closer to senior year, I realized how expensive four-year universities are, and I started looking at SCC because I had no reason not to save money and do my first two years at SCC then transfer. I felt pretty prepared going into Sigma Community College because my high school was really difficult, and I also took a class called "how to be an adult" that taught about time management and studying and that was helpful for college.

Based on his first time enrolling in college, Ben knew that some adjustments were needed to obtain the grades he desired, primarily as it related to using various study skills. He indicated:

> I knew that when I came back to school, I needed to completely devote myself to learning how to learn, and I needed to relearn or restructure how I study because when I first went to school, I only got Cs and Bs. I don't want that anymore for myself. And I felt that if I can build a high grade point average, then more scholarships would come my way that may help my pursuit of education.

Finally, Elle had previously attended a small private college and a large public university and was surprised and delighted at the environment at SCC. She noted that Sigma Community College was really large but said it was "interesting that it has that feel of a small college. It feels

like they care about students, their overall well-being, and faculty and staff want to see us thrive, and that is nice."

In summary, the themes that emerged in findings connected to how part-time enrolled community college students describe their experiences related to academic resilience, persistence, and utilization of academic and social support services and programs included (a) general awareness of resources existed, but students were unclear about what they do and how to utilize or access them fully, (b) time constraints prevented utilization of resources, (c) internal drive and sense of purpose mattered for persistence, and (d) previous learning environments shaped expectations and experiences.

Interactions With Agents of the Institution and Sense of Belonging

Research Question 2 was designed to explore how part-time enrolled community college students describe their interactions with agents of the institution and their sense of belonging. The five themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) advisors are looked to heavily for guidance and connection to resources, (b) interactions with and connections to faculty are crucial, (c) time constraints limit the ability for involvement and connection to faculty, staff, peers, and the institution, (d) seeing others similar to self is validating and motivating, and (e) COVID implications had negative impacts on connection and sense of belonging.

Theme 1: Advisors Are Looked to Heavily for Guidance and Connection to Resources. The first theme that emerged was that students at Sigma Community College knew who their advisor was and utilized them as the primary source for guidance on what courses to register for. Additionally, participants who were aware of support resources shared that an advisor was the person who informed them about available resources and facilitated a connection to the resources needed for support. Seven of the eight participants mentioned their advisor

throughout the interview as being a resource, a support person, and a positive interaction they had with someone from Sigma Community College. Alejandro, Jay, and Ben mentioned having a program map, which outlined the classes needed for degree completion, but all students liked to "confirm they are taking the right classes in the right order" each semester before registering. Ben also added that his advisor was helpful with checking for classes that fit best for his schedule. Elle shared that she either met in person or virtually with her advisor to check in, plan for transfer, and make sure she was on track. Elle has been highly satisfied with her advising experience and said, "She is great … she's responsive and very helpful." Three participants discussed specific ways that their advisors made them aware of additional resources. Kay shared, "My advisor is really great and has helped me so much to get financial support for tuition, to cover textbooks, and to access daycare. It's really great!"

Lia shared the challenges with switching majors and converting credits from a certificate program toward a degree program. She also said her advisor helped with the process for requesting learning accommodations and said:

> It's a little confusing to me because the degree plan requirements seem to change, but the advisor was helpful and able to go into the system and apply credits I had to different things so I didn't have to retake classes. They also helped me understand how to go about requesting accommodations because of my autism.

Dee talked very highly about her advisor and how he kept her informed about what was going on and what she needed to be on top of. She said:

> I initially got assigned an advisor who I was told was going to be my advisor throughout my whole time, but he was only with me for one semester and then I got my advisor that I have now. He basically helps me through everything like what classes I should register

for, helping me come up with a schedule that works for me, letting me vent when things are overwhelming, sending emails with reminders about deadlines, and also about resources like the student relief funds that were so helpful.

Theme 2: Interactions With and Connections to Faculty Are Crucial. The second theme that emerged was that interactions with faculty are crucial and can positively or negatively influence a student's performance, confidence, and desire to persist. Participants shared both positive and negative experiences they had with faculty at Sigma Community College and the impact of those experiences. Positive and meaningful interactions with faculty led to increased confidence, sense of belonging, and persistence. Negative or mediocre interactions with faculty led to frustration, ambivalence, and questioning about fit and belonging. Ben commented that "professors have a deeper connection and respect for adult learners," which was affirming. Elle shared that she has had really great experiences with faculty and has found them to be "kind and wonderful and just a great mix of different people." Alejandro indicated that he has enjoyed all of his professors, and although there has been less interaction with faculty than what he expected coming into college, that "everyone has been really nice."

Two participants shared having had a mix of experiences with faculty members during their time at Sigma Community College. Dee had both positive and negative experiences with faculty and indicated that for her, "teaching style, level of support, and responsiveness is what makes for a good professor." She stated that some professors were exceptional, and others were hard to get ahold of. Lia mentioned having had a few clashes with faculty, which led her to withdraw from classes, but that she also had some professors whose classes were really enjoyable to attend because of how they facilitated interaction and demonstrated patience. She shared a story about an interaction with one professor that left her wondering if the professor had

given a compliment or made a sarcastic remark. Lia stated that after receiving a paper back, the professor made a comment about the use of so many sources in the paper. The professor stated that they did not know how Lia had the time to incorporate so many sources, and it was almost distracting. Lia said, "I guess that was a compliment … I don't know."

Shelly shared several experiences with faculty and commented that her involvement with the Honors Program was incredibly valuable for connecting with faculty at Sigma Community College. She became connected to the Honors Program because one of her professors wrote a comment on a paper suggesting that Shelly should be involved in the Honors Program. Shelly expressed that this comment on her paper was such an affirmation and boost to her confidence. She indicated having gotten along with the vast majority of her professors and has kept in contact with a lot of them. Shelly said:

> Honors courses have been consistently a safe place to have a meeting of minds without worrying about offending someone or getting somebody angry. Professors really facilitate a space for critical thinking and debate, and I really like that about honors courses. I really have connected with the professors and enjoy them. I know so many and have worked with so many through the Honors Program, and for me, that was one of the biggest things that made me stay.

Shelly also shared that initially, there was some nervousness about having to transition to online learning due to COVID because of her negative experiences with online learning at a previous institution. She was pleasantly surprised with the experience at Sigma Community College and expressed that her professors "actively encouraged and paid attention to their students throughout the online transition," and for her, that was a big deal and made it worth continuing online. A final comment Shelly made about her experiences with faculty was that experiences with adjunct

faculty had not been as good. She said, "It hasn't been really bad, but it just doesn't feel as much of a community."

Theme 3: Time Constraints Limit the Ability for Involvement and Connection. The third theme that emerged was that part-time enrolled students at Sigma Community College desire to connect with others on campus, utilize resources, and get involved, but time constraints limit or prevent their ability to do so. Jay and Alejandro both indicated that while it would be fun, neither student had joined any clubs or done any extracurricular things because they did not have the time, or it would require drastic schedule adjustments and rearranging priorities. Alejandro said:

> I feel like people aren't really there to make friends. I mean, people are all nice, but I haven't clicked with anyone to become friends. Most people are really, really busy and don't have time to make friends and get involved in stuff. They are working jobs and sometimes have to leave class and go right to work, or they want to go home to get rest because they don't have a lot of time for that either. It's different than my friends at big universities with their big friend groups, and fraternities, and student get-togethers.

Elle talked about her experience of getting involved with Phi Theta Kappa after being inducted. She said:

> There's a lot of information coming from them, and it is hard to stay on top of. I could probably get more involved in stuff, but I have young kids, and I'm really involved in my recovery fellowship and stuff like that. It just can become a lot. I think it is great that there are options for people to get involved and especially for people who don't have a lot of support, but I am fortunate to have a lot of support from my personal community.

Finally, Ben shared that he had been involved with two student organizations but found it hard to have solid connections with people and be involved in a meaningful way because of time availability. He said, "If I could work less, I could focus more on school, connecting with professors, seeking mentors, getting involved, and having a richer academic experience. Instead, I have to keep working, and I almost feel robbed of my ability to invest in my own education."

Theme 4: Seeing Others Similar to Self Is Validating and Motivating. The fourth theme that emerged was that seeing others similar to self is validating and motivating and impacts the sense of belonging. Three participants specifically discussed how seeing others, either on campus or in classes, that were of a similar age or stage of life helped them feel more comfortable being at college. Lia said:

> It has been very validating to see other people back at college for a second go-around or maybe way above what you think is the traditional college age because sometimes I feel weird as a 34-year-old being at college when everyone else is in their 20s.

Three participants indicated that faculty played a big role in facilitating the level of comfort in the classroom by doing activities that help classmates get to know each other. Lia, Elle, and Jay indicated that it felt less awkward when there were other people around that were a bit older and when "you kind of know your classmates a little." Elle shared that a fear in coming back to college was that everyone was going to look at her as the "old lady sitting in class" and wonder what she was doing. She was relieved that this had not been her experience and loved the "mix of people and the differences everyone brings to the learning environment." Dee expressed that she has connected with a friend who is also a part-time student, in her 30s, back in school, and works in healthcare. She said, "We can relate to each other and know how to encourage and motivate each other."

Ben expressed a slightly different perspective about his experience being an adult learner. He shared that while he felt valued and respected by his professors, it was sometimes hard being the oldest person in a class. He said, "Sometimes it feels like younger students want you to coddle them because you are older. I think it would be phenomenal and more enriching if there were special courses or sections for adult learners."

Theme 5: COVID Negatively Impacted Connection and Sense of Belonging. The fifth theme that emerged was that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted students' sense of belonging and ability to connect with others and with the institution. All eight participants shared that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted them in one or more ways as it related to their educational experience. Six of the eight participants indicated specific negative impacts that related to sense of belonging and connection. Kay expressed that it has been hard being online as a nursing student for several reasons. One reason being that there was support and encouragement that came from being able to "be around people who are going through the same kinds of things you are going through." Elle, Jay, and Dee all indicated a noticeable difference in the level of interaction with both professors and peers when they had to switch to online learning due to COVID. Dee shared that unless a class set up a Group Me, there was not really much interaction with her classmates, and it was challenging to feel disconnected. Jay said:

> There was no interactive audio or video experiences with my peers or faculty. There were posts and discussion boards and things like that, but I never saw any of them or spoke with them in real-time, and that was odd to me. Previous to COVID, I loved it! I would go to class and sit up front with my notepad to take notes and be the oldest one there, and I didn't care. It was fun to talk to people a little bit before class, and I also learn and perform better that way.

Elle shared that she enjoyed interacting with classmates and always had positive experiences with other students but did not experience the same kind of connection with others when classes transitioned to virtual learning. She mentioned that she and a couple of classmates formed a small study group for one class, and having that connection and support was enjoyable. She also indicated that since COVID hit midsemester, she "didn't really have a lot of time to get involved with anything." Ben echoed the challenge of being involved once COVID hit and shared that his level of involvement as an officer in a student organization decreased. He said time constraints and the stress of the transition to online learning led him to "just kind of checking out."

Finally, Shelly indicated that COVID impacted her ability to continue networking with people who work in the department, feel connected to the campus, and try out the latest equipment that she will be using as a radio, television, and film major.

In summary, the themes that emerged in findings connected to how part-time enrolled community college students describe their interactions with agents of the institution and their sense of belonging included (a) advisors were looked to heavily for guidance and connection to resources; (b) interactions with and connections to faculty were crucial; (c) time constraints limited ability for involvement and connection to faculty, staff, peers, and the institution; (d) seeing others similar to self was validating and motivating; and (e) COVID implications had negative impacts on connection and sense of belonging.

Factors Contributing to Persistence, Challenges Experienced, and Factors That Impact Delayed Progress Toward Academic Goals

Research Question 3 was designed to explore how part-time enrolled community college students explain their ability to persist toward their academic goals, the challenges they

experience, and the factors that impact slow progress toward academic goals or a decision to stop out. Three themes emerged related to success factors impacting persistence, and five themes emerged related to challenges experienced, including those challenges resulting in stop out or delayed progress for a student. The three success factor themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) flexibility matters, (b) support systems are needed, and (c) time management is critical. The five themes that emerged from data analysis related to challenges experienced included (a) personal life challenges or transitions, (b) exhaustion and burnout, (c) finances, (d) COVID, and (e) lack of direction or changing majors.

Success Factor Theme 1: Flexibility Matters. The first success factor theme that emerged in the stories of part-time enrolled students at Sigma Community College is that flexibility matters. This theme presented in two primary ways, including how students talked about employment and class schedules. As it relates to employment, the greater the flexibility experienced, the greater the likelihood that students persisted. As it relates to class schedules, students expressed frustration with trying to find classes that fit their work and personal or family life schedules, indicated there were not enough course sections offered at times that work best for them, and liked some of the flexibility that online learning provided.

Four of the eight participants said that continuing their education would not be possible without flexible employment. Kay said it could be tricky to work out a schedule but that "having a flexible employer and coworkers and the ability to switch shifts and have different shift options helps me strike a balance with my responsibilities." Dee also noted the benefits of an employer that provided a variety of shifts and shared, "My new job will allow me a flexible schedule that gives me mornings to focus on school. And there are different shifts, so if I need to change that, I have the ability to do that." Shelly and Lia had employment situations that were more

independent and allowed them to have autonomy over their schedules. Shelly cleans houses, and Lia does a variety of jobs such as pet sitting and Instacart. Shelly expressed gratitude for having flexible clients who work with her to accommodate a schedule each semester that works around her classes. She expressed:

> I really have lucked out because my clients are amazing. The flexibility they provide is great because if I had a normal 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. I could not be doing school, there's just no way. I'd be entirely too overwhelmed and too tired because I'd be in class either at 6:00 a.m. or at 8:00 p.m.

Lia echoed the benefit of having flexible work options and the ability to schedule work around classes. She had worked in medical clinics before but had a hard time managing that and taking classes she needed at the times they were offered. She shared:

> I've had various but flexible work like cat sitting and then Instacart once COVID hit because less people were traveling or working away from home. Cat sitting also paid pretty well, especially if it was a holiday or the cat needed any kind of medical things like pills or creams or stuff. In order to be able to take classes when they are offered and make a little money, I've had to find work options that are flexible.

Elle shared that she does not work out of the home but needs to manage a schedule that involves caring for her kids and getting them to and from school. She prefers classes that are back-to-back on Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Thursdays so she can get the kids to school, have time to get herself ready to go to school and go, and be back in enough time to pick her kids up from school. She said, "That is also why going part-time works … it just fits with my life." Jay mentioned that he shares custody of his son and works full-time during traditional business hours, so he needs to schedule his classes on evenings when he does not have his son.

Success Factor Theme 2: Support Systems Are Needed. The second success factor theme that emerged for part-time enrolled students at Sigma Community College is that support systems are needed. Support systems were experienced in different ways, but every participant commented that they could not do it alone and that they received support in various ways from people in their lives. The people most frequently identified as main sources of support included family, friends, and significant others. One participant stated that his employer was his biggest source of support.

The most commonly identified ways that support was demonstrated to participants in this study included encouragement, motivation, accountability, reminders to practice self-care, and assistance with basic life tasks such as house chores and food preparation. All eight participants expressed the importance of being encouraged by people who are important to them and hearing words of affirmation that indicated people in their lives believed in them and were pulling for them. Dee talked about the importance of having positive people around her. She shared that she, her mom, and her brother share their goals with each other, encourage each other to keep a positive mindset, and check in with each other to provide motivation and uplifting words. Dee added that she finds a lot of support from a friend who is a part-time student, works in healthcare, and is also in her 30s and back in school. Dee shared that the ability to relate to each other makes supporting and motivating each other and studying together valuable. Alejandro commented about the benefit of having friends who can relate to what he is going through. He shared that while he has not really asked anyone for help and knows his parents are there for him, he finds the most support in his friends. He expressed that because he has friends who are also in college, they are able to use a group chat to talk about feeling overwhelmed, to complain about school, to encourage each other, or just to share what is going on because "everyone is in

the same boat struggling during COVID." Kay indicated that while she would like a little more help from family with childcare, she is appreciative of the emotional support they provide. She said her family, particularly her stepmom, is very encouraging and checks in frequently to remind her to take it easy and take care of herself.

Shelly, Elle, Ben, and Lia indicated gratitude to their families who helped with things around the house. Shelly shared that her sister "picks up slack around the house when things get tough in the semester or when a test or big assignment is coming up," and Elle indicated that her husband would help with house stuff and taking care of kids, especially when she has something big to work on. Elle spent some time talking at length about her "super supportive network that all help in different ways." In addition to her husband's help, she also mentioned that her father provides encouragement and is proud of her, she has a friend that she studies with who provides encouragement and motivation, and she remains connected to her recovery fellowship community who are a tremendous source of support. Ben expressed that family "really stepped up" when he hurt his back. He said some of the ways they were particularly helpful were with "food preparation, house chores, and helping to set me up with a comfortable space to study." He indicated that his family's consistency allowed him to focus on school and work and to rest and heal and that the ability "to have the peace of mind to rest was the biggest gift of all." Lia stated that her mom is very supportive and helpful. She shared that she pays rent to her parents and helps with household responsibilities. Her mom helps with accountability and organization, provides reminders, helps prioritize things, and encourages her to communicate any questions to her professors. Lia also identified friends who check in with her to make sure she stays on track and provide encouragement as a big part of her support network.

Jay identified his employer as his biggest source of support. He shared:

My employer is really supportive, and they are helping pay for me to go back to school, so that is great, and it makes me work to get good grades too. My employer is a huge supporter of me in every facet. It's a really nice opportunity because they are helping pay for it, and I am also able to apply what I am learning at school while I'm at work.

Success Factor Theme 3: Time Management Is Critical. The third success factor theme that emerged in talking with participants is that time management is critical for success. Students reported that time management was one of their biggest challenges and one of the things they had to become better at to be successful and balance many responsibilities. Participants discussed the process of becoming better at managing their time and indicated that some of it came with maturity, that trial and error led to finding systems that work best, that being organized and establishing routines helps, and that they must prioritize and reprioritize.

Alejandro shared that although he had taken a class at his college preparatory high school that included a lesson on managing time, it was still a challenge when he got to college. He described his experience by saying:

I just had terrible time management and would forget about assignments, and it was just a mess. I have learned how to plan ahead and make time for classes and homework. I also am not good at studying at home, which has been hard with COVID because I study better when I'm around other people who are studying. Time management has mostly been trial and error for me to find out what works. I started using to-do lists, and then tried the calendar on my phone, and then one of those like day planners. I just have to set up a plan at the start of the semester and, you know, check what is coming up each week, and sometimes I have to ask for time off at work so that I can catch up on my classes.

Lia also experienced a process of trial and error to find what works for her to manage her time. She shared that she had tried using an online calendar, but devices are one of her distractions, so she quickly discovered that system did not work for her. In talking about her process to discover what works, she shared:

> I feel like I'm more mature now. I still struggle with time management issues, but I use various systems and alarms now to help me keep on track with schoolwork. I use a whiteboard to write down all the things that need to be done, whether that is school related or other things, and then I can check them off when I finish them. I have a monthly meeting with my Capital Idea navigator, and they kind of check in with me, see if I'm having any troubles, encourage me to use resources on campus, and whatnot. There's this app called Forest, and it helps with focusing and procrastinating. You set an amount of time and a little picture of a tree starts growing, and if you do something else on your phone before the time is up, your tree dies, and it encourages you with messages like "you can do it" or "stop procrastinating."

Dee, Ben, and Shelly all talked about the importance of having a plan, being organized, and setting up routines. Dee stated:

> You need to have a planner and prioritize your studying. It's important to get into the routine of setting up a good study space, which means turning off [the] TV, putting your phone away, having water and snacks nearby, and just focusing on what you need to do for class.

Shelly shared that having deadlines and managing time was a big adjustment and challenge and that she came to realize the need to "go in at the beginning of a semester with a

plan … get my syllabus and chart out a plan." Ben indicated that building strong routines was key for him in managing time and establishing some balance. He expressed:

> I've had to build strong routines, and for me, that includes meditation, exercise, intermittent fasting, using lunch breaks for homework, and setting aside evening time for homework. You have to know that you are going to have long days and that there is emotion, energy, focus, and time that you have to put into it. So, any break or chance you have, you are doing homework. Like I use my lunch break at work and I eat dinner while I'm doing homework.

Four participants mentioned learning more about time management and managing procrastination in their effective learning strategies course. This class is intended for students who are entering with less than 12 credits or who are adults returning to college after a significant time away from college. Two of the students shared that they ended up taking this class in their third semester, and the other two students shared it was taken in their second semester. All four students perceived the class to be incredibly helpful in transitioning back to being a student, figuring out how to manage time and prioritize responsibilities, and becoming aware of support resources. These students also expressed irritation about not taking the class in their first semester when it would have been most helpful. Shelly expressed a desire for her first class to have been something to do with time management; how to navigate college, prioritize things, and find balance; and how to study. She explained:

> If you don't know how to manage time, it can seem so big to you. I mean, I picked it up, I learned it, I figured it out, but it was like sink or swim. There is a course that teaches those things, but I didn't take it until the third semester when I didn't need it anymore. I think they should be a little more strict with when a student takes it because, again, it

would have been really helpful in the first semester, but by the third semester, I was

irritated that I was taking the class because I'd already had to learn this stuff on my own.

It's such a transition to get back into school, and it was annoying that in the third

semester after you've been sinking the whole time, that they're trying to teach you how

[to] swim.

Jay articulated agreement about time management being so important and that he wished he

would have taken the effective learning strategies course sooner. He shared:

Time dedication is the biggest thing, and prioritizing is important. You have to block off

a timeframe for schoolwork that you know you won't have interruptions or distractions

and make yourself stick to it. Because when you don't, then you are really struggling

because you fall behind. I took a really useful class for new students or adults returning to

college, and it had a lot of real-world application[s] like time management and some

things that we talk about at work in management training and coaching seminars like goal

setting and stuff. I think I should have taken it much sooner, but I think it was one of the

classes I had dropped before. That class should be required sooner and before I got into

so many of my other classes.

Kay and Elle discussed the challenges of being realistic about what can reasonably be

accomplished in a given amount of time given any competing priorities and the guilt that

sometimes accompanies having to choose certain priorities over other equally important

priorities. Kay shared that time management and being tired are big challenges and that she has

gotten better with managing time and making adjustments to her schedule to fit everything in.

She shared that she still struggles with guilt about not spending as much time as she would like

with her son and taking time to do something for herself or to rest. Elle commented about the impact of maturity and self-awareness on her ability to manage time. She said:

Scheduling, managing deadlines, and just being on top of things has [have] been really important and also balance. So, it's ok to take a break when needed and making that work too. I now have the maturity and self-awareness to be realistic about what I can and can't handle and then schedule my time better.

Challenges Experienced Theme 1: Personal Life Challenges or Transitions. The first theme that emerged from data analysis as it relates to challenges experienced and factors that contributed to either stop out or delayed academic progress was personal life challenges or transitions. An interesting connection observed is that in several instances, personal life challenges that contributed to stop out or delayed progress also contributed to internal drive and sense of purpose previously discussed as a success factor. Two participants indicated that divorce led to taking a break from school while they moved through that experience and tried to regroup and refocus. Two participants shared that a major personal health situation led to taking time away from school. One participant shared that he experienced a severe spinal injury that required a lot of physical therapy to be mobile again. The other participant shared that she experienced complications after a surgery that led to her being incredibly sick and managing chronic pain. Managing pain led to depression and addiction to pain medications, which she sought treatment for and became connected to a recovery community. One participant indicated that her autism contributed to slower progress than a "normal student" because part of her accommodations was being able to take a decreased course load. One participant shared that he relocated to be closer to his girlfriend and took a break to settle in, find a job, and then look for a community college to continue in the new area where he was living. He also shared that the relationship did not work

out, so he ended up relocating again and returned to Sigma Community College to keep working toward his degree.

Challenges Experienced Theme 2: Exhaustion and Burn Out. The second theme that emerged as a challenge experienced and either was a factor that contributed to delayed academic progress or consideration of stop out were exhaustion and burnout. Exhaustion and burnout were not directly cited as a reason for stopping out but were mentioned as a reason for taking a reduced course load or considering taking a break from school. All eight participants expressed feeling tired or exhausted and indicated that they had to accept the exhaustion as part of being in school while trying to manage work and family at the same time. Ben articulated that "there is no rest, no breaks for five and a half months, and you just have to accept the mental strain of that. You have to consider the weight of going nonstop with work and school." Kay shared:

> Doing school, working, and taking care of my son, and having to pay for daycare can get tough. I do my homework and studying at the end of the day after my son goes to bed and there is nothing going on, but it is very tiring.

Jay expressed a similar experience and said, "I'm working full-time, have my son with me half of the time, doing school part-time, and it is a lot … it gets tiring. Elle mentioned, "There are days when I just want to take a huge break and just sleep. It gets tiring staying on top of everything."

Dee and Alejandro commented on the challenge of determining a manageable course load while also working. They both discovered a need to reduce the number of classes they took each semester to keep up. Dee shared that she wanted to enroll full-time and tried to, but it was too much, and she had to withdraw from a couple of classes. She elaborated more on her experience and said:

I tried to go full-time, but that was too much. I was working, had to go to two campuses, and that was just real tricky, so I had to drop down to part-time. And even with COVID and working from home, it just can be too much, especially when classes are hard, like the nursing classes I have left. Sometimes I just feel exhausted.

Alejandro had a similar experience with taking too many classes while working full-time and shared that it led to feeling burnt out. He indicated:

I guess during my first year, I took too many classes for how much I was working. And after three semesters of that, I kind of burned out because I just didn't have time for anything really. It was just work, school, go to bed, and, um, I didn't fully stop, but I took one or two classes the next semester instead of, you know, the normal three I was doing. I just needed to back off and take some time. But, um, after that, I slowed it down a little bit and found that two classes kind of works best.

Challenges Experienced Theme 3: Finances. The third theme that emerged as a challenge for part-time enrolled community college students was finances. Students identified financing their education while also covering living expenses as a major stressor. An observation I made was that most of the students were confused or felt misled about how financial aid works, were unclear or frustrated about accessing scholarships, and were afraid of and wanted to avoid student loan debt. Students also identified a variety of financial support systems or programs that were instrumental in their ability either to persist or to experience less stress about financing their education. Five of the eight participants indicated needing to use student loans to finance their education. Of those five participants, one student reported that she had maxed out on loans during her first attempt at college and was not eligible for loans anymore; one student reported that she was so far into debt that she did not even really know how much she owed or how she

was going to pay it back; another student shared that she currently has $20,000 in student loans and was going to need to keep taking loans but was hoping to also work and save more so she could avoid so much additional debt; and one student mentioned that if she had finished college after high school when she started, her parents would have paid, but now that she was returning as an adult, she had to use some loans for help. When asked about how much loan debt she anticipated upon graduating, Shelly replied:

> I don't really know how much it's going to cost me in total. I pay what I have to pay and figure community college is cheaper than what a four-year university will charge. I try not to overwhelm myself with that, and probably when I get closer to the end, I will formulate a plan for repaying loans. I just try not to think about it too much because it is a stress factor.

Kay shared that she carries student loan debt from the first time she went to college and maxed out, so she cannot take any additional loans. When asked about how she felt about her total loan amount and her repayment plan, she shared, "It's a little overwhelming, and what I'm hoping is that I can work for a hospital that has one of those loan forgiveness programs to help me repay it."

Dee and Ben both indicated that they had taken time off school for financial reasons. Ben explained that he hoped to work to be able to "pay down some debt and then come back to school a little more focused" but indicated that did not work because he "saved and paid and saved and paid" but could not seem to get ahead on his credit cards. Dee shared that after taking some time off school because of financial reasons and coming up with a new plan to attend Sigma Community College, she was unable to enroll because of a financial hold that she was unaware of at her previous four-year university. Dee shared her story:

I had to withdraw from State University (pseudonym) due to financial reasons. Then when I tried to come to Sigma Community College, I couldn't get my transcripts from State University and found out I owed them money, so I had a hold on my account. I had to work and try and save money to pay them off because that's the only way I would be able to go to another college. So, it took me about six or seven years to work and pay them off, and it delayed my education just so I can [could] get my transcripts sent to another university. That's horrible. It was very frustrating.

While Shelly did not take time off due to financial reasons, she considered it and shared that COVID-19 and the transition to online learning actually helped her remain in school. She said:

Um, right before COVID, this is going to sound terrible, but it couldn't have happened at a better time for me because it was getting hard to afford the commute. It was getting hard to drive to campus twice a week, drive back twice a week. So, thankfully, that happened at the right time because I had just lost two big clients, not because of anything that I did, but that's, that's how it works. So, I just couldn't afford it. And I was thinking about like, oh, maybe I'll just take a semester off and save up some money and then COVID happened. I was like, perfect. No commute ... Awesome. So, I did consider it, and it would have just been for financial reasons. I wouldn't stop for any other reasons.

Five participants shared stories about the financial strain and stress they experienced by having to figure out how to pay for tuition and also cover living expenses. Kay shared that it gets really tough sometimes trying to figure out how to cover daycare expenses. Shelly expressed, "It's a struggle to keep up because I can't work full-time and do school, so I work part-time, and paying bills can get difficult. I rely on student loans." Jay indicated that he and his family have always been on the income line where he did not qualify for any financial aid, but stated, "It is

still pretty hard though to pay for school and living expenses." Ben shared his experience with fluctuating income and mentioned that at times when his income decreased, he did not receive additional financial aid to "supplement the drop," so loans were necessary. Ben continued to share:

> The challenge is not only how am I going to pay for school but, more importantly, how am I going to pay my living expenses? It is not as affordable as it was even a year ago to live here. To support myself while pursuing education, I have to work 40 hours a week or more.

Dee also shared her challenges with trying to make ends meet and how overwhelming and defeating it can feel. She expressed:

> My financial aid has decreased, and I don't even know why. It's just upsetting because in my situation, I don't make a lot of money and I've applied for so many scholarships and haven't gotten any even though I meet requirements and have been told my essays are good, so that makes me honestly want to give up on trying. It's hard to pay out of pocket because I have to pay for everything right now … like everything! School, living expenses, loan debt … and I don't even have health insurance. It's just horrible, not a good feeling at all and kind of ironic that I am studying to be a nurse and don't even have my own health insurance. I think going forward, I am just going to accept the subsidized loans and start saving up so I can pay more out of pocket and then try and get some back on my taxes.

Alejandro, Lia, Elle, and Ben all either directly expressed or inferred a desire to avoid student loan debt as much as they could. Ben indicated that at times he wishes he could be a full-time student and work part-time, but he would "never be able to cover expenses" and was not willing

to take that much money in student loans. He said, "I won't allow myself to go into debt to a level that I cannot personally pay it off." Lia mentioned that she had taken a short-term no-interest loan to help with some expenses but paid the loan off before it started collecting interest. Elle shared that she accepted about $7,000 in subsidized student loans, but it was mainly to pay off her credit cards. She said:

> I thought it was a good opportunity to go from a 17% annual percentage rate (APR) to a 4.3% APR or whatever it was … it was just worth it to me. I don't know if that is appropriate or not, but it really is a lot better in the long run for me.

Alejandro expressed his desire to remain debt free and avoid taking any loans to pay for his education. He shared that he works a lot because he does not want to take out loans, and that is also why he wants to transfer to a four-year university nearby, so he can continue working and avoid loans. He shared that he was raised with the idea of not taking loans and just saving up for something or paying for it along the way. He shared that his "parents have not taken loans for cars or anything, and if they can't buy it outright, they won't buy it." He expressed:

> I work a lot doing a variety of jobs because I don't want to have to take any loans out wherever I go, so I think I work more than I go to school. So, it's taken me a while to do my basics. It's taken me three years now instead of [the] two years it usually takes people. But I've been working like a bunch of different jobs, and I've been saving up. I have a good amount. I don't think I would have to take out any loans to pay for where I go, which is nice. I haven't actually done the math, and I don't know if I'll get any financial aid when I transfer. If I don't have enough saved and can't make enough working, I may have to ask my parents for some money. I think they had planned to help me pay for college already, but I ended up paying my way through Sigma Community

College. I think they still have some money saved up, so I think we should be good if we combine our funds … hopefully, it will be enough. I don't want to take any loans at all.

Challenges Experienced Theme 4: COVID-19. The fourth theme that emerged as students shared their experiences was the impact of COVID-19 on their educational experience, personal life, finances, and sense of connection with others. All eight participants were impacted by the transition to online learning and had to learn how to engage with and become comfortable with synchronous or asynchronous learning. Six participants indicated that while faculty did a great job transitioning and supporting students, the learning experience did not feel as rich as when attending in person. Each of the eight participants shared that they felt less connected to peers, and four of the eight participants shared that they felt less connected to faculty in the virtual environment as compared to the face-to-face environment. Students also shared the impact of COVID-19 on finances and work situations and the need for increased financial support to continue their education.

Alejandro and Kay made direct comments about how the transition to online learning negatively disrupted their educational experience and ability to learn. Alejandro articulated:

Online school because of COVID has just been the worst thing for me because I feel like I'm technically doing well, like getting good grades, but I feel like I haven't learned anything because it's just different with tests being online and open book or notes. I don't know if I'm really absorbing the material, and I'm afraid that I'm going to forget how to learn because of COVID. I also am not good at studying at home, which has been hard with COVID because I study better when I'm around other people who are studying.

Kay shared that she has trouble reading on her computer and prefers having something to hold in her hands to read, make notes on, and highlight. She said that with everything being digital, it is

hard, and all the time sitting at a computer contributes to her exhaustion. She also commented about the negative impact of COVID on her ability to learn and be exposed to various things she should be learning as a nursing student. She said:

I feel like we are missing out on a lot of things because of COVID. Especially with nursing and current patient and safety protocols, we are not able to float around in the hospitals or even on campus in the simulation clinics and experience different things. It is sad we aren't able to get the full experience and preparation. It's also hard to not be able to learn from what classmates are doing too because we have to keep a distance, and if we are in hospitals, they only allow one student to be in a patient room so you can't see things your classmates are doing. My fellow nursing students and I all wish we could be together and we can't because it is just nice to be around people that are going through the same kind of things you are going through.

Lia, Kay, and Alejandro all shared disappointment in not being able to utilize the library as a space for studying. They all agreed that the library was a good place to study without getting distracted and to make copies and print things off related to class.

When talking about experiences learning online versus learning in-person, Elle, Jay, and Dee expressed that it was a little awkward, especially at first, not to interact much with professors. They all said that faculty did a great job adjusting and showing care for students, but it just "wasn't the same" as learning in person. Jay shared:

There was not any interactive audio or video with my peers or faculty. There were posts and discussion boards and things like that, but I never saw any of them or spoke with them in real-time, and that was odd to me. Previous to COVID, I loved it! I would go to

class and sit up front with my notepad to take notes and be the oldest one there, and I

didn't care. I learned better that way and performed better that way too.

Elle also commented about the decreased interaction with faculty when classes transitioned

online and how that impacted her experience with learning. She said:

In one class, my professor never really taught us. It was done through a learning platform,

and we'd have to email back and forth, and she'd grade our videos and stuff, and we

could see her in a video because she'd do our vocabulary for each section, but we didn't

really interact.

Dee talked about how the transition to online learning impacted testing and made her feel very

uncomfortable with taking tests online. She has test-taking anxiety and indicated the level of

anxiety was amplified by her experience taking proctored tests online. She expressed:

One of the things that I think has been horrible with online learning is that they make us

use cameras to watch us when we take exams because they assume students cheat. Not

every student cheats, and I feel like that is an invasion of privacy, and it really sends a

message that they distrust and are suspicious of the student. I really don't like that at all.

It made me even more anxious when taking my tests because they are staring at you. It's

very different than when you are in a classroom and your professor is just floating around

in the room while students take a test.

Dee, Shelly, Elle, Kay, and Lia indicated that COVID resulted in either a loss or decrease

of employment for them or their family, which impacted income and made things even tighter

than they normally were. Each of these students was grateful for the Higher Education

Emergency Relief Funds (HEERF) they received through either the Coronavirus Aid, Recovery,

and Economic Security (CARES) Act or the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental

Appropriations (CRRSA) Act. Dee also shared that her employer, who had typically been willing to work around her class schedule, became a bit more inflexible when COVID hit because they needed people to show up and were short-staffed.

Participants commented about the flexibility that online classes provided. Jay expressed this by saying, "It does give me a lot more flexibility, but it doesn't give me that structure of sitting in a classroom with others and the time that you have to be at school." Elle also mentioned that online classes provided flexibility with a schedule but created the challenge of having to set the time aside to complete what was needed for school. She shared that she enjoyed synchronous online classes best because it still allowed some flexibility but provided a set time for class and being able to see a professor in real-time.

Challenges Experienced Theme 5: Lack of Direction or Changing Majors. The fifth theme that emerged as a factor that led to either stop out or delayed academic progress was a lack of direction or changing majors. Of the eight participants, only one student was still pursuing their originally identified major. Four students switched majors once at various points in their academic progress, two students switched majors twice, and one student switched majors seven times. Elle stated, "My biggest issue was that I had no direction of what I wanted to do, none." This sentiment was echoed by Kay, who said, "I wanted to learn, but I had a hard time knowing what I wanted to do." Ben shared that he started as a premed student and was getting his classes done but "wasn't able to connect with the material" and became frustrated about that. He decided to take some time off to explore what he wanted to do, make some money to pay off some debt, and hopefully, return to school "a little more focused." Shelly shared that she began as an English major with a desire to be a writer and a backup plan of being a teacher. Three and a half years into her program, she decided to switch to a film major. She shared that she "happened

upon it" when COVID hit because she began editing videos for class presentations as part of her role with the honors department since they could no longer make in-person classroom presentations. Shelly indicated that film had been an interest of hers previously but in the context of making content related to gaming on Twitch and YouTube. She did not realize how she could do something like that as a career, making money to support herself.

In summary, the themes that emerged in findings connected to how part-time enrolled community college students explain their ability to persist toward their academic goals, the challenges they experience, and the factors that impact slow progress toward academic goals or a decision to stop out were organized into success factors and challenge factors. Factors contributing to student success and persistence included (a) flexibility, (b) support systems, and (c) time management. Factors that presented challenges to persistence included (a) personal life challenges, (b) exhaustion and burnout, (c) finances, (d) COVID, and (e) lack of direction or changing majors.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 presented a summary of the research design, an overview of the study institution, participant profiles, findings of this study, and themes that emerged from analyzing the data collected from participants' interviews and questionnaires. Research Question 1 sought to explore how part-time enrolled community college students describe their experiences related to academic resilience, persistence, and utilization of academic and social support services and programs. The four themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) general awareness of resources exists, but students are unclear about what they do and how to utilize or access them fully, (b) time constraints prevent utilization of resources, (c) internal drive and sense of purpose

matters for persistence, and (d) previous learning environments shape expectations and experiences.

Research Question 2 aimed to explore how part-time enrolled community college students describe their interactions with agents of the institution and their sense of belonging. The five themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) advisors are looked to heavily for guidance and connection to resources; (b) interactions with and connections to faculty are crucial; (c) time constraints limit the ability for involvement and connection to faculty, staff, peers, and the institution; (d) seeing others similar to self is validating and motivating; and (e) COVID implications had negative impacts on connection and sense of belonging.

Research Question 3 strived to explore how part-time enrolled community college students explain their ability to persist toward their academic goals, the challenges they experience, and the factors that impact slow progress toward academic goals or a decision to stop out. Three themes emerged relating to success factors impacting persistence, and five themes emerged relating to challenges experienced, including those challenges resulting in stop out or delayed progress for a student. The three success factor themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) flexibility matters, (b) support systems are needed, and (c) time management is critical. The five themes that emerged from data analysis related to challenges experienced included (a) personal life challenges or transitions, (b) exhaustion and burnout, (c) finances, (d) COVID, and (e) lack of direction or changing majors.

Chapter 5 will present a discussion of the findings and include the implications of the findings for educators and higher education practice, recommendations for educators and higher education professionals, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the study's purpose, a summary of the problem statement, limitations of the study, and a discussion of the study's findings. Implications and recommendations for higher education practice are discussed, and recommendations for future research are identified.

U.S. community colleges provide access to upward economic mobility because of their ability to reach a large population of low-income, first-generation, and minority students. The accessibility and affordability of community colleges contribute to decreasing the racial gap in postsecondary college enrollment, providing a pathway to make up for inequities in opportunity and reducing the income and wealth disparity (Thoma, 2013). However, community college completion rates, defined as degree attainment or certificate completion, are low. Bailey et al. (2015) indicated that fewer than 40% of community college students earn a certificate or degree within six years of enrollment. Instead of closing gaps and decreasing wealth disparity, failure to persist in a timely manner and complete a degree or certificate leads to unmanageable student debt (Hittepole, 2017; THECB, 2015; Thoma, 2013). With community colleges positioned to provide students with multiple pathways into good-paying jobs, noncompletion dramatically reduces a student's opportunity to improve employment outcomes, increase earning potential (Belfield & Bailey, 2017; Carnevale et al., 2017; Holzer and Baum, 2017; Oyserman, 2012), and achieve upward mobility and increased life satisfaction.

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), community colleges are especially important because 18 of the 30 fastest-growing occupations between 2016 and 2026 require some level of postsecondary education. Projections suggested that by 2020, 65% of Texas jobs will require a degree or certificate; however, only 39% of Texans are expected to

meet these requirements (Groves & Helmcamp, 2015; Paredes, 2017). The increased number of jobs requiring a career certificate or college degree has resulted in added pressure from federal agencies, state governments, college systems, and individual institutions for community colleges to increase college completion rates. One response to the pressure on Texas institutions is the *60X30TX* higher education plan, with a stated goal of having 60% of the 25- to 34-year-old Texas population holding a certificate or degree by 2030 (THECB, 2015).

Changing student demographics and enrollment patterns point to the need to reexamine the metrics that define and assess community college student success and institutional effectiveness. In fall 2015, 75.4% of students in Texas community colleges were enrolled part-time, 45.6% were working while enrolled, and 29.1% were 25 years and over (NCES, 2019; Paredes, 2016). Only 20% of the students who start their college career part-time in Texas institutions complete their bachelor's degree within six years (E3 Alliance, 2020). To meet the needs of the state economy, support the success of all students, and ensure that students graduate with no debt or manageable debt relative to their incomes, the unique needs of the growing nontraditional student population must be understood and accounted for (Hittepole, 2017; THECB, 2015).

Low completion rates of nontraditional part-time enrolled students are a significant problem for community colleges. There is limited research focusing on retention and timely completion at community colleges, particularly as it relates to the needs and motivations of nontraditional students (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Suleman et al., 2019; Tolliver & Miller, 2018). The experiences and expectations of nontraditional part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States, including how they define success,

challenges to achieving success, and factors that contribute to success, are not fully understood or assessed. There is a need to look closer at the community college student experience, redefine success, and determine measures to assess and evaluate student and institutional success. Addressing this problem may help community college administrators provide well-informed support services and institutional resources for nontraditional students that lead to the successful completion of a workforce certificate or degree program and a prepared workforce in Texas.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of nontraditional part-time enrolled students who attend multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. Specific interests were how students described their experiences with utilizing support resources, how students described their interactions with agents of the institution and their sense of connection and belonging, and what students perceived were factors that led to persistence and what challenges contributed to stopping out or delayed academic progress.

Discussion of Findings

The three research questions that guided my research were:

RQ1: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges describe their experiences related to academic resilience, persistence, and utilization of academic and social support services and programs?

RQ2: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges describe their interactions with agents of the institution and sense of belonging?

RQ3: How do nontraditional part-time enrolled students attending multicampus urban community colleges explain their ability to persist toward their academic goals or their decision to stop out/drop out?

Experiences Related to Academic Resilience, Persistence, and Utilization of Resources

Research Question 1 was designed to explore how part-time enrolled community college students describe their experiences related to academic resilience, persistence, and utilization of academic and social support services and programs. The four themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) general awareness of resources exists, but students are unclear about what they do and how to fully utilize or access them, (b) time constraints prevent utilization of resources, (c) internal drive and sense of purpose matters for persistence, and (d) previous learning environments shape expectations and experiences.

All eight participants identified two or more personal and academic resources that they would find useful but were unsure how to access or did not exactly understand what the service was supposed to do for them. All eight participants also indicated a desire to know more about how to access scholarship opportunities. They articulated that there was some mystery and lack of transparency and access around the scholarship process, which led to frustration, confusion, and ambivalence. This finding supports the assertion in a recent study conducted through the Hope Center that "insufficient information about existing resources to support basic needs keeps students from getting the help they need to make academic progress" (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2021, p. 1).

Fambely (2020) discussed role conflicts that emerge for students due to competing pressures of childcare, household responsibilities, financial obligations, work commitments, and school commitments. Study participants shared that the challenge of balancing multiple

obligations led to a very tight schedule with very little free time. Limited free time contributed to a lack of resource utilization. Participants who were generally aware of resources available shared that they either did not have time to utilize them, learn more about how they could support their success, or figure out how to access them. Five of the eight participants directly stated that there are one or more resources that they would take advantage of if they had more time. The top resources of interest, if they had more time to use them, listed by students included tutoring, academic coaching, counseling, and attending various events and programs offered on campus.

Six of the eight participants shared that their first attempt at college was unsuccessful primarily because they had no direction, did not really know what they wanted to do as a career path, or did not want to be in college but enrolled because of family expectations. These participants shared that in their return to college, they felt more purpose, direction, focus, and relevance between their coursework and their academic and life goals. Each of the eight participants had very personal reasons for why they were continuing with their education despite the many challenges experienced and sacrifices made to do so. These findings are consistent with the work of Bailey (2017) and León et al. (2019) around purpose as a factor that leads to academic success and persistence. Bailey's (2017) research indicated that when students are clear on their goal for attendance and see a path toward completion that appears to be attainable, they are more likely to persist toward completion. León et al. (2019) discussed the importance of supporting students around finding purpose, discovering strengths, recovering from setbacks, and setting and meeting challenging long-term goals for academic success.

Interactions With Agents of the Institution and Sense of Belonging

Research Question 2 was designed to explore how part-time enrolled community college students describe their interactions with agents of the institution and their sense of belonging. The five themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) advisors are looked to heavily for guidance and connection to resources; (b) interactions with and connections to faculty are crucial; (c) time constraints limit the ability for involvement and connection to faculty, staff, peers, and the institution; (d) seeing others similar to self is validating and motivating; and (e) COVID implications had negative impacts on connection and sense of belonging.

When discussing interactions with agents of the institution, seven of the eight participants mentioned their advisor throughout their interview as being a resource, a support person, and a positive interaction they had with someone from Sigma Community College. This finding provides evidence in support of the conclusions made by Acevedo and Zerquera (2016) and Clark (2012) about the importance for students to connect with college employees, particularly advisors. Acevedo and Zerquera (2016) concluded that enhanced availability and quality of advising and connection to advisors is a strong point of connection for students who show progress toward successful completion. Clark (2012) added that when community college students form deep connections with college employees, they are more likely to persist.

Stories shared by participants indicated that interactions with faculty are crucial and can positively or negatively influence a student's performance, confidence, and desire to persist. This finding supports previous research that highlights the impact of meaningful interactions and relationships with faculty on student success. Margarit and Kennedy (2019) discussed the importance of faculty-student interactions, and Buskirk-Cohen and Plants (2019) discussed the impact of caring pedagogy and connection to faculty on student success. Participants shared both

positive and negative experiences they had with faculty at Sigma Community College and how those experiences impacted them. Positive and meaningful interactions with faculty led to increased confidence, sense of belonging, and persistence. Negative or mediocre interactions with faculty led to frustration, ambivalence, and questioning about fit and belonging.

Participants expressed a desire to connect with others on campus, utilize resources, and get involved but indicated that time constraints limited or prevented their ability to do so. Participants shared that even if they wanted to get involved or utilize resources, it would require them to make significant adjustments in their schedule, which can be difficult to do. Six of the eight participants also indicated that COVID-19 and the transition to fully online learning negatively impacted the already challenging experience of feeling connected. Finally, participants shared that seeing others similar to self was validating and motivating and impacts sense of belonging. Three participants specifically discussed how seeing others, either on campus or in classes, that were a similar age or stage of life helped them feel more comfortable being at college. This finding lends credence to the assertion that validation is important in shaping a student's successful transition into college and facilitating academic and personal self-efficacy, leading to successful educational and personal outcomes (Barber, 2018). It also aligns with validation theory, which asserts that validation is an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by agents of the institution that facilitates a sense of belonging and fosters academic and interpersonal success and development (Rendón, 1994; Yosso, 2005).

Factors Contributing to Persistence, Challenges Experienced, and Factors That Impact Delayed Progress Toward Academic Goals

Research Question 3 was designed to explore how part-time enrolled community college students explain their ability to persist toward their academic goals, the challenges they

experience, and the factors that impact slow progress toward academic goals or a decision to stop out. Three themes emerged relating to success factors that impact persistence, and five themes emerged relating to challenges experienced, including those challenges resulting in stop out or delayed progress for a student. The three success factor themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) flexibility matters, (b) support systems are needed, and (c) time management is critical. The five themes that emerged from data analysis related to challenges experienced included (a) personal life challenges or transitions, (b) exhaustion and burnout, (c) finances, (d) COVID, and (e) lack of direction or changing majors.

Student nonacademic success factors identified in my literature review included emotional intelligence, relationships and connections to others on campus, self-empowerment, persistence, and community or family connections. These factors were upheld in the findings of my research with the nontraditional part-time enrolled students who participated in this study and are reflected in themes that emerged in all three research questions. Emotional intelligence and self-empowerment appeared in findings as themes related to time management and lack of direction or changing majors. Findings showed that when students have a higher level of self-awareness, a clearer sense of purpose and direction, consistent strategies for managing time, and more developed systems for organizing and completing their responsibilities, they are more likely to successfully persist toward their academic and personal goals. These themes align with research that suggests clarity of purpose, goal, and direction (Bailey, 2017), and self-regulation, self-awareness, and self-management (Muenks et al., 2017; Rogers-Shaw & Carr-Chellman, 2018) are factors that impact achievement outcomes and persistence toward completion.

Relationships and connections to others on campus and community or family connections appeared in findings as the need for support systems. Themes around the importance of

relationships and connections to others that repeatedly emerged in a review of the literature

included (a) relationships with faculty, (b) family support, and (c) campus engagement and

support (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Previous research suggested

that strong connections with faculty, family, and agents of the institution lead to students feeling

supported, valued, and believed in, which impacts persistence. Findings in this study expand

upon previous research to include the importance and impact of employer support for working

students. Additionally, campus engagement and support for participants in this study were more

likely to be connected to academic experiences such as study groups, in-class peer interactions,

and information sharing networks rather than the more traditional extracurricular experiences of

students at four-year universities such as clubs and student organizations (Karp et al., 2011).

Persistence appeared in findings as the resilience, hard work, grit, motivation, and

perseverance employed by participants to overcome personal life challenges and manage

exhaustion and burnout. Buzzetto-Hollywood and Mitchell (2019) identified personality

attributes of grit to include self-regulation, self-discipline, resilience, dutifulness,

conscientiousness, and low impulsivity. These attributes, combined with clarity of purpose,

positive self-efficacy, and a growth mindset, have been suggested as important factors that

enhance grit's impact on student performance and success (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Mitchell,

2019). Findings in this study expand upon previous research to include flexibility as a highly

important factor contributing to success and persistence. The need for flexibility presented in two

primary ways, including how students talked about employment and class schedules. As it relates

to employment, the greater the flexibility experienced, the greater the likelihood that students

persisted. As it relates to class schedules, students expressed frustration with trying to find

classes that fit their work and personal or family life schedules, indicated there were not enough

course sections offered at times that worked best for them, and liked some of the flexibility that online learning provided.

Student barriers to persistence and completion identified in my literature review included low income, institutional oppression, academic preparedness, and balancing roles and responsibilities. Challenges of being low income and having to balance roles and responsibilities are factors that were upheld in the findings of my research with the nontraditional part-time enrolled students who participated in this study. The challenge of being low income appeared in students' stories about the need to work while being in school, the frustration with financial aid and the scholarship processes, and the stress and concern around student loan debt. The challenge of balancing roles and responsibilities appeared in findings as themes related to time management and exhaustion and burnout. Participants in this study shared that taking a reduced course load was essential for maintaining a school, work, social, and family life balance (Lee, 2018). Students also discussed the exhaustion and burnout that result from managing the competing pressures of childcare, household responsibilities, financial obligations, work commitments, and school commitments (Fambely, 2020).

Findings in this study expand upon previous research to include personal life challenges or transitions, lack of direction or changing majors, and COVID-19 as barriers and challenges that most significantly impacted their ability to persist and complete. All eight participants were impacted by the transition to online learning and had to learn how to engage with and become comfortable with synchronous or asynchronous learning. Six participants indicated that while faculty did a great job transitioning and supporting students, the learning experience did not feel as rich as when they were attending in person. Each of the eight participants shared that they felt less connected to peers, and four of the eight participants shared that they felt less connected to

faculty in the virtual environment as compared to the face-to-face environment. Students also shared the impact of COVID-19 on finances and their work situations and the need for increased financial support to continue their education.

Findings in this study did not support previous research that suggests academic preparedness as being a barrier to completion for community college students. Luna-Torres et al. (2018) indicated that more than 50% of community college students require remedial coursework, which lengthens the time it takes to complete a degree and exacerbates the cost of attaining their educational goals. Participants in this study did not indicate a need for remedial education or point to a lack of academic preparedness as a factor that impacted their progress toward completion. Five of the eight participants initially started college at a different institution and did not persist due to a variety of previously discussed reasons. One participant inferred poor high school performance but did not discuss a need for developmental coursework, and the other two participants indicated feeling academically prepared for college.

Limitations

As described in Chapter 3, the small sample size in case study research was a limitation to this study. Given a small sample size and a single site of study, which is a second limitation, conclusions drawn and findings discovered may or may not apply to other part-time enrolled students pursuing certificates, degrees, or transfer at community colleges in the Southwest region or other regions of the United States. Therefore, the generalizability of the study was a limitation.

A third limitation of the study was the impact of COVID-19 safety protocols on interview quality. While participants were able to participate in interviews from the comfort of their own homes, virtual or phone interviews did impact the quality of interactions with participants. Internet connectivity strength impacted clarity of communication, virtual interviews limited my

ability to observe nonverbal communication, virtual interviews with participants in their homes resulted in more distractions and interruptions for participants, and phone interviews felt less personal.

Finally, the timeframe was a limitation that likely impacted the depth and richness of the study results. Since the study is a dissertation project, it had to be completed in a comparably short amount of time. The timeframe impacted the frequency of interactions with study participants to gather qualitative data. The specific ways this limitation impacted my study were in using participant journals and applying the relational turning points framework (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Each participant was provided with a password-protected document to serve as a participant journal for documenting and reflecting on participation in the research project or perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs of lived experiences. The journals were optional and intended to serve as a tool for participants to reflect on their experiences, capture postinterview thoughts, or respond to my follow-up questions. None of the participants utilized the optional journal. Instead, any additional thoughts or reflections that participants had were communicated to me via email.

Applying the relational turning points framework to graph and visualize significant events and interactions that students experienced over time and the impact that those events had on various relational and institutional commitment outcomes (Baxter & Bullis, 1986) proved challenging due to the timeframe. While students articulated having product and relational expectations when pursuing higher education and experiences that positively and negatively impacted their level of commitment to their academic goal and the institution, the timeframe prevented a clear identification of the student life cycle of a part-time enrolled student. Additionally, six of the eight participants began their higher education journey at an institution

other than the study site. Attendance at other institutions and breaks in attendance further complicated my ability to graph a timeline of the student's experience and how those experiences enhanced or detracted from their level of commitment to their education and sense of belonging to the institution.

Recommendations for Future Research

While my study brings voice to the perspectives and experiences of part-time enrolled community college students, there remains a need to more fully understand the experiences of this population of students and how to support them toward completion. The recommendations for future research are informed by the findings and limitations of my study.

First, there is a need to understand the comprehensive experience of part-time enrolled students over the entire life cycle of their academic journey from interest in applying through completion and becoming alumni. A longitudinal case study could be conducted to explore and better understand the perceptions and experiences of part-time enrolled students at multicampus urban community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States. A study such as this could involve ongoing observation and collection of qualitative data through various data collection tools from a student's point of enrollment at a single institution through the completion of their identified academic goal. The study could also include focus groups to provide an opportunity to compare and contrast experiences that are similar or different across cases for students and affirm or deny themes that emerged from this study. Finally, the study could include a multiple case study comparing the students' experiences at multiple different community colleges with similar and different demographics to determine if experiences are similar or different. This type of study would provide insight into the specific experiences and interactions that contributed to sense of belonging and connection, deepened or weakened

commitment to the institution and the student's goals, and facilitated the utilization or lack of utilization of success and support resources.

Second, it is important to continue to conduct research within community colleges to understand how the current policies, practices, and resources serve or fail to serve the diverse population of students enrolled. Historically, there has been a focus on college readiness, and students have been identified as either college-ready or not for a variety of reasons. With a national average of nearly 63% of students enrolled in community colleges as part-time students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2018), community colleges need to understand how to be student-ready to serve all students, including nontraditional and historically underserved students who make up a large majority of part-time enrolled students (NCES, 2015). Preparing to support these students toward successful completion involves understanding how to support them in coping with and managing their nonacademic lives and responsibilities.

Third, given the finding from this study that students found a lack of transparency and experienced frustration around seeking out scholarships, it would be valuable to conduct a study with students who have successfully obtained and maintained scholarships to understand more about how students become aware of scholarship opportunities; what resources, if any, they utilized to access scholarship opportunities; and what factors contributed to being awarded scholarships, particularly those that significantly assist a student in funding their education or living expenses. A component in a study such as this may also involve interviewing individuals who promote, review, and award scholarships. This type of study would provide insight into the channels used to promote scholarships, the effectiveness and accessibility of those channels, and the criteria that impact decisions to award scholarships. Understanding these factors may lead to more equitable access and utilization of scholarships.

Fourth, the finding from this study that flexibility in employment matters and contributes to persistence compels future research to explore employer attitudes, experiences, and perceptions related to the value or challenges of providing flexibility and support to employees who are pursuing higher education or advanced skills training or certification programs. This type of study would provide an understanding of employer attitudes, experiences, and perceptions; potential insight into coaching employers on the ways to provide support and flexibility that also make business sense; and awareness of industries and employers that most likely support ongoing educational and skill advancement of their workforce.

Recommendations for Practical Application

The results of this study have produced multiple recommendations for higher education practice to consider. With student persistence and completion at the top of the higher education agenda and the growing demand in the workforce for skilled employees, community colleges must seek ways to support part-time enrolled students in developing skills needed and attaining educational credentials in a reasonable timeframe with limited debt. My recommendations for higher education practice are not exhaustive but closely relate to this study's findings. The four recommendations relate to (a) resource awareness and utilization, (b) finances, (c) purpose and belonging, and (d) community college branding, identity, and outreach.

Resource Awareness and Utilization

The first recommendation for higher education practice is that faculty and staff demonstrate proficiency in connecting students with resources that support their success. This recommendation involves more than faculty and staff merely knowing about the resources but also being able to connect students to the resources at the right time to increase the likelihood of effectiveness. Connecting students to resources at the right time involves having the resources

and services available at times and on the days that students most need them and with the least amount of inconvenience to access the resources as possible. I recommend that certain resources such as tutoring, academic or success coaching, and financial advising and planning are embedded into the students' experience, which eliminates the challenge of time constraints in utilizing certain resources. For instance, courses that historically are shown to be challenging for students could have embedded tutors in the course or supplemental instruction sessions immediately following class. Another consideration in this recommendation is that staff and faculty collaborate to create a messaging timeline and outreach plan that maps out "need-to-know" information and relevant resources at various points of a students' experience, starting from their interest in applying and enrolling through their graduation and connecting to the institution as alumni.

Finances

The second recommendation for higher education practice is to increase transparency and reduce the mystery about receiving financial aid, financing education, and accessing and applying for scholarships. As it relates to financial aid and transparency, I recommend that each award offer come with a video explanation of what is being offered to the student for aid, conditions of the aid such as whether it needs to be paid back or not and if it collects interest or not, and the applicant criteria that qualified them for each type of aid offered. It may also be helpful for a student to know up front if there is a lifetime cap on the aid awarded and the general circumstances that may impact the award amount in the future and ways to report changes in circumstances.

As it relates to scholarships, I have two recommendations. First, I recommend that institutions create a vetted and easy-to-use database that compiles scholarship opportunities and

organizes them or has filters allowing a user to organize them by the application due date, application criteria, and award amount. As part of this database, it would be helpful to have tips for applying, samples or templates to use for essays or personal statements, contact information for someone to assist if needed, and a way to check the status of any applications submitted. Second, I recommend that institutions create retention and persistence scholarships that are awarded to students incrementally as they continue their education and remain in good standing. It would be important to map out the amount students can expect for each term as they continue so it can be factored into their overall plan for financing their education. I would recommend, particularly for part-time enrolled students, that the amount awarded increase as a student gets further into their degree attainment. The rationale behind that recommendation is that for this student population, the likelihood of competing priorities and responsibilities is higher, and the longer it takes to complete a degree on a part-time basis, the more likely it is that external factors impact completion.

Purpose and Belonging

The third recommendation for higher education practice is to integrate experiences that facilitate exploration and clarification of purpose for students. Because not all students have the opportunity to be involved in co-curricular experiences, this must be incorporated either into all or a combination of the core curriculum, a first-year or returning student course, and the required interactions with institutional agents such as academic advisors. Experiences and conversations that facilitate clarity of purpose can help students feel more connected and committed to their coursework; celebrate students and their strengths, stories, and dreams; and support students in making meaning of adversity in a way that empowers and builds hope and resilience, which can contribute to drive and direction.

Belonging builds on purpose, and a recommendation to facilitate sense of belonging is for higher education practitioners and educators at community colleges to welcome all students through an asset-based perspective and with an attitude that students do not have to prove themselves to belong but that they belong the moment they express interest in attending. Additional recommendations for facilitating belonging are intentionally connecting students with their peers in meaningful ways and inviting students' families into their college experience. Connecting students to each other is particularly important in the virtual environment where interactions are less likely to happen in more organic ways, such as chatting before or after class. Inviting students' families into their college experience could be achieved by providing events and programs that are family-friendly, by offering a tuition incentive program for a family member to enroll alongside their student, and by doing targeted outreach to the family that shares what their student may be experiencing and tips for how to support them and also ideas how to cope if what their student is experiencing is impacting the family.

Community College Branding, Identity, and Outreach

The fourth recommendation for higher education practice is to tell a new story of what community colleges offer and how they fit into the larger education and workforce development ecosystem. Many students in my study talked about the lower expectations and the stigma or negative perceptions that still exist for community colleges and how that was not what they experienced at Sigma Community College. My recommendation is that community colleges work on a strategy to redefine and establish a compelling identity, establish new brand recognition, and outreach in a variety of ways to promote the various pathways available through community colleges to obtaining higher skills, higher learning, higher earning potential, and ultimately a better quality of life.

Conclusions

The experiences, needs, and motivations that impact persistence and completion for nontraditional part-time enrolled students at community colleges need further investigation. A majority of the existing research regarding student persistence and completion focuses on students enrolled at four-year universities and routinely examines the roles of gender, race, and academic readiness. This study sought to explore the community college student experience for nontraditional part-time enrolled students and understand the complex inter-relationships and factors, as well as the lived realities, that impact persistence and completion of certificate or degree programs or successful transfer to a four-year university.

This study utilized multiple case study methodology and was guided by a constructivist research paradigm, which asserts that truth is relative and dependent on one's perspective, a relativist ontology that assumes multiple realities, and a subjectivist epistemology in which the researcher and the participants cocreate understandings (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Terrell, 2016). Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model provided a framework for understanding and exploring the experiences of study participants, and the theory of intersectionality provided a lens through which to consider the background and defined variables in Bean and Metzner's framework.

While each individual student case was unique, themes of greater and lesser similarity across cases were found. Findings supported Bean and Metzner's (1985) assertion that external environmental factors such as family responsibilities, finances, outside encouragement, and hours of employment seemed to affect persistence for nontraditional students. However, while social integration and academic variables may have less of an impact on persistence for nontraditional students, these variables were presented as factors that impacted sense of

belonging, connection, and sense of purpose, which positively impacted the likelihood of persistence. The findings of this study contribute to a larger body of knowledge and provide a more refined understanding of the experiences nontraditional part-time enrolled students have in pursuing their academic goals. Insights gained through this research may help inform practices, programs, services, and policies that could have a meaningful impact on student success and completion at community colleges in the Southwest region of the United States.

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Appendix A: Permission to Use Figures

Bean and Metzner's (1985) Nontraditional Student Attrition Model (see Figure 1)

Tinto's Theory of Integration (1975,1993; see Figure 2)

Cabrera et al.'s (1993) Integrated Model of Student Retention (see Figure 3)

Case Study Methodology (see Figure 4)

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Script

My name is Janelle Green, and I am conducting research for my doctoral degree at Abilene Christian University (ACU). I am studying the experiences that part-time enrolled students have while attending Sigma Community College (SCC). I would like to invite you to participate in my research. Please see the attached flyer and below for additional information.

In order to be included in this study, you must meet the following criteria:
- Over the age of 18.
- Currently part-time enrolled or have been part-time enrolled at some point between today and January 2016 in credit-bearing courses at SCC.
- Pursuing one of the following academic goals:
  - associate's or bachelor's degree from SCC,
  - a level 1 workforce certificate from SCC, or
  - transfer to a four-year university.
- Completed 50% of the credits required to complete your identified academic goal.
  (For example, an associate degree requires completion of 60 credit hours … if you have completed 30 or more credits and are pursuing an associate degree, you meet these criteria.)

You cannot participate if:
- You are currently enrolled full-time in credit-bearing courses at SCC.

If you participate in this research, you will be asked the following:
- Phase I: Complete a 10-question demographics questionnaire in which you will be asked about your age, academic goal, student classification, course enrollment status, gender identity, ethnicity, employment status, challenges you experience as a part-time student, and factors that contribute to success as a part-time student.
- Phase II: Based on the demographic questionnaire, if you meet the criteria for the study and express interest in sharing more about your experience, you may be invited to meet with me for two to three one-hour interviews either through virtual technology or over the phone. We will choose times convenient for you.
- Phase II: Optional journal to write down any thoughts or questions about your participation in the study and any perspectives, beliefs, or stories you think of that you may not have been able to share in an interview. This is optional and not mandatory and will be secure so that only you and I have access to the thoughts and questions you write.

If you have questions for me, please email me at: xxxxx@xxxxxxxx OR xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxxx. You can also call or text me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

If you would like to participate in the study and do not have any initial questions, please review and sign the consent form located here (hyperlink to consent form for phase I demographic questionnaire) or the QR code below and then complete the questionnaire, which will be made available upon signing the consent form.

Thank you in advance for your time!

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Seeking Part-Time Students At ▮▮▮ For A Dissertation Research Study

Doctoral work being completed at Abilene Christian University

Only 16% of those who start college **part-time** complete their degree.

% earning vocational certificate, associates, or bachelors in 6 Years

Purpose of the Study

I am studying the experiences that part-time enrolled students have while attending ▮▮▮ with a hope to learn more about the holistic experience students have, the challenges encountered, and the factors that lead to success.

My desire is to understand ways to better serve and support part-time enrolled community college students in ways that support their success in reaching their identified goals.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research.

Criteria for Participation: Interested Students MUST

- Be over the age of 18
- Be currently part-time enrolled or have been part-time enrolled at some point between today and January 2016, in credit-bearing courses at ▮▮▮
- Be pursuing one of the following academic goals:
  - associate's or bachelor's degree from ▮▮▮
  - a level 1 workforce certificate from ▮▮▮ or
  - transfer to a four-year university
- Have completed 50% of the credits required to complete your identified academic goal (for example, an associate's degree requires completion of 60 credit hours…if you have completed 30 or more credits and are pursuing an associate's degree you meet this criteria)

Participation Will Include:

- Completion of a socio-demographic questionnaire and consent form
- Expressed interest in participating in 2-3 one-on-one virtual or phone interviews (no longer than 60 minutes each)
- Optional journal to record thoughts, feelings, or questions about personal experiences and participation in the study
- Reviewing and offering feedback about the themes identified from the data analyzed

Socio-Demographic Questionnaire and Consent Form

If you would like to participate in the study and do not have any initial questions, please review and sign the consent form located **HERE** or through the QR code below and then complete the questionnaire.

Be sure you are signed into your ▮▮▮ account to access the link

SCAN ME

Thank you for considering participation in this study. Please note that all participation is voluntary and you can stop participating at any time. Also, all information collected for purpose of this research study will be stored securely and processes are in place to protect participant privacy and confidentiality.

QUESTIONS????

CONTACT: Janelle Green
Email: ▮▮▮
Phone: ▮▮▮

Appendix D: Study Site Approval

███████████

Office of ███████████

███████████ • ███ , Texas ███ • Phone ███████ • Email ███████

███████████

Institutional Research Review Committee
Letter of Agreement

DATE: April 9, 2021

TO: Janelle M. Green

FROM: ███████████

On behalf of the Institutional Research Review Committee of ███████████ , I am pleased to inform you that the proposal you submitted, "Part Time Enrolled Community College Students: A Case Study Examining the Experiences of the Invisible Majority" has been approved.

If you wish to pursue this proposal, please sign and return this letter to the Office of ███████████ by April 23, 2021. All ███████ research must be completed within one year of this agreement, unless otherwise stated.

If you have any questions, please contact us.

Sincerely,

███████████   04/14/2021
                                     Date

███████████
Chair, ███ Institutional Research Review Committee
Vice President, Office of ███████████

1 of 2

███████████

Institutional Research Review Committee
Researcher's Statement Regarding Proposal: Part Time Enrolled Community College Students: A Case Study Examining the Experiences of the Invisible Majority

I have read the **Research Review Process** and agree to abide by the guidelines specified there.

I understand that my Research Proposal has been approved contingent upon the modifications listed above.

I understand that approval of this project does not imply ███████████ endorsement of either the project or it results.

I understand that ███████████ is not responsible for any debts that I may incur as part of this project nor will it provide consumable resources.

I will provide a copy of the results of this study to the Institutional Research Review Committee of ███████████ .

Janelle M. Green   4-14-2021
Janelle M. Green, Researcher   Date

Appendix E: Sociodemographic Participant Questionnaire

What is your age in years?
- ❑ Please specify: _____
- ❑ I prefer not to answer

Academic Goal

What is your current academic attainment goal at your community college? (Credential you would like to attain)
- ❑ Certificate
- ❑ Associate's degree
- ❑ Bachelor's degree
- ❑ Transfer to a four-year university
- ❑ Other, please specify: _____

Student Classification

What is your student classification? (How many college credit hours have you earned or completed?)
- ❑ FR (0–29 credits)
- ❑ SO (30–59 credits)
- ❑ JR (60–89 credits)
- ❑ SR (90+ credits)
- ❑ Other (for example, nondegree seeking, seeking second degree), please specify: _____

Enrollment Status

Which category best describes your current college enrollment?
- ❑ Not currently enrolled in classes
- ❑ Enrolled in 1–6 credit hours
- ❑ Enrolled in 7–11credit hours
- ❑ Enrolled in 12 or more credit hours

Gender Identity

Which term best describes your gender identity?
- ❑ Woman, female, or feminine
- ❑ Man, male, or masculine
- ❑ Transgender woman, female or feminine
- ❑ Transgender man, male, or masculine
- ❑ Nonbinary, gender nonconforming, gender queer, or gender questioning
- ❑ Two-spirited, intersex, or other related terms
- ❑ Another gender identity, please specify: _____
- ❑ I prefer not to answer

Race or Ethnicity
What is your race or ethnicity? (Mark all that apply)
- ❑ American Indian or Alaska Native or Indigenous or First Nations
- ❑ Asian or Asian American
- ❑ Black or African American
- ❑ Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin
- ❑ Middle Eastern or North African
- ❑ Multiracial or Biracial
- ❑ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ❑ White or Caucasian or European American
- ❑ Some other race, ethnicity, or origin, please specify: _____
- ❑ I prefer not to answer

Employment
On average, how many hours do you work a week?
- ❑ 0–19 hours
- ❑ 20–30 hours
- ❑ 31–40 hours
- ❑ More than 40 hours

What are the biggest challenges to you as a student pursuing your academic goals?

What factors have allowed you to be successful in making progress toward your academic goals?

Would you like to provide your contact information so that someone can follow up with you about participating in an interview for this study?
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

If yes, please provide the following information so someone can reach you:

- First and Last Name: _____

- Preferred Name (if applicable): _____

- Phone Number (including area code): _____

- Email: _____

Appendix F: Participant Interview Protocol

Say: Hello, I am Janelle Green, a doctoral candidate in the Organizational Leadership program at Abilene Christian University. Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my research study for my dissertation. As we talk today, I will be asking several questions related to your experiences as a part-time enrolled student pursuing your academic goal. The purpose of my study is to understand more about the experiences part-time students have and the ways we can serve and support them better toward achieving their goals.

Can I ask how you heard about the opportunity to participate in my study? I appreciate all the support I have received and want to thank anyone who helped make students aware of my desire to learn from you (jot down the name and move on).

Before we get started with questions, I want to remind you that you can choose to discontinue your participation or decline to answer any of the interview questions at any time. Do you have any questions for me so far? Also, do you have a pseudonym or nickname you would like me to use in my study when referring to you as a way to protect your privacy?

Okay, well, let's get started then with my first question:

1. When did you start thinking about going to college? What sparked your interest in going to college?
    a. Tell me about how you decided to enroll in community college.
    b. Why did you choose this college?
    c. What is your academic goal?
        i. How did you decide upon that?
    d. Why did you decide to pursue your goal on a part-time enrollment basis?
        i. Did you consider attending full-time?
            1. If yes, why did you decide against it?
            2. If no, any particular reason why you did not consider it?
    e. Did you attend any other schools or vocational training centers before enrolling in this community college?
    f. How long do you anticipate it will take you to achieve your academic goal?
        i. Does that timeline fit with your personal and professional goals?

2. Did you have any help from anyone in returning to college?
    a. What kind of help did you have applying?
    b. What kind of help did you have with TSI or college placement testing?
    c. What kind of help did you have enrolling and registering for classes?
    d. Did you have to make any lifestyle arrangements or changes to support being a student? If so, can you share what changes were made?
    e. What ways do you continue to receive help or support?
    f. Who would you identify as your biggest sources of support?
        i. How do you feel about the support you have from family?
        ii. How do you feel about the support you have from friends?
        iii. How do you feel about the support you have from faculty?

iv. How do you feel about the support you have from college staff?

3. Did you need financial assistance to return to school?
    a. What sources of financial assistance did you seek out or utilize?
    b. Did you complete the FAFSA?
        i. How did you become aware of the need to complete the FAFSA?
        ii. Were you aware of the benefits of completing this application?
    c. Are you incurring debt to be in school?
        i. How much student loan debt do you anticipate having when you complete your academic goal?

4. Tell me about what it's like to attend class.
    a. Is the coursework content what you expected?
    b. Is the coursework demand what you expected?
    c. Is the coursework relevant, useful, or interesting to you?
    d. Do you feel you were academically prepared for your courses? If yes, what prepared you? If no, what did you struggle with?
    e. How do you feel about your interactions and connections with your classmates?
    f. How do you feel about your interactions and connections with your professors?

5. Tell me about your experiences on campus or with the institution.
    a. Have you joined or gotten involved in any student groups or campus activities? If so, which ones? If not, why not?
    b. Are you a part of any study groups?
    c. Are there any activities outside of class that have helped you connect to other students, staff, or faculty members? If so, which activities?
    d. Have you sought out any of the services and resources available to students at your institution?
        i. If so, what have you utilized?
        ii. If so, how were you made aware of the services/resources?
        iii. If so, what has been your experience with staff in those service or resource areas?
        iv. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, how much did each service or resource you utilized contribute to you successfully continuing as a student?

6. Did you face any challenges that made you consider dropping out?
    a. If so, tell me about those challenges and how you moved through them and why you stayed.
    b. If not, why do you think that might be?

7. What does it look like to you to be a successful student?
    a. What is happening, and how are you feeling when you are being successful?
    b. What are the main things you think have made you a successful student this far?
        i. Were those things you already knew before becoming a student? Things you learned while being a student? Things provided to you along the way?

       ii.   Have others contributed to your success? If so, who are those people, and how did they contribute?

    c.   How will you know that you have successfully accomplished your academic goal?

8. Is there anything you wish you would have known earlier that you feel would have impacted your college experience differently?

9. Is there anything you wish you had access to as a student that you feel would enhance your community college experience and would contribute to your success?

10. How do you think completing your community college experience or academic goal will impact you personally and professionally?

Say: Thank you so much again for sharing time with me today. Next, I will be reviewing and analyzing all of the information I receive from the interviews and pulling common themes from what all students I talk with share. Is it ok if I reach out to you if I have any additional questions or need clarification about anything? Also, once I transcribe the interviews, I will be sending you a copy of the transcript so you can review it to make sure I captured everything you shared accurately. If you have any questions that come up or additional things you think of that you would like to share, please feel free to reach out to me.

Appendix G: Consent to Participate in the Study: Phase One—Demographic Questionnaire

Title: Part-Time Enrolled Community College Students: A Case Study Examining the Experiences of the Invisible Majority
Conducted By: Janelle Green   **E-mail:** xxxxx@acu.edu
Organization: Abilene Christian University   **Telephone:** xxx-xxx-xxxx

Invitation to participate: You are invited to participate in a research study on the experiences part-time enrolled students have at Sigma Community College. The following information should help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop your participation at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Purpose of this study: The study's purpose is to learn about the experiences, challenges, and factors that lead to success for part-time enrolled community college students.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following: This study includes two active phases of participant involvement. The first phase is to complete a questionnaire that gathers basic demographic information and your perspective about challenges you have experienced and factors that have contributed to your success as a student.

Based on the demographic questionnaire, if you meet the criteria for the study and express interest in sharing more about your experience, you may be invited to participate in the study's second phase. This would involve meeting with me for two to three interviews, which would be conducted either through virtual technology or over the phone.

Total estimated time to participate in the first phase of the study:
- 20 minutes.

Risks of participating in the first phase of the study:
- Foreseeable risks of completing the questionnaire are minimal. The primary risk with this study is a breach of confidentiality. However, I have taken steps to minimize this risk. Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name to protect your identity.

Benefits of participating in the first phase of the study:
- You may not experience any direct personal benefits from participating in this study, but your participation in this research is likely to help in understanding ways to better serve and support part-time enrolled community college students in the future.

Compensation:
- There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality and privacy protections:

- All information collected for the purpose of this research study will be stored securely on my external hard drive, and efforts will be made to protect the privacy of study participants by using pseudonyms.
- Any individually identifiable data from student educational records will also be maintained on a password-protected Excel spreadsheet.
- Finally, confidential information will be protected to the extent permitted by law and not shared outside the research team.

Contacts and questions:

If you have any questions about the study, please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation, call the researcher conducting the study. I can be contacted by calling or texting xxx-xxx-xxxx or by emailing xxxxx@acu.edu. If you are unable to reach the lead researcher or wish to speak to someone other than the lead researcher, you may contact Dr. Jerry Ausburn, my faculty advisor, at xxxxx@acu.edu. If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at:

(xxx) xxx-xxxx
xxxxx@acu.edu
320 Hardin Administration Bldg., ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in phase one: demographic questionnaire of this study. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____   Date: _____

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix H: Informed Consent Form

This informed consent form is for current or former part-time enrolled students at Sigma Community College who are invited to participate in the research titled "Part-Time Enrolled Community College Students: A Case Study Examining the Experiences of the Invisible Majority."

Investigator: Janelle M. Green, doctoral candidate   ***Organization***: Abilene Christian University

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:
- Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you, including the risks and benefits to you as a potential participant).
- Signature of Consent (for signatures if you choose to participate).

Part I: Information Sheet

INTRODUCTION

My name is Janelle Green, and I am conducting research for my doctoral degree at Abilene Christian University (ACU). I am studying the experiences that part-time enrolled students have while attending Sigma Community College. I am giving you information and inviting you to participate in this research. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate. Before you decide, please read this form carefully and ask me any questions that you may have about the study. You can ask about research activities and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as a family member or trusted friend.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop your participation at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION

Community colleges provide affordable access to higher education, leading to upward economic mobility and workforce preparation. However, degree and certificate completion rates are alarmingly low, particularly for part-time enrolled students. I want to learn more about the experiences, challenges, and factors that lead to success for part-time enrolled community college students. I hope that a better understanding of the experiences part-time enrolled students have can inform practices, programs, and policies that could have a meaningful impact on student success and completion. You are being invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as a part-time enrolled student at SCC can contribute to my understanding and insight into institutional practices, programs, and policies that impact your success as a student in positive or negative ways.

If selected for participation, you will be asked to:
- Complete a 10-question demographics questionnaire.
- Complete two to three one-hour interviews with me over the course of six months either through virtual technology or over the phone. We will schedule times that are convenient for you.
- Use a journal to write down any thoughts or questions about your participation in the study and any perspectives, beliefs, or stories you think of that you may not have been able to share in an interview. This is optional and not mandatory and will be secure so that only you and I have access to the thoughts and questions you write.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. There is no compensation for participating in this study. You can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

You may not experience any direct personal benefits from participating in this study, but your participation in this research is likely to help in understanding ways to better serve and support part-time enrolled community college students in the future.

Foreseeable risks are minimal. The primary risk with this study is breach of confidentiality. However, I have taken steps to minimize this risk. See the next section on privacy and confidentiality for specific information on how a breach of confidentiality risk is being minimized. Secondary risk includes your potential discomfort in sharing personal experiences. While it can be empowering and therapeutic to share personal experiences, you do not have to answer any question or share any experience that you are not comfortable talking about. Additionally, you will be given the opportunity to review your remarks throughout the study. You can ask to modify or remove portions of your remarks if you do not agree with my notes or if I did not understand you correctly.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Your records may be viewed by members of the Abilene Christian University (ACU) Institutional Review Board and members of the Sigma Community College (SCC) Institutional Research Review Committee, but the confidentiality of your records will be protected to the extent permitted by law.

The data resulting from your participation may be used in publications or presentations, but your identity will not be disclosed. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name in any written material.

WHO TO CONTACT

If you have questions about the research study, the lead researcher is Janelle Green, a doctoral candidate. I can be contacted by calling or texting xxx-xxx-xxxx or by emailing xxxxx@acu.edu. If you are unable to reach the lead researcher or wish to speak to someone other than the lead researcher, you may contact Dr. Jerry Ausburn, my faculty advisor, at xxxxx@acu.edu. If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at:

(xxx) xxx-xxxx
xxxxx@acu.edu
320 Hardin Administration Bldg., ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

Part II: Signature of Consent

I have been invited to participate in research about the experiences of part-time enrolled community college students. I have read all of the information provided to me about the study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my participation in the research, and all questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to be a participant in this study, do not waive any legal rights by signing this form, and understand that I will receive a copy of this signed consent form.

_____   _____   _____

Printed Name of Participant   Signature of Participant   Date (Month/Day/Year)

I confirm that the participant was given information about the study and provided an opportunity to ask questions. I affirm that all questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and they voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Additionally, a copy of this signed consent form has been provided to the participant.

_____   _____   _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent   Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date (Month/Day/Year)

Appendix I: Part-Time Student Life Cycle

Life Cycle of Experiences for Part-time Enrolled Community College Students:

- Thoughts of attending college
- Deciding on SCC
- Application process
- Enrollment process
- Orientation or AOS session
- Meeting with advisor, selecting AOS, building schedule
- Registration for first semester
- Start of first semester—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 1 midterms
- Register for second semester
- End of first semester
- Semester 2 start—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 2 midterms
- Register for third semester
- End of second semester
- Semester 3 start—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 3 midterms
- Register for fourth semester
- End of third semester
- Semester 4 start—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 4 midterms
- Register for fifth semester
- End of fourth semester
- Semester 5 start—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 5 midterms
- Register for sixth semester
- End of fifth semester
- Semester 6 start—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 6 midterms
- Register for seventh semester
- End of sixth semester
- Semester 7 start—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 7 midterms
- Register for eighth semester
- End of seventh semester
- Semester 8 start—first two weeks (12th class day)
- Semester 8 midterms
- Apply for graduation or transfer
- Other event or experience
- Other event or experience

Appendix J: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

March 5, 2021

Janelle M. Green
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies
Abilene Christian University

Dear Janelle,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled
"Part-Time Enrolled Community College Students: A Case Study Examining The Experiences Of The Invisible Majority",

(IRB# 21-024   )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs