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## Perceptions of Community College Success Seminar Faculty Regarding First-Year Student Persistence

Ikpobari Dumletam Senewo  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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IkpoBari Dumletam Senewo

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2021

Abstract

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Student Persistence

by

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MEd, DePaul University, 2009

BA, DePaul University, 2004

NCE, Federal College of Education, 1987

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

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## Abstract

Persistence of first-year, full-time students toward graduation at U.S. community colleges poses concerns for administrators, faculty, and policymakers. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of faculty members teaching a college success seminar at an urban multicampus community college on what impedes or supports the persistence of these students through the first year. Tinto's student departure and Astin's student involvement theories served as the framework. Using a basic qualitative approach, interviews with 10 faculty members at a multicampus community college were analyzed using Creswell's 6-step data analysis strategy. Findings suggested that sense of belonging, early connection to a reliable advisor, motivation to persist, mentorship, faculty support, and academic structure supported the persistence of first-year, full-time students. Impeding students' persistence were problems with support systems, students' lack of involvement, inadequate resources and services, finances, family- and employment-related situations, mandatory first-year student orientation, college/campus environment, weak student-faculty relationships, and minimal presence of mentors. Furthermore, findings indicated that increasing support systems, maintaining students' involvement, provision and expansion of available resources and services, strengthening student-faculty relationship, advising students on employment-related matters, and the use of former students and infographics in class improved these students' persistence. Application of the findings may support positive social change by engendering a change in students' attitudes, motivating them to be more engaging in their education and enabling them to reap the benefits of their investments in education.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to my father, *Mene-Senewo*, Festus Deesor Neekpa and my mother, *Kawator* Nukpugi Gbara. Their passionate *parenting* shaped my life into what it is today. Although departed, may this moment stay as an indelible reminder of their personal and educational investments. And may the glory herefrom remain their portion. Papa and Mama, rest in perfect peace. Amen!

I equally dedicate this study to all teachers. In their dedication, teachers inconvenience themselves to produce students capable of promoting and furthering positive social change in societies worldwide. Although not always recognized, teachers are great heroes and heroines. May they reap their rewards here on earth and in heaven. Amen!

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

American community colleges are 2-year higher education institutions that operate using an open-access model (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2014). The open-access model allows college entry for anyone regardless of their level of ability (Scherer & Anson, 2014). Additionally, community college tuition rates are low and offer several useful programs and services to full-time and part-time students with various educational and cultural backgrounds and experiences including those seeking career training (AACC, 2014).

Because community colleges, like the Mega City Community College (MCCC; pseudonym), play important roles in the U.S. higher education system (Dougherty et al., 2017; Edgecombe, 2019; Schneider, 2013; Schneider & Lu, 2011), policymakers, administrators, and educators at community colleges are concerned with low persistence, retention, and completion rates and struggle with how to ensure that first-year, full-time students persist through the first year of college. Like other community colleges in the United States, MCCC provides educational opportunities to all students to enable them to achieve their goals and those of their communities. However, MCCC continues to struggle with first-year, full-time students' persistence through the first year of college, which might serve as a necessary step to persistence to graduation. In this study, I addressed the first year because of the heavy attrition during that phase of students' matriculation. I explored the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar within the MCCC who worked or interacted with first-year students on

issues of persistence to successful college completion with focus on their perceptions regarding what promotes and what impedes the persistence of the students they serve.

In this chapter I discuss the context and background of my study, the research problem, and its purpose. I list the research questions (RQs) that guided my study and discuss the basis for the conceptual framework. I also identify and discuss the nature of the research, key definitions, assumptions, scope, and limitations. Finally, I present the significance of the study and potential contributions to the field of student persistence. The social change implications of this study include the building of a cohesive college-community relationship favorable to creating a conducive campus/learning environment; causing a change in students' attitudes, motivations, and engagement in their education; and engendering an improvement in their careers and social statuses.

### **Background**

American community colleges are rapidly growing, 2-year educational institutions (AACC, 2016, 2017). Given their focus on providing open-access educational opportunities to a diverse array of students (AACC, 2017; Paulson, 2012), community colleges represent an important element in the American higher education system (Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013). Designed to serve a diverse student population (Crisp & Mina, 2012) and award associate degrees in arts and sciences, community colleges serve more than 40% of all U.S. college students (AACC, 2016; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The services offered by community colleges have made them an important part of higher education in America in addition to helping students obtain better careers (Schneider, 2013).

Despite the benefits of community college, there has been a gradual but consistent decline in the persistence of full-time, first-year students starting in 2009. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) indicated that the first-year student persistence rate at 2-year public institutions (including community colleges) rose 0.2% in the fall of 2014 over the previous year (NSCRC, 2015). For the same period, however, the full-time, first-year student persistence rate dropped by 0.7% (NSCRC, 2015). Although a 0.7% drop in the full-time first-year student persistence rate in 2014 might seem insignificant, this percentage indicates a trend that raises concerns for community college educators, administrators, and policymakers.

Though studies have shed light on broad issues of student persistence, the literature has not illuminated what the situation looked like at a more microcosmic level—that is, perceptions of faculty members who worked directly with first-year students at urban community colleges such as MCCC. Recent findings from the NSCRC (2017b) showed that 50% of students who enrolled full-time likely completed college against 23% of students who enrolled part-time. The Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) added that 38% of first term full-time student enrollees as against 21% of their part-time peers likely graduated with an associate degree or certificate (CCCSE, 2017). This suggests why community colleges' initiatives are focused on encouraging full-time attendance through college (CCCSE, 2017). This is also why my study was concerned with the persistence of first-time full-time students rather than the persistence of their part-time peers.



## **Problem Statement**

Student persistence to completion of degrees at community colleges and universities continues to attract researchers' attention (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Jones, 2014; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012; Ylisela, 2012). Studies have focused on student persistence at both the university and community college levels (Asby, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012). To clarify factors that affected students' persistence, researchers have focused on areas such as commitment to institutions of choice (Wardley et al., 2013), institutional fit (Bowman & Denson, 2014), finance (McKinney & Novak, 2013; Tinto, 2012), college environment (Johnson et al., 2014), family, and programs (Barefoot et al., 2012; Cabrera et al., 2013; Cuseo, 2010; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013). The literature has also shown perspectives of faculty members that evolved from other studies (Astin, 2012; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Cuseo, 2012; DeBate, 2010; Hoffman, 2014; Patrick et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012); for example, there have been studies on the faculty–student relationship, retention, or support systems with programs. Nevertheless, I found a lack of research regarding impediments and support to persistence at urban community colleges such as MCCC that explored the perceptions of faculty members teaching the college success seminar. These faculty members interact with first-year college students through their first year in college.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year, full-time U.S. community college students during and through their first year in college from faculty members' perspective. This period was important because it

was believed that if students could persist through the first year, their chances of completing college may improve considerably (Levitz & Noel, 1990, p. 65). To achieve this goal, I explored and analyzed the perceptions of 10 faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar at MCCC. I analyzed the data obtained from the interviews seeking patterns/themes that illuminated what impeded or supported first-year students' persistence at MCCC. By exploring these faculty perspectives, I sought to add a missing dimension to the literature by clarifying impediments and supports to the persistence at this set of urban community colleges and drawing out insights on strategies and practices for addressing first-year students' persistence.

### **Research Questions**

The two RQs that guided this study were as follows:

RQ1: What do faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar who work with the first-year, full-time students at MCCC perceive as impediments and supports to the persistence of MCCC students through the first year?

RQ2: What suggestions do these faculty members have for overcoming impediments and improving the support of first-year students' persistence at MCCC?

### **Conceptual Framework**

My study was designed to explore what impedes and supports the persistence of full-time students through the first year at community colleges like MCCC. Thus, Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of student departure and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement comprised the conceptual framework for this study, because each spoke directly to first-year, full-time student persistence. Tinto's theory of student departure

held that factors such as difficulty adjusting to a new environment, feelings of isolation, the inability to integrate new information and knowledge with previous knowledge, and financial stress might be responsible for attrition. Tinto pointed out that students' first year of study is crucial for their academic and social integration into higher education institutions' environments. Astin's involvement theory proposed that students must be involved in their college environment for growth and learning to transpire. Astin argued that a student's personal development and learning investment are in direct proportion to the quality and quantity of engagement in their environment. The more the students invest in college activities, the more they gain in development and learning (Astin, 1984). Both theories emphasized the criticality of students' engagement and integration (academic and social) into the college environment. Both theories also stressed that involvement and integration were important to students' development and informed their decisions to persist in college through the first year to graduation (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993).

Further, both Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1984) theories related the students' decision-making process to persistence in college. For instance, students might decide to either persist in or depart college because of how they felt about whether they were engaged and integrated (academically and socially) into the college environment (Tinto, 2012) and how challenging and supportive the college environment was, especially in meeting their needs. The interconnectedness among engagement, integration, and the college environment might, therefore, serve as a driver for the students' decision to either leave or remain in college through the first year to graduation. Key elements of the

framework were integration (academic and social), engagement, college environment, and student persistence. The connections among these key elements of this framework are fully explained in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

For my study, I used a basic qualitative design. A basic qualitative study is interdisciplinary, widely employed in applied fields of practice, and frequently used to conduct qualitative studies in education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative design allows the researcher to investigate how people interpreted their experiences, constructed their worlds, made meanings of their created worlds, and made sense of their lives within these worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I conducted a basic qualitative interview research study, employing face-to-face interviews to collect data. Interviews are a fundamental mode of inquiry in qualitative research (Seidman, 2013), which generate information that address the RQs (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). The purpose of interviewing was to understand the experiences of people and the meanings they attached to, made of, or extracted from such experiences (Seidman, 2013). I interviewed faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar to gain their perspectives on impediments or supports to first-year students' persistence through their first year at MCCC. I also explored their reflections about what could improve supports for first-year persistence at MCCC.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Attrition:* Departure from or failure of a student to reenroll in a college or university before a successful degree or credential completion (Berger et al., 2012; Johnson, 2012).

*College success seminar faculty:* Faculty member whose role is to help create an effective learning environment through helping first-year students fulfill their maximum potential in mastering course content while employing a variety of summative and formative assessments in assessing these students' learning outcomes (Upcraft et al., 2005).

*College success seminar:* Introduces students to academic skills that support their success in and after college by assisting them gain expertise in critical thinking, reading and writing as well as study skills, time management, stress management, and the use of technology for communication and research (Zeidenberg et al., 2007).

*Full-time student:* A student who takes 12 or 15 credit hours per term (fall and spring) in every term they enroll (CCCSE, 2017).

*Integration:* An intentional process of creating a community among students through the encouragement of academic and social engagements by interacting with each other in an ongoing fashion (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Young, 2014).

*Motivation:* "Concerns the underlying attitudes and goals that give rise to action...it concerns the why of action" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54). Motivation is either intrinsic or extrinsic (D'Lima et al., 2014; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Part-time student:* A student who enrolls in 6 to 8 credit hours per term (CCCSE, 2017).

*Perception:* Awareness, comprehension, or an understanding of something; the understanding or knowledge obtained by perceiving. The formation of a specific idea, concept, or impression (Williams, 2014).

*Persistence:* The desire and actions of a student to stay in higher education from the beginning of the school year through degree completion (Berger et al., 2012; NSCRC, 2016, 2017a). In contrast, first-year persistence is the continued enrollment at any higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student's first and second year (NSCRC, 2017b).

*Retention:* The ability of an institution to maintain student from admission through graduation (Berger et al., 2012; NSCRC, 2016).

*Self-efficacy:* A person's belief in their capability to complete set task successfully (Baier et al., 2016; Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; Tinto, 2017b).

*Student's engagement:* A student's academic commitment and application demonstrated by the time and energy they devote to activities that are educationally purposeful (Astin, 1984; Crosling et al., 2009; Horstmanshoff & Zimitat, 2007).

### **Assumptions**

I carried several assumptions into my study. First, the focus of my study was on first-year, full-time students. I assumed that making it through the first year in college indicated a favorable progress toward graduation. Second, I assumed that the theoretical framework used in this study would provide a viable the lens for the work. Third, I thought that there were similarities/differences between full- and part-time students, especially in their experiences, needs, circumstances, and financial investments. Fourth,

the individuals I interviewed were expected to be knowledgeable about the dynamics of student persistence at MCCC. I also supposed the individuals who volunteered to be interviewed would avail themselves of this opportunity to speak unhindered and substantively to the issues of first-year, full-time student persistence at MCCC. Moreover, I assumed that the findings from this study might help in pointing the way regarding policies and strategies to assist MCCC and other community colleges in improving first-year student persistence. In addition, I believed the results of my study might raise new questions and arguments about first-year student persistence and, as such, produce novel areas in the field of persistence for further research.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In this study, I explored the perceptions of community college faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar regarding what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC. This group of faculty members work or interact with first-year students and are knowledgeable about first-year student persistence at MCCC. I selected an initial group of 10 volunteers from among a large pool of faculty who taught sections of this seminar from all the MCCC campuses for this study.

There were several boundaries for this study. First, the field of student persistence and retention is broad; therefore, this study focused on what impeded and supported the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC. Second, only faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar at MCCC qualified for participation in this study. Third, this study focused only on what these faculty members perceive as impeding or

supporting first-year student persistence as well as what strategies might improve first-year student persistence at MCCC.

Finally, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied in other contexts or generalized to other situations (Ang et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Transferability applied to my study on two grounds. First, my study was qualitative and was undertaken in an urban community college setting. Second, the focal point of this study was on first-year student persistence at an urban community college. As with all qualitative research results, I will not claim that my results could be generalized to other settings. My intention was to understand, in-depth, what the faculty I interviewed perceived. Nevertheless, this study could attract the attention of researchers, educators, and policymakers at similarly situated institutions as well as others interested in issues related to first-year student persistence.

### **Limitations**

This study had the following limitations. First, this study had only two data collection sources. The primary source was my interviews, and the secondary source was my log of descriptions, thoughts, and notes that I kept throughout the interview process. The participants' responses reflected their experiences and maybe biases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013) at MCCC. Though I had my own observations in my role as an instructor at MCCC, in which case, I was careful about my own perceptions. I was also responsible for interpreting the outcomes of my study, and my perspectives might have been limited as the sole interpreter. Second, I interviewed only 10 faculty members



teaching the College Success Seminar across several campuses and areas of responsibility at MCCC. As such, the limited sample size coupled with the attributes of the particular campuses and the specific areas of responsibility of this group of faculty members might have affected their perspectives and limited the vantage points of my study. In addition, though my findings might interest others concerned with persistence of first-year students at urban community colleges and in other higher education settings, my findings might speak directly only to the faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar I interviewed and to the specific context in which they work.

### **Significance of the Study**

Persistence and retention of first-year, full-time students at community colleges such as MCCC are of concern to community college educators, administrators, and policymakers (Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013). Findings from my study can be useful to community colleges, such as MCCC, that are struggling with first-year student persistence. The goal of my study was to shed light on the challenges facing MCCC and similarly situated community colleges in the United States regarding persistence of first-year students.

Findings from my study might also be valuable to MCCC and other community colleges in the areas of policy and practice especially as policymakers and administrators assess and work to improve their current persistence strategies and practitioners seek to implement useful practices. As such, community college educators, administrators, and policymakers might find the perspectives of this group of faculty members useful as they plan strategies and craft policies to promote the persistence of first-year students at

MCCC and other U.S. community colleges. These findings might also encourage the creation of new strategies to eliminate or help alleviate circumstances that inhibit first-year, full-time students from remaining in college through the first year. The findings might help with the implementation of policies that will enhance the persistence of this group of students. More importantly, findings and recommendations from my study might result in the inclusion and engagement of faculty members teaching the college success seminar in making plans, developing strategies, and formulating and implementing constructive policy decisions for first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC and other similarly situated community colleges in the United States.

Further, there are several implications of my study for social change. The study might prompt the crafting of new policies that will institute a community college local community leadership partnership forum. This forum would serve as a think tank and foster an exchange of ideas among community college and local community leaderships on how to engender the persistence of first-year students at community colleges. It would also aim at boosting stronger ties between community college and high school leadership to adequately prepare prospective students for an onward transition to college. A collective and cohesive leadership front adopted by both the college and the local community is not only advantageous to building an accommodating campus environment but also to crafting and implementing strategies to address impediments to students' persistence and retention.

My study might also inform the development of new, or the expansion of existing student-centered programs and support systems aimed at enticing students to commit

themselves to persist in college through the first year to graduation. These programs and support systems might also help students understand the importance of not losing the benefits of the money they and their parents invested in their education and getting a college credential (CCCSE, 2017). Understanding the consequences associated with losing the benefits on their educational investments because they chose not to remain in college might lead to a change in students' attitudes toward persisting in college and motivate them to be more proactive and engaging academically and socially.

### **Summary**

In this study, I explored what impeded or supported the persistence of first-year students to completion at MCCC. Previous studies focused on related aspects of student persistence in U.S. community colleges. Less well documented is research that focused on investigating the impediments to the persistence of first-year community college students from the perspectives of faculty members teaching the college success seminar who worked and interacted with this group of students. My study was designed to explore this gap in the literature.

The findings of my study can contribute to the field of student persistence and retention by shedding light on the challenges facing MCCC and similarly situated community college students in the areas of persistence to graduation. I intend for my study to be useful to practitioners, policymakers, and administrators at MCCC and possibly at other urban community colleges as they assess and work to improve their current persistence strategies. In the following chapter, I review the literature that provided the lenses for the analysis of my data.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Studies have shown that first-year students at community colleges encounter difficulties in persisting from the beginning of the year through degree completion (NSCRC, 2015). Based on national statistics for 2-year colleges, less than 25% of first-time first-year students persist in completing their associate degree programs (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). MCCC is a 2-year, multicampus community college in an urban setting situated in the Midwest United States. Despite its reform programs aimed at students' persistence and successful completion of college, MCCC has continued to struggle with the problem of first-year students' persistence (Jones, 2014; Ylisela, 2012). Persistence rate of first-time full-time students for fall 2013 at 2-year public, not-for-profit community colleges like MCCC was 66.7%, down by 2.3% (NSCRC, 2015; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). This fall in persistence rate has raised concerns to community colleges' educators, leaderships, and policymakers. The purpose of my study was to examine what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC, which may help improve their current persistence strategies. The following literature review explored and highlighted themes on first-year students' persistence at 2-year educational institutions as a foundation for this study.

### **Synopsis of the Current Literature**

Researchers studying persistence and successful completion of college of first-year students at higher education institutions have observed that students' commitment to their institutions of choice (Wardley et al., 2013), students' institutional fit (Bowman &

Denson, 2014), and the degree to which students became stressed in their college environment (Johnson et al., 2014; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2014) affect persistence, retention, and successful completion of college. The fit between reality and students' preexisting attitudes toward the institution, on-campus academic engagement, and students' life experiences have contributed to students' commitment to persist in college to completion (Wardley et al., 2013). However, satisfaction with the social and academic environments and peer relationship may have a more direct impact on a student's intent to persist in college (Bowman & Denson, 2014).

The complexities involved in students' transition to college and the perceptions of involving students can impact their persistence through the first year of college. The systems colleges provide to support this transition can affect first-year students' persistence in college. It is important for colleges to have support systems in place for first-year students because these students need self-discipline and organizational skills to enable them to persist and successfully complete college (Budgen et al., 2014). There is a need for higher education institutions to have FYE programs (e.g., the summer bridge program), which can provide knowledge of support systems at the institutions, facilitate social integration, encourage networking among students, and enhance peer-peer and student-faculty relationships (Cabrera et al., 2013). Early alert and intervention strategies play significant roles in providing support for first-year students' persistence and academic success (Asby, 2015; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

Tailored institution-developed programs might affect students' persistence in college (Barefoot et al., 2012). Although there has been a correlation between intensive,

comprehensive, and mandatory programs and the improvement of persistence and retention (Fontaine, 2014), the effectiveness of programs meant to enhance first-year college students' cognitive abilities and persistence depends on ensuring that students are well connected to social and academic support systems within the educational institution (Cabrera et al., 2013). Faculty members working and interacting with first-year college students have perceived that part of such support systems derived from academic advising (DeBate, 2010) and the taking of the first-year college success seminar course (Cuseo, 2012). Community college faculty have generally agreed on the effectiveness of academic advising on students' persistence and the positive relationship their perceived role as academic advisors has created between them and their students (DeBate, 2010). In addition, professionals (including faculty) working with first-year experience (FYE) have suggested that first-semester freshman college success seminar is positively linked with students' academic aptitude, persistence, and college completion (Cuseo, 2012).

The impact of finance on first-year students is also a key factor affecting persistence (Long, 2013; McKinney & Novak, 2013; Tinto, 2012a). For instance, the greater the amounts of financial aid students (especially those from low-income backgrounds) receive, the higher the rate at which they might remain in and successfully complete college (Tinto, 2012a). Thus, filing for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has been related to higher odds of first-year of continuing persistence among all students (McKinney & Novak, 2013). Additionally, reduced funding from government (local, state, and federal) affects tuition, with tuition increases at community colleges putting more financial burdens on students and their families and leading to

being no longer able to support their children through college; therefore, students are constrained to decide against staying in college to completion (Long, 2013; Shapiro et al., 2015).

### **Preview of Major Sections of the Chapter**

My study explored what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year students at U.S. community colleges such as MCCC. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the purpose of this study. The next section explains the strategies used in my article search and selection. Then I discuss the theories from which I drew my conceptual framework—Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of student departure and Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement. It further amplifies the rationale for the choice of these theories. Following the definition of key terms inherent in the conceptual framework, I provide an exhaustive review of the current literature on impediments to first-year student persistence in 2-year community colleges such as MCCC. Chapter 2 ends with a summary of the review of the literature and identified the gap in the literature and sets the groundwork for Chapter 3.

### **Literature Search Strategies**

I conducted searches using published books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and electronic databases to source for materials for this literature review. Such databases included Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Elite, Google Scholar, Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), and ERIC. Others were Sage Premier, Education Research Complete, Education Research Starters, ProQuest Central, and other peer-reviewed journals. I used key terms to conduct my search are as follows: *student’s commitment to the institution of choice, student institution-fit, stress, college*

*environment, programs, college support systems, student transition to college, student perception of college, faculty perceptions, and finance.* Other keywords I used to source for materials for my literature review were *campus culture, student demographics, and institution types.* To facilitate the search process, I used terms and combination of terms like *retention, persistence, dropout rates, community/city college, college success, and college completion* in Google Scholar, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest, Sage, ERIC, Education Research Complete, Education Research Starters. I collected data on stress, finance, and other college-related situations from the HERI database.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For my conceptual framework, I used two theoretical models: Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of student departure and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. Both Tinto and Astin's theories related to first-year student persistence through the first year at community colleges like MCCC, which was the focus of my study. Tinto and Astin's theories have, over the years, substantially guided research into students' persistence, retention, college completion at community colleges (Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013). Tinto's work has had significant influence on research on community colleges, especially in area of retention to college completion (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Though these two traditional theoretical models were not specifically developed for 2-year educational institutions, including community colleges (Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013), Tinto's theory (1975, 1993) of student departure and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement provide a broad theoretical foundation for studies in the field of persistence, retention, and college completion (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Gill, 2016a;



Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013). These theories, therefore, provided the conceptual lens with which to explore what impedes and supports first-year students' persistence through their first year at U.S. community colleges, such as MCCC.

### **Tinto's Student Departure Theory**

Tinto's (1993) interactionalist theory of student departure stated that several factors were responsible for student attrition. Some of these factors include difficulty adjusting to a new environment, feeling of isolation, and inability to integrate new information and knowledge with previous knowledge, and financial stress. The first year of college is crucial for academic and social integration into the higher education institutions' systems (Tinto, 1993). Tinto theorized that students who academically and socially integrated into their college campus community increased their commitment to the college and were potentially liable remain in college to graduation (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Gill, 2016a, 2016b; Tinto, 1975).

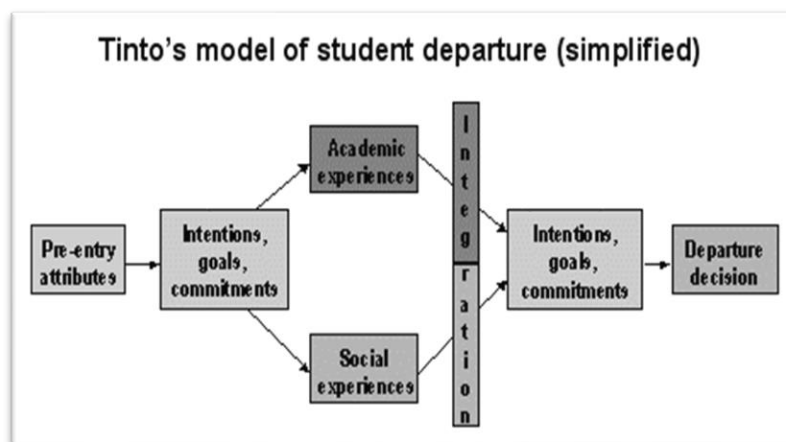
Integration might come about through interactions and immersion of students in many dynamics of college life (Metz, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993). These interactions occur between students and the academic and social systems of their college and might either be formal or informal experiences students have in college (Harvey & Drew, 2006; Seidman, 2012). Academic integration deals with students' experiences on college campuses that encourage and support cognitive and academic developments and motivate students to pursue their learning in a meaningful way. Structured and unstructured academic integration experiences can influence students' commitment to their educational aspirations and educational institutions (Tinto, 1993). Social inclusion or

integration comprises of experiences that assist students connect to their college environments, aid in their psychological development, and contribute to their overall satisfaction of the college of choice (Tinto, 1993). Formal and informal social integration experiences not only reinforce these students' devotion to their educational institutions but also fuel their academic performance hence facilitating the achievement of students' educational goals (Tinto, 1993). The availability and level of academic and social integrations might lead students to reassess their aspirations and goals (Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 1993). Thus, integration is a driving force behind students' decision-making to either persist to completion or drop out of college (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Harvey & Drew, 2006; Metz, 2002).

See Figure 1 for a diagram of Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure. Based on the figure, students enter college with attributes (intentions, goals, and commitments). These attributes split into academic and social experiences, underscore the students' integration process, and inform the decision of students to either persist in or depart from college (Garza, 2013; Yorke, 2013).

**Figure 1**

*Tinto's 1975/1993 Theory of Student Departure*



From “M. Yorke, 2013, Student retention in open and distance learning. In Student involvement: Interactionalist theory of student departure.” (n.d.). *Weebly.com*, para. 6.

Tinto's theory covers two important bearings relevant to students' persistence. First, it confirms the need for educational institutions to provide students with academic and social integration environments, platforms, and experiences that are necessary to help them decide to persist in college to successful completion. Second, and maybe most importantly, it shifts the decision-making process of either withdrawing or continuing in college to students. In which case, students are responsible for their decisions. However, such decisions hinge on the institution's ability, action, or inaction regarding providing an integrative academic and social environment and experiences for students' learning (Harvey & Drew, 2006; Tinto, 1993). This was where an educational institution's provision of academic and social integration environments, platforms, and experiences is crucial.

Additionally, Tinto (2012) theorized that expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement were four conditions embedded in academic and social integration experiences critical to promoting students' persistence, retention, and graduation. Tinto's claim, therefore, was that the more the students are engaged in both academic and social integrative experiences that offer them positive experiences, the less plausible their decision to depart from college might be because "positive experiences reinforce commitment" (Harvey & Drew, 2006, p. 36). Experiences (positive or negative) are rooted in expectations; the support, assessment, and feedback students received from the college; and the level of involvement opportunities they were exposed to (Tinto, 1993, 2012). But if students' academic and social integrative experiences are negative, they might not commit themselves to persist in college. Rather, such experiences might reinforce students' decision to depart college without completion.

### **Astin's Student Involvement Theory**

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement supports the assertion of Tinto's (1993) student departure theory, which, in part, hinges on engagement, thereby laying a perfect groundwork for the examination of issues related to first-year student persistence in a community college setting. According to Astin (1993), students must be involved in their college environment for growth and learning to transpire. Astin defined involvement as the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy the student invests in the college experience. Astin further argued that a student's personal development and learning investment must be in direct proportion to their quality and quantity of

engagement in their environment; the more the student invests in college activities (curricular and extracurricular), the more they gain in development and learning.

College activities include the blending of curricular and extracurricular learning experiences. Examples include expending substantial time in studying, spending quality time on the campus, participating in organizations, games and sports, and interacting with faculty and other students (Astin, 1984). These activities enhance students' intellectual and scholarly development and imbued in them a renewed sense of appreciation in the values of life. The more students engage actively in various aspects of the college life, the better the college experience in their lives (Kuh et al., 1991), suggesting that that involvement is behavioral and places attention on the motivation and behavior of the students (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). The decision and action of students is not external, but student generated (Astin, 1993). Students' decisions to either get involved or not get involved in academic or social activities at their institutions are dependent on what they found as well as concluded were motivating and crucial to their interests and developments (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 1991).

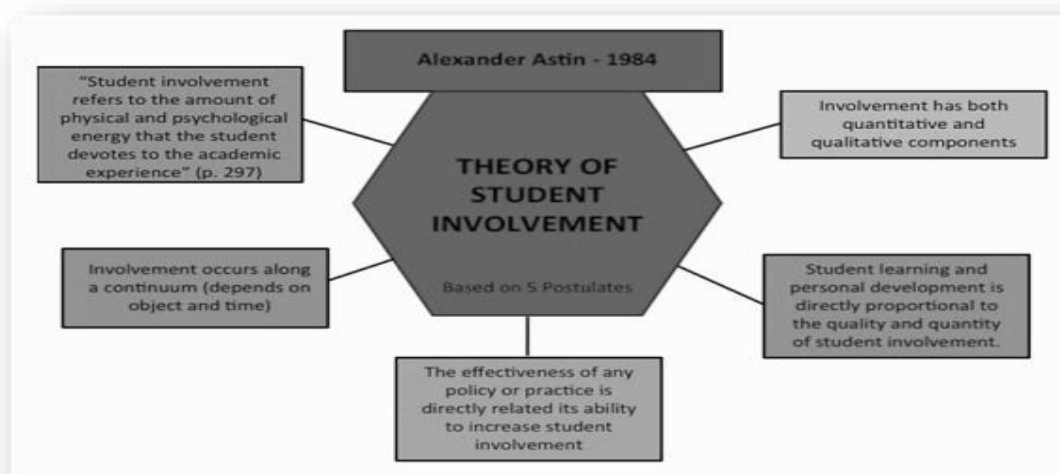
In summary, Astin's (1984) theory hinged on five basic postulates that may affect students' involvement decisions. Jones' (n.d.) illustration (see Figure 2) indicated Astin's underlying theoretical assumptions as follows:

1. Students invest their physical and psychological energy generally in various objects, which might include social and academic experiences.
2. Student involvement occurs along a continuum. Manifestations of students' participation in either time or object are distinct and different.

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The number of times students expend on tasks or experiences they are involved can be measured and assessed.
4. The proportionality of students' learning and personal development associated with educational programs to the quality and quantity of involvement of students in such programs.
5. The effectiveness of education policies and practices versus the direct relationship of the programs' capacity to increase students' involvement.

**Figure 2**

*Astin's 1984 Theory of Student Involvement*



From "Knowledge and understanding of student populations and student development," by W. J. Archer (n.d.), *Oregon State University College Student Services Administration*, Identity and Articulation Issues section.

### **Tinto's Departure Theory and Astin's Involvement Theory: Rationale for Choice**

In approaching this study, I considered two traditional theoretical frameworks associated with student persistence, retention, and college completion—Tinto's (1975, 1993) student departure theory and Astin's (1984) student engagement theory. I settled for the two theories, especially given their pertinence to this study. Students might depart college for two reasons—integration or involvement (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). When students were not academically and socially integrated into the college environment (an environment that provided students with the needed experiences to persist to successful completion of college), they were prone to disengage from college (Tinto, 1993). On the other hand, involvement (Astin, 1984) was crucial to the college experience.

According to Tinto (2012), engagement was “perhaps the most important condition for student success” (p. 7). Tinto's statement reflected, in summary, results from Astin's (1984) longitudinal study of college dropouts which indicated that involvement was one of the strongest factors that contributed to students' persistence. The results also concluded that the same factors that led to students dropping out of college inferred their lack of involvement. These theories, therefore, provided the lenses through which I explored first-year students' persistence at MCCC. I drew together in my conceptual framework Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Astin's theory of student involvement.

I chose Tinto (1993) and Astin (1984) for this study not because they were considered traditional persistence and retention theorists, according to Crisp & Mina (2012). More than that, Astin and Tinto's theories underscored the conceptual relevancy

of my study. Their theories provided the lens through which to view and explore the totality of the issues (including support) surrounding students' persistence and successful completion of college (Seidman, 2012). Also, these theories provided the basis that spoke directly to and helped in answering the RQs I posed for my study.

Both Tinto and Astin's theories emphasized the criticality of students' academic and social integration into the fabric of higher education institutions' environments. They stressed that integration was critical to students' development and their decision to persist to graduation (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). Some experts in the field of retention and persistence have argued against the lopsidedness of these traditional theories especially as they apply to community college settings (Crisp & Mina, 2012). For example, Karp (2011) strongly argued that these traditional theories on persistence hardly fully address the issue of diversity of students at community colleges. Crisp and Mina (as cited in Seidman, 2012), for example, observed that these theories do not focus on the community college experiences or the community college context.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Astin and Tinto's theories provide the foundation for student persistence investigations. They equally frame students' persistence or withdrawal decisions in the context of their social and academic integration (Tinto 1993) and involvement in their institutions (Astin, 1984). My choice of Tinto and Astin's theories to build the conceptual framework for this study derived from noting the latitude both theories might provide in the investigation of what impeded or enhanced persistence of first-year college students at MCCC. Therefore, I drew on these two theories to explore emergent themes and issues surrounding first-year college student



persistence and support systems while seeking to clarify what faculty members working with the FYE at the MCCC perceived as barriers to or facilitators of the persistence of this group of students at community colleges like MCCC.

### **Theories, Previous Applications, and Similarity to Present Study**

Several researchers have used Tinto's (1993) student departure and Astin's (1984) student engagement (involvement) theories in their studies and applied them in ways that shared similarities with my study. For example, in his mixed study, Holliday (2014) used Tinto's departure and Astin's involvement theories to examine first-year experience (FYE) seminars and how contrasting models impacted the college transition and retention. Holliday's study focused on: (a). Student Success Seminar, an honors FYE program that specifically enrolled resilient, primarily first-generation students and, (b) Honors Colloquia, an FYE program designed to introduce honors students to specialized academic content areas (p.16). Holliday used these theories on student retention to establish connection between the contrasting models and their impact on the college transition and retention he was examining.

Holliday's (2014) research was similar to my study because Holliday used Astin and Tinto's theories as the theoretical frameworks to explore and understand the implications of the college transition on persistence and retention. Using the same theories as frameworks, my study sought to explore impediments and supports to first-year college students' persistence through their first year at MCCC. In addition, while Holliday used these theories as lenses through which he sought to understand the perception of honors students on FYE programs, my study sought to use the same

theories as lenses through which to explore the perception of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar and interacting with first-year students on what impeded or supported this group of students' persistence through their first year of college. As Holliday rightly observed in his study, much attention was given to first-year student experience for two reasons. First, because understanding the issues associated with persistence in and adjustment to college was crucial in the development of students' success programs and support services. Second, because it served as a buffer in stemming students from leaving college, hence boosting persistence and retention.

Nakajima et al. (2012) investigated factors that might influence the persistence of students at community colleges. For their investigation, these authors drew on Tinto's (1993) student departure and Astin's (1984) student engagement theories to explore the relationship between student persistence and several variables such as psychological, demographic, financial, social, and academic integration. Results of Nakajima et al.'s (2012) study highlighted several key points relevant to the subject of their investigation. For instance, the findings revealed that finance, age, and work hours affected student persistence at community colleges. They also showed that cumulative GPA influenced students' decision to either stay or drop out of college, hence affecting retention rates at community colleges.

Nakajima et al.'s (2012) research shared similarity with my study because: first, like these authors, I conducted my study at a community college and on the same central issue of student persistence. Second, Nakajima et al. used Tinto's (1993) student departure and Astin's (1984) student engagement theories as theoretical frameworks. My

study used these same theories as framework to explore the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar and working with first-year students on what impeded or engendered first-year students' persistence at MCCC.

### **Primary Writings by Key Theorists, Philosophers, Seminal Researchers**

First-year student persistence in higher education institutions' (including community colleges) poses serious concerns to government, educators, researchers, policymakers, and legislators (Gill, 2016a; Metz, 2002). Persistence of first-year students was the focus of my study. As earlier on explained, my study used Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1984) theories as framework to explore the perceptions of faculty members working with first-year students, on what impeded or supported first-year student's persistence at 2-year U.S. community colleges like MCCC.

Over the years, Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1984) theories have served as traditional foundations to studying student's persistence in higher education institutions. As a result, these theories have attracted criticisms for their scope of coverage (Crisp & Mina, 2012; Karp, 2011). For instance, some experts in the field of retention and persistence argued that these theories were lopsided in their application to community college settings (Crisp & Mina, 2012). Karp (2011) stated that these traditional theories on persistence did not fully address the issue of diversity of students at community colleges. Crisp and Mina (2012), observed the lack of focus of these theories on the community college experiences or the community college context.

These theories have also undergone several transformations (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). For example, Berger & Lyon (2005), Demetriou and Schmitz-

Sciborski (2011), and Tinto (2007) all noted the versatility of Tinto's seminal theory; pointing out that his theory has influenced innumerable studies in the field of persistence and retention. His theory has also expanded to include motivational variables such as goal commitment, expectancy, self-efficacy beliefs, motivations, academic conceptualizations, and optimism (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). As a researcher my current study was interested in further understanding the variables related to first-year, full-time student's persistence through the first year of college at MCCC. Therefore, the relevancy of Tinto's theory to my study cannot be overstated.

Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1984) theories have occasioned the formulation of several new models fashioned toward further understanding student persistence. For instance, according to Ishler and Upcraft (2005), Tinto and Astin's theories might have inspired other viable models on student persistence. Examples of such viable models include Bean and Metzner (1985), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Stage and Hossler (2000), and Tierney (1992). These fundamental theories, according to Ishler and Upcraft (2005), have further informed the conduct of current critical analyses on persistence and retention theories and research as exemplified in Braxton's (2000) works on student persistence and retention.

## **Review of Current Literature**

### **Programs and Persistence**

Programs community colleges offer can affect the persistence of students to college completion (Bandeem et al., 2016; Crisp, 2016; Gonzalez & Meling, 2018; Millea et al., 2018; Peña & Rhoads, 2018; Pruet & Absher, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2018;

Waiwaiole et al., 2016). There are about 1,400 community colleges in the United States enrolling approximately 7 million students annually (Gardner et al., 2016). The goals of these community colleges are: first, to help their students to complete college and earn their degrees and, second, to assist them become successful in their future career or studies (Gardner et al., 2016). Community colleges serve a diverse group of students (Mayo, 2013; Mertes & Hoover, 2014) and that accounts for the different programs they provide to accommodate this student diversity (Mayo, 2013; Peña & Rhoads, 2018). To accomplish their goals (Gardner et al., 2016) as well as cater for their diverse student population (Mayo, 2013), the programs community colleges provide are important. Both Mayo (2013) and Mertes and Hoover (2014) observed that community college students face social, academic, and intellectual challenges. Peña and Rhoads (2018) and Gonzalez and Meling (2018) stated that these challenges also apply to Latina/o and other students of color.

Mertes and Hoover (2014) added that community colleges are less homogenous in nature hence making their students operate in a very different learning environment. As such, Mayo (2013) advised that community colleges should design structured programs tailored toward helping students adapt as the first semester is critical in students' decision making especially since students tend to leave college between the first and second years (Mayo, 2013). Therefore, to ensure students' adaptability to college, effective programs for first-year students need to focus on different strategies and interventions that will improve learning, transfer, and facilitate persistence and retention (Mayo, 2013; Millea et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2018) to college completion.

Results of other studies (Gonzalez & Meling, 2018; Nitecki, 2011; Peña & Rhoads, 2018; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004) that examined the importance of programs to student persistence tied program effectiveness to both faculty-student interaction and the rigors of programs (Gonzalez & Meling, 2018; Peterson, 2016). For example, faculty-student interaction ranked high among the predictors of students' commitment and persistence in community colleges (Fong et al., 2017; Nitecki, 2011; Peterson, 2016; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004;). Findings from these studies revealed that programs that ensured the availability of faculty-student interactions enhanced student persistence in community colleges. According to Fong et al. (2017) and Nitecki (2011), faculty availability and faculty advisement were crucial to students' decision to remain in college to completion. These factors also accounted for high retention rate in urban community colleges. Both Nitecki (2011) and Peterson (2016) pointed out that the high retention rate experienced in community colleges was because of well-run programs that promoted one-on-one mentoring, emphasized professionalism, responsibility, and advising, and boosted peer-to-peer interactions.

Certain studies, however, linked student persistence to the rigorousness of programs run by community colleges (Bandeem et al., 2016; Caporrimo, 2007; Peterson, 2015; Thomas et al., 2017; Pruett & Absher, 2015). For example, Caporrimo (2007), in her research in both a four-year university and a community college, found that some students questioned and complained about the rigors of community colleges' programs. Caporrimo had to explain to students that her curricular at both institutions had the same content and rigor. Furthermore, she pointed out to her students that courses taken at both

the community college and university levels were not that different regarding intensity, expectations, and monitoring. These courses, Caporrimo argued, exhibited the same intensity and expectations at both institutions, especially regarding students' ability to monitor their learning. The intensity and expectations of the courses also affected how students acquired critical-thinking skills and how they were empowered to write excellently (Caporrimo, 2007; Gonzalez & Meling, 2018). Although these studies viewed the importance of programs to students' persistence from somewhat differing perspectives, their arguments and findings tend to favor the importance of programs to persistence.

The way colleges develop, fashion, and focus their programs can affect students' persistence in college (Barefoot et al., 2012; Crisp, 2016; Millea et al., 2018; Young & Keup, 2016). There seems to be a correlation between intensive, comprehensive, and mandatory programs and the improvement of persistence (Fontaine, 2014). Windham et al. (2014) also examined the retention of first-year, full-time community college students. Focusing on whether participation in a skill acquisition course affect persistence, their study explored to what extent the characteristics of these first-time, first-year students increase students' staying in college to completion with the ACT Compass test at community colleges (Windham et al., 2014). Employing a post facto quasi-experimental approach, the authors explored in-depth the predictive nature of taking a student's success course. Findings from their study showed that students who participated in the ACT Compass course remained in college throughout the year. On the other hand, students who did not participate in this program quickly dropped out of college. By

implication, community colleges with study skill programs had a higher retention rate of first-year, full-time students annually than those that did not have such programs.

Using quantitative cross-sectional techniques and employing several retention models, Mertes and Hoover's (2014) study attempted to replicate and build on previous studies that used statistical analysis to identify the potential of shifting trends in predicting students' retention at community colleges. Results from the Chi-square analysis showed that age, gender, programs of study, and CIS 100 grade ranked among the highest predictors of retention at community colleges. For example, while results indicated that retention rates were high for female students, students under the age of 18, and those that had a grade of at least a C in CIS 100, retention rates were low for the opposite categories.

To some extent, results from Mertes and Hoover's (2014) study were consistent with the findings of Luke et al. (2015) on intent to return to college and Windham et al.'s (2014) findings on grades and programs. The results are also consistent with Nakajima, et al. (2012) on age, gender, and grades, and Gonzalez and Meling (2018) on programs, GPAs, and fall-to-fall persistence. The implications of this study are twofold. First, it is incumbent on community colleges to spend considerable time on developing their intake/enrollment mechanisms, training staff on proper data collection process, and developing mechanisms for constant data reviews. Second, given the diverse nature of community colleges, there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to data analysis. Therefore, each institution should, according to Mertes and Hoover perform its own analysis of its student population to determine retention. Millea et al. (2018) concurred,



adding that the success of universities and colleges and their students are intertwined. As such, these institutions should design workable programs and incentives aimed at improving their students' persistence, retention, and graduation.

However, the effectiveness of programs meant to enhance first-year college students' cognitive abilities and persistence depend on ensuring that students are well-connected to social and academic support systems within their educational institution (Cabrera et al., 2013). Faculty members working with first-year college students believed that part of such support systems derived from academic advising (DeBate, 2010) and the taking of first-year college success seminar courses (Cuseo, 2012). DeBate (2010) pointed out that community college faculty agree on the effectiveness of academic advising on students' persistence and the positive relationship their perceived role as academic advisors have created between them (faculty) and their students. Cuseo (2012) stated that professionals (including faculty) working with the first-year experience (FYE) believed that first-semester college success seminar has a positive effect on students' academic aptitude, persistence and college completion.

### **Faculty-Student Relationship and Persistence**

There was equally a link between students' inclination to persist in college to successful completion or depart college and the faculty-student relationship (Astin, 2012; Dwyer, 2017; Hoffman, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pittendrigh et al., 2016; Ryan, 2013; Tovar, 2015). Zerquera et al. (2018) emphasized faculty is the primary point of contact for college students, hence the pivot of faculty-students' relationship. Zerquera et al. (2018) further stated that this relationship causes faculty to play important roles not

only in shaping the students' experiences (in and out of college) but also in engendering students' persistence, retention, and goal attainment. The sustenance of such a relationship develops through interactions (which could either be positive or negative) depending on the level of these interactions (Hoffman, 2014; Zerquera et al., 2018). Results from Hoffman's (2014) study suggested that positive or negative faculty-student interactions correlate with positive or negative students' outcomes. Therefore, there is a greater possibility that the relationship might inform the student's decision to either stay in college to successful completion or depart college. Results of other studies affirm Hoffman's conclusions, confirming the effectiveness of student-faculty relationship through positive interactions. For instance, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) believed that actual outcomes such as increased efforts in academic undertakings, greater student engagement, and a higher level of content acquisition offer better prospect of students' persistence and college completion.

Ryan's (2013) study also stressed the crucial role student-advisor relationship plays in shaping the attitudes and decisions of students to or not to persist in college to completion. Ryan's study examined how to improve retention and academic achievement for first-year students at a 2-year community college. She used a freshman seminar course (COL 105) to investigate students enrolled in this course. Ryan (2013) divided students into an experimental group (taught by a trained former student's advisor) and a control group (taught by a regular trained instructor without advising experience). Results of the study indicated that students in the experimental group performed well academically and were retained through the following semester at a higher rate than the

students in the control group. On the contrary, students in the control group did not perform well and were susceptible to dropping out of college.

The implication of Ryan's (2013) study again pointed to the need for community colleges to invest adequately in student-advisor relationship and mentorship (Docherty et al., 2018). The second implication is that community colleges' administrators should also invest in encouraging college advisors to teach first semester courses in their institutions (Ryan, 2013). It is believed that the better the student-advisor relationship, the stronger the students will commit to staying in college to successful completion. On the other advisors teaching first semester courses retains and strengthens bonds between students and advisors while at the same time providing anchorage to students to persist in college.

Viewed from the standpoint of involvement (Astin, 2012), Komorrajju et al. (2010) stressed that faculty-student collaboration on educational projects and informal discussions with faculty outside the classroom, for instance, might result in psychosocial growth and development, heightened motivation, and greater academic self-confidence. Hoffman (2014), Bowman et al. (2019), and Lau et al. (2018) added that students getting access to faculty engender intellectual development, setting of educational goals and attaining them, changes in students' attitudes, an orientation towards more scholarly careers, and sense of belonging. From all indications, Astin (2012), Hoffman (2014), Komorrajju et al. (2010), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) all emphasized the positive impact of faculty-student relationship on students as it relates to students' persistence in college to successful completion. As Hoffman (2014) aptly observed, there is a

correlation between this level of relationship and the decision of students to persist in college to completion.

### **Students' Commitment to Institutions of Choice, Institutional Fit and Persistence**

Researchers studying persistence and college completion of first-year students at the tertiary level observed that connectedness and commitment to the college of choice (Jorgenson et al., 2018; Wardley et al., 2013) and institution fit (Braxton & Francis, 2018; Bowman & Denson, 2014) affect students' persistence. According to Wardley et al. (2013) and Bowman and Denson (2014), students' commitment to their institutions of choice and students' institutional fit affect persistence, retention, and successful completion of college. Wardley et al. and Braxton and Francis (2018) indicated that the fit between reality and preexisting students' attitudes toward the institution, on-campus academic engagement, academic rigor, and students' life experiences contribute to students' commitment to persist in their college of choice. Bowman and Denson and Jorgenson et al. (2018) took a similar position as Wardley et al. but added that satisfaction with the social and academic environments, feeling connected to the college, and peer relationship have a more direct impact on a student's intent to persist in college.

In retrospect, Tinto (1975, 1993) had theorized that the experiences of students before and during college affected the extent to which they integrate into institution's academic and social environment. The ability or inability of students to integrate serves as a key predictor of students deciding to either stay in college to completion or drop out of college (Denson & Bowman, 2015). In which case, students' decision to persist or leave college might rest on how their colleges of choice marry students' previous

experiences with current college experiences. An interlock of these two experiences, which might affect students' decision to stay or depart college, derives from the ability of their institution of choice to provide a suitable (fit) environment for integration (academic and social) and engagement. Denson and Bowman (2015) conducted a quantitative study aimed at developing and validating an instrument to assess the correspondence between students and the characteristics of their chosen institutions. General results from their study supported Tinto's argument. Further, the results revealed a correlation between student institution-fit, academic adjustment, academic (dis)engagement, intended persistence, and retention (Denson & Bowman, 2015). These results, according to the Denson & Bowman suggested that the characteristics of institutions students choose can have a severe impact on their persistence or disengagement for such institutions.

Worth noting is the issue of congruence or incongruence in students' perceptions about their colleges' preferences (Denson & Bowman, 2015). As these authors argued, students' preferences vary by how congruent or incongruent their colleges' environments are. Expectedly, tertiary institution settings should fit into what students perceive as important or what they view as advancing their academic progress and decision to remain engaged in college (Denson & Bowman, 2015). For example, students might consider an institution "fit" on political grounds. That is, for instance, if the political environment of the college aligns with their preferences. Conversely, students might consider an institution "unfit" on academic grounds, that is, if the school environment is incongruent with students' expectations (Denson & Bowman, 2015; Braxton & Francis, 2018). Tinto (1975, 1993) as well as Bowman and Denson (2014), and Denson & Bowman (2015),

tend to agree that any of the above scenarios can affect students' decisions to either commit to, remain engaged with, or get disengaged from their college of choice.

### **Psychological, Demographic, and Other Variables and Persistence**

Several studies state that psychological and demographic variables can impact the engagement, hence the persistence of first-year students at community colleges (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2016; Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Fleming et al., 2017; Garvey et al., 2015; Luke et al., 2015; Nakajima et al., 2012; Pruett & Absher, 2015; Rattan et al., 2015; Rubin & Wright, 2017). Specifically, some of these studies submitted that variables such as racial composition of the college (Abu-Ghazaleh & Hoffman, 2015), leveraging mindset (Rattan et al., 2015), gender and sexual orientation (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Garvey et al., 2015; Luke et al. 2015), environmental conditions (Fong et al., 2017), and hostile campus climate (Pruett & Absher, 2015) can affect first-year students' persistence at community colleges.

Abu-Ghazaleh and Hoffman (2016), for instance, conducted a study on the interaction effects of racial composition and student racial identification. Using multivariate regression, the authors assessed the impact of race and racial demographics on students' satisfaction and engagement vis-à-vis persistence. One of the findings from their research showed, among others, that race and racial composition of a college campus have multiple effects on the way students engaged and interacted with that environment. Abu-Ghazaleh and Hoffman (2016) believed that a race-dominated environment can serve as an inhibiting trigger to students engagement, hence can occasion departure if students perceive campus as hostile (Pruett & Absher, 2015).

In their qualitative study on student persistence in community college, Nakajima et al. (2012) investigated factors that might influence the persistence of students at community colleges. For their investigation, Nakajima et al. (2012) used Tinto's (1993) student departure and Astin's (1984) student engagement theories to explore the relationship between student persistence and several variables such as psychological, demographic, financial, academic, and social integration.

Results of the authors' study highlighted several key points relevant to the subject of their investigation. For instance, the findings revealed that finance, age, and work hours affected student persistence at community colleges. They also showed that cumulative GPA influenced students' decision to either stay or drop out of college, hence affecting retention rates of community colleges. The findings of Nakajima et al.'s (2012) study have important implications for community college administrators. First, they may help administrators, faculty, and counselor improve the services they offer to their student. Second, the findings may also assist administrators, faculty, and counselors implement best practices capable of engendering college students' persistence and retention (Nakajima, et al., 2012; Roksa & Whitley, 2017). Overall, like Rubin and Wright (2017), Fong et al. (2017), and Fleming et al (2017), Nakajima et al.'s study suggests a strong tie between psychological, demographic, financial, social and academic integration variables and first-year student persistence. Fleming et al. added to Nakajima et al.'s and Rubin and Wright's observations by pointing out that a strong sense of membership and belonging can facilitate first-year students' social integration, hence informing their decision to persist in college.

### **Intent to Return to College and Persistence**

Like Nakajima et al. (2012), the study by Luke et al. (2015) sought to explore psychological factors affecting retention of students at community colleges. In contrast to the approach by Nakajima et al., Luke et al. used the quantitative methods for their investigation. They applied two survey instruments—the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale-Short Form and the Career Locus of Control Scale—to examine these psychological factors. Using Bean’s (2005) model of college student retention as conceptual lenses, Luke et al. focused on career development at community colleges; measuring four related factors—self-efficacy, the locus of control, the education-employment connection and the intent to return to college.

Results of their study showed, among others, that intent to return is the most important factor in predicting actual students’ return to community colleges (Ishitani & Flood; 2018; Luke et al., 2015; Peña & Rhoads, 2018). Further findings from Luke et al.’s (2015) study also indicated that while community colleges’ efforts to retain their students are yielding positive results in some quarters, for example, career decision making, these colleges tend to direct their focus the wrong way. This shift of focus by community colleges implies that they are ignoring proof of the abilities in career decision-making (Baker et al., 2018), hence becoming susceptible to focusing away from workable persistence and retention strategies.

### **Support Systems and Persistence**

Support systems (Baéz, 2016; DeWine, Ludvik; Tucker et al., 2017; Lunenburg, 2011; Peterson & Sally, 2015; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012), including early alert systems



(Dwyer et al., 2018) and programs (Bandeem et al., 2016), all encouraged students to continue in college to successfully completion. Ward et al. (2005) concurred with these authorities on the importance of support to student persistence. They stated that support is an elaborate theoretical concept that embodies challenge, support, and readiness (Ward et al., 2005). Ward et al. argued that for a student to develop holistically and comprehensively, there must be a balance between challenge and support (Ward et al., 2005). These two factors, followed by student learning and developmental goals and a focus on values clarification and character development must be appropriate for the accomplishment of set tasks (Ward et al., 2005). Holcomb and Nonneman (2004) stressed that imbalance between support and challenge could inhibit students' development, hence causing them not to accomplish set tasks and to withdraw from college. Ward et al. (2004) and McCallum (2015) concur adding that for student development to occur regularly in college, faculty and professionals must integrate support and challenge. To Bandura (1977), Barling and Beattie, (1983); Lunenburg (2011), and Van der Bijl and Shortridge-Baggett (2002), this integration boosts students' growth, enhances their self-confidence, engenders self-efficacy, and reiterates their determination to persist in overcoming set tasks or situations.

The complexities involved in students' transition to college as well as the issues of the systems colleges provide to support this change can affect first-year students' persistence in college (Budgen et al., 2014; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012a). In a study conducted by Budgen et al. (2014), they concluded that it is important to have support systems in place for first-year college students, adding that first-year students need to

have self-discipline and organizational skills to enable them to persist and complete college (Budgen et al., 2014). More recently, Lizzio and Wilson (2013) and Asby (2015) argued explicitly for early alert and intervention strategies as playing significant roles in providing support for first-year students' persistence and academic success.

Laying out a framework for institutional action to enhance student persistence and successful completion of college, Tinto (2012b) noted four conditions—expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. In discussing support, Tinto broke support into three categories—academic, social, and financial; stating that without support, first-year students and especially those that entered college underprepared, struggle to succeed or stay in college (Tinto, 2012a; 2012b). By implication, underprepared and struggling students might end up quitting college probably because they cannot cope with the rigorous college experiences into which they found themselves.

That is why Tinto (2012b) emphasized that providing support systems to cater for students is more important in the critical first year of college than at any other phase in their educational pursuit. At this stage, according to Tinto, students are in transition and still not sure of their success in college. Coupled with the shakiness of their success, students depend more on and respond to institutional interventions and actions (Tinto, 2012a). Maxwell-Stuart et al. (2016) and Moschetti and Hudley (2015) held similar views with Tinto about the impact of support systems on student persistence. However, while Maxwell-Stuart et al. captured the essence of support systems in terms of ensuring students' satisfaction, Moschetti and Hudley theorized it as social capital. They argued an interrelationship between support systems and academic and social adjustment of,

especially low-income first-year students; a combined phenomenon capable of encouraging these students pursue their college education to completion. To persist in college, therefore, first-year students will need all the support their institutions can provide to cope with the challenges, rigors, and complexities of the college experiences.

Students' perception of college and support systems colleges provide to aid students' transition can affect first-year students' persistence in college (Budgen et al., 2014; Hatch et al., 2016). While Fosnacht et al. (2017), Hatch and Garcia (2017), and Kelly (2017) specifically underscored the importance of support systems vis-à-vis academic advising and persistence, Crisp and Mina (2012) viewed support systems in the form of resources. They observed that community colleges face challenges of, for example, unreliable funding, increasing enrollments, diversity, not enough instructional materials, and increasing responsibilities. They argued that lack of resources, for instance, adequate and reliable funding, instructional materials, and instruments to cope with growing enrollments, diversity, and added responsibilities, posed enormous problems to students' persistence and retention in college (Crisp & Mina, 2012). They further observed substantial inadequacies in funding and the provision of instructional materials between community colleges and four-year colleges, adding that such disparities account for a significant weakness in student outcomes (Crisp & Mina, 2012).

From another perspective, Budgen et al. (2014) opined that it is important to have support systems in place for first-year college students; adding that they need to have self-discipline and organizational skills to enable them to persist and complete college. More recently, Lizzio and Wilson (2013) and Asby (2015) argued explicitly for early

alert and intervention strategies. These authors believed that early warning and response strategies play significant roles in providing support for first-year students' persistence and academic success. The bottom line is that adequate support systems targeted at students' success can make first-year students to remain in college (Crisp & Mina, 2012). The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (2016), Gill (2016a), and Tinto (2012b) all tend to concur with Crisp and Mina's suggestion. However, these authors also noted that the cultivation of positive, social working relationships among diverse student groups on campus, students' performances, and satisfaction with their colleges can increase first-year student persistence.

For instance, key findings from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) on support to learners were quite revealing (CCSSE, 2016). These results underscored the effects of support on student persistence and successful completion of college. About 75% of students polled agreed that their institutions put "quite" or "much" emphasis on providing the needed support to help them (the students) succeed. Fifty-five percent said they are satisfied with the focus their college puts in encouraging contact among students from diverse social, racial, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. However, 37% of students surveyed stated that their college puts little emphasis on helping them cope with their non-academic responsibilities while 25% felt that their college gave them not enough support to ensure they succeeded socially. Significant from these data is the fact that while 53% of the students approved of the efforts of their college in providing them with financial support, 21% stated that their college did not do a good job to provide them with financial assistance (CCSSE, 2016).

Worth noting in these findings was the word “emphasis.” This term highlighted the importance of support to students (Tinto, 2012a; Tinto, 2012b). It also underscored the need to have support systems in colleges (Crisp & Mina, 2012) and poses a crucial question “if?” about students’ persistence (CCSSE, 2016). If 37%, 25%, and 21% of the students polled do not view their college as focusing on providing support in critical areas of their lives (CCSSE, 2016); Fosnacht et al., 2017; Hatch & Garcia, 2017), the question is, will these students persist in college? The plausible answer in response to this question, according to Crisp and Mina (2012) and Tinto (2012b), might be that the percentage of students in each category that is not satisfied with the levels of support provided to them by their colleges might be susceptible to dropping out of college.

As Tinto (2012b) explained, support is most useful when connected to and integrated into students’ learning environment. Tinto (2012b) argued that isolating support from students’ learning environment translates to removing the building blocks on which students’ success hinged. To mitigate against the isolation of support in the learning environment, Tinto favored supplemental support in the classroom (Tinto, 2012b) and the formation of learning communities (LC) in colleges (Tinto, 2012a). According to him, supplemental support should be explicit and directly attached to each class. This strategy not only helps students to succeed academically but also serves, in the long run, as a gateway to future foundational coursework needed for students’ success (Tinto, 2012b).

Many colleges nowadays adopt learning community (LC) into their student support service programs (Tinto, 2012a). LC provide additional support services and

interconnection among different courses students take (Tinto, 2012a). Also, LC promote student involvement through the provision of complementary academic and social activities beyond the classroom (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). LC foster interaction among students, develop peer relationship, strengthen faculty-student rapport (Barnes & Piland, 2010), and build supportive climates within the students' community (Tinto, 2012a; Tinto, 2012b). The focus of Tinto (2012), Zhao and Kuh (2004), and Barnes and Piland's (2010-2011) studies on LC vary substantially. Notwithstanding the variations, Barnes and Piland, Tinto, and Zhao and Kuh (2004) all acknowledged the impact of LC and support systems that incorporate supplemental services in the classroom on students' decision to either remain in college to completion or drop out of college.

### **Self-Efficacy and Persistence**

Self-efficacy plays a significant role in first-year students' intent to persist in college (Baier et al., 2016; Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; Tinto, 2017b). Self-efficacy, a theory advanced by Bandura (1977, 1995) deals with a person's belief in his or her capability of completing set task successfully. Such a conviction results from the individual's belief that capacity begets persistence and perseverance produce success (Van der Bijl & Shortridge-Baggett, 2002). According to Barling and Beattie (2003), self-efficacy deals with "people's judgments about their capability to perform particular tasks...self-efficacy increases the effort and persistence towards challenging tasks" (p. 114). In which case, the more a person becomes convinced of his or her capability to accomplish a task, the more he or she remains on such task to completion (Lunenburg, 2011; Tinto, 2017b). In other words, experiencing early success or having a history of

past successes in the family, for instance, might reinforce future successes. A student who experiences early success or models after previous family successes might get a boost in confidence from such an experience or design. That boost in confidence becomes a propelling factor for persistence and, at the same time, serves as a pivot for achieving more success. McSweeney and Murphy (2014), Lunenburg (2011), Pavlov (2003), Tinto (2017b), and Watson (2013) all tend to reiterate early success or past family success might, therefore, act as positive reinforcement that not only stimulates but helps to elicit more successes from students.

First-year college students without family backgrounds with past experiences of academic success to model from might find it hard to get the needed support to experience early success. This situation might pose a problem to these students vis-à-vis their persistence in college to completion. Astin (2015) argued that the quality of a talent pool stems from how well-developed the capacities of that talent pool. In which case, students might model after the family academic experiences (good or bad) at their disposal. That is where the college comes in. According to him, the responsibility of developing students' abilities during their college years, rests with colleges and universities. To fully develop their capacities, first-year students are meant to tap into the support systems provided by the institution to link their previous experiences of success to the college experience. As Astin (2015) pointed out, focus on the culture of summative assessment in college hardly establishes this crucial link. Rather, it is parochial in defining the personality as well as the talent of students and ends up causing problems for both students and parents.

Establishing that crucial link and ensuring self-efficacy, persistence, and successful completion of college is important. In this regard, Astin (2015) and Popham (2008) tended to advocate for a culture of transformative, all embracing assessment. They preferred formative assessment over the traditional summative assessment that is currently used in schools and colleges to assess students. Their arguments suggest that summative assessment only tests an aspect of a student's learning process, growth, progression, and competencies (Astin, 2015), thereby subjecting students to frustration and inputting in them a mindset of failure and encouragement to depart college (Astin, 2015; Popham, 2008). On the contrary, formative assessment provides responses that aid in adjusting pedagogy and learning in such a way that they improve the ability of students to achieve expected instructional outcomes (Popham, 2008). This kind of assessment, according to Popham, is holistic and allows both students and teachers to recognize areas of weakness, refine pedagogy and learning, hence improve overall outcomes in students.

Astin (2015) linked the quality of our national talent pool with colleges and universities' ability to develop students' capacities and persistence. He argued that the national talent pool is affected by the nature student turnovers from our universities and colleges. The question is: how do higher education institutions assist first-year students to get into a position to experience early successes so that they can build on that by beginning to establish a pattern of success, which, in turn, might lead to self-efficacy? Or, framed another way, how will colleges assist their students to regain the confidence that they will be successful again because they already have been? Tinto (2012b) opined that students' success depends on how the settings (environments) in which they (the



students) operate assess their performances, especially regarding providing frequent feedback to students, faculty, and staff. Tinto (2012a) argued that regular feedback enables both teachers and students to adjust their teaching and learning styles in ways that promote learning, hence engender persistence on the part of the students.

Well-developed capacity stems from comprehensive assessments that consider possible strategies to combat weakness, retool for strength, and breed self-efficacy in students (Astin, 2015). If students receive extensive feedback on their learning, they might experience the success they are denied by just being provided with test scores (Astin, 2015; Popham, 2008). According to Popham (2010), education should be organized in a manner that ensures students to become more knowledgeable, gain more skills, and possess “life-enhancing, affective dispositions” (p. 2). Supporting Popham’s argument, Astin (2015) emphasized the need for higher education institutions to start systematic monitoring of their students’ learning. He noted that if these colleges establish routine monitoring, they might be able to achieve two outcomes—first, devise more effective means of pedagogy and, second, monitor students at all levels of their preparation (Astin, 2015). By implication, monitoring of students is especially crucial since it might help higher education institutions identify and cater for the needs of their students (Astin, 2015). On the other hand, it assists these colleges to adopt strategies necessary to boost students’ self-efficacy (Lunenburg, 2011), hence ensuring students’ persistence as well as stemming early departure (Tinto, 2012a; 2017b) from college.

Self-Efficacy affects learning, motivation, and performance in three ways—goal, learning, and persistence (Bandura, 1982; Tinto, 2017b). First, self-efficacy influences

choice of goal. An individual with low self-efficacy might have low self-esteem.

Invariably, such a person might end up setting minimal personal goals. The opposite is the case with an individual with high self-efficacy. Stronger self-efficacy results in the setting of high personal goals (Lunenburg, 2011; Tinto, 2017b). Second, self-efficacy affects learning and the amount of effort expended on set tasks. According to Tinto (2017b), a person with high self-efficacy is confident, works harder, and invests more efforts to ensure that he or she not only learns new and complex tasks but also excels in performance and success.

On the contrary, the low self-efficacy individual makes no such efforts and ends up failing and quitting set tasks (Tinto, 2017b). Third, self-efficacy impacts persistence. People with high self-efficacy are likely to persist on set and challenging tasks because their learning and performance motivate them. Therefore, they have great confidence in their abilities to undertake set tasks to a successful completion. However, individuals with low self-efficacy question their capabilities to learn and perform, hence they abandon or give up on responsibilities (Tinto, 2017a). The end results, according to Bandura (1982), Lunenburg (2011), and Tinto (2017b), are students either not completing or failure at set tasks.

Studies view self-efficacy as a psychological factor related to students' academic success and persistence (Bujack, 2012; Cerasoli & Ford, 2013; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). For example, in a quantitative study to establish a correlation between an adult student's self-efficacy and persistence, Bujack (2012) found, among others, that self-efficacy predicted persistence. The more positive and comfortable students were with and

convinced of their capability to face the rigors of college, the higher their confidence to take on the challenges of their new environment (Bujack, 2012). Also, the higher the students' confidence, the greater their motivation to learn and excel in performance. Of course, the students' boosted confidence equally strengthens their determination to persist in college to completion (Cerasoli & Ford, 2013; Lunenburg, 2011). Conversely, the less convinced students were about their capability to accomplish set task, the less motivated they will be to persist in college (Axtell & Parker, 2003; Barling & Beattie, 1983; Bujack, 2012). It is evident from these studies that people (including students) only learn and perform at levels consistent with their self-efficacy. It is equally obvious that self-efficacy has a serious impact not only on learning, motivation, and performance (Wells et al., 2014). Also, in the views of Baier et al. (2016), Bandura (1982), Bartimote-Aufflick et al. (2016), Bujack (2012), and Lunenburg (2011) self-efficacy is important to and affects persistence, successful college completion, and reduces the tendency of students dropping out of college.

### **Motivation and Persistence**

Motivation, according to Fongm et al. (2018), Roksa and Whitley (2017), Wells et al. (2014), Baéz et al. (2016), Frey et al. (2018), and Davidson and Blankenship (2016), is one of the many intricate predictors of a student's academic success and the student's decision remain in college to completion. They viewed motivation as an agency of hope; arguing that hope serves not only as an important influencer but also as a predictor of a college student's success and persistence. For example, a student with a sense of hopefulness might be motivated to persist until their educational goals are achieved

(Wells et al., 2014). The contrary is the case with an unmotivated student. Such a student becomes, hopeless, uninterested, disengaged, and might drop out of college; thereby ending up not achieving their educational goals (Wells et al., 2014).

Fong et al. (2018), Brewster and Fager (2000), Roksa and Whitley (2017), and D’Lima et al. (2014) held that there is a correlation between high motivation and engagement and reduced dropout rates and increased levels of success among students. In their study on how ethnic and gender differences in first-year student affect persistence and retention, D’Lima et al. stated that early achievement motivation played an important role in first-year student persistence. Their study found motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic), among others, as having positive impact on academic performance, hence student persistence. Although tending to have the same opinion with D’Lima et al., Fong et al., Roksa and Whitley, and Cerasoli and Ford (2013) added that notwithstanding the linkage of motivation with student’s performance and persistence, mastery of goals can explain link between motivation (intrinsic) and performance, hence persistence. While Fong et al. linked academic motives to student persistence, Roksa and Whitley observed that academic motivation does not benefit every student group, for example, African Americans in comparison to White students. Roksa and Whitley’s observation, especially, might affect policy formulation and practices relating to improving student success and persistence.

### **Involvement and Persistence**

Experts in the field of student persistence and retention view engagement (involvement) as an essential condition for student commitment, persistence, and

successful completion of college (Gill, 2016a; Lee & Schneider, 2018; Nagro et al., 2018; Tinto, 2012a; Thomas et al., 2017; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012; Shaddock, 2017). The more students were socially and academically involved with their peers, faculty, college environment, and staff, Tinto (2012a) argued, the more they were likely to remain in college to graduation. Conversely, both Tinto and Huerta et al. (2018) tended to concur that the less engaged the students socially and academically, the less their motivation, aptitude, or propensity to persist or succeed in college. According to Tinto, these two contrary outcomes arise because engagement begets social affiliations. In turn, social affiliations provide not only social and emotional supports to students but also inculcate in them higher intent to commit to and participate in their academic endeavors.

In their qualitative case study on how motivation and engagement influence students' performance, Saeed and Zyngier (2012) concluded, among others, that motivation not only guides students' interest about but also secures their engagement in learning. As such, it was the position of teachers to motivate their students through engaging them in meaningful learning activities. Also, they observed that motivation and engagement are behavior-modification drivers in students; advising, therefore, that teachers take cognizance of this role and device strategies that incorporate motivation and engagement into their pedagogy (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

However, other studies (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) acknowledge the challenges involved in motivating and engaging students. For example, teachers (including the most seasoned and experienced) encounter the challenges of figuring out how to sustain their students' interests in school and how to keep them

engaged while, at the same time, motivating them to succeed (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). In some cases, teachers resort to several different strategies such as the use of inspirational materials and coercion in the bid to persuade students to engage meaningfully in school activities and motivate them to achieve their academic goals (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). The ultimate expectation of every motivation-related strategy adopted by teachers is to ensure that students do not lose interest in or disengage from school but remain hopeful, motivated, and persistent in school to successful completion (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Wells et al., 2014; Tinto, 2012). Gill (2016a) added that motivation is helpful to getting the best out of the students as well as gingering them to succeed. In which case, when students are engaged, they are motivated, and there is the likelihood that they might persist in college to degree completion. But when students are disengaged, they are less motivated and there is a high tendency for them to quit college. Given this correlation, Garcia et al. (2018) observed engagement issues applied also to the growing body of international students at community colleges. They, therefore, advised community colleges to identify, build on, and support areas relevant to engendering students' engagement, satisfaction, and persistence not only of international but also traditional students through their first year to college completion.

### **Stress and Persistence**

Stress is a major problem with all human beings in the modern society including college students (Chand and Koul, 2012; Heckman et al., 2014; Peterson, 2016; Eagan & Garvey, 2015). According to Zajacova et al. (2005), stress is “a state of psychological

arousal that results when external demands tax or exceed a person's adaptive abilities" (p. 679). The authors believed that environmental factors, for example, finance, family, college environment, are external demands that can challenge students' abilities to adapt to college life and the college environment. These factors might result in students deciding on whether or not to remain in college to completion (Zajacova et al., 2005). In the introduction to their study on workplace spirituality and how to cope with stress, Chand and Koul (2012) pointed out that stress is inevitable, unavoidable, and a core concern in everyone's life irrespective of professional, educational, business, economic, or social pursuits. Chand and Koul further explained that the inevitability and unavoidability of stress in human life stemmed from an increase in competition and complexities arising from high living standards. They added that stress is inevitable and unavoidable. They further argued that stress has become a major life concern (Chand & Koul, 2012). Gardner et al. (2016) categorized stress as "one of the biggest challenges facing college students (p. 96). The authors referenced the American College Health Association (2012) findings to support their claim about the magnitude of challenge stress posed to college students. They emphasized that many students complained about the negative impact of stress on their academic progress, for example, examination or course grades (Gardner et al., 2016).

Other studies on persistence, and successful completion of college found that the degree to which students become stressed in their college environment (Johnson et al., 2014; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Zajacova et al., 2005) affect persistence, retention, and successful completion of college. Johnson et al. (2014) studied the effects of stress

and campus climate on the persistence of students of color and white students. Results from their study indicated that psychological factors including stress affected student persistence. Johnson et al. and Zajacova et al. (2005) noted that stress has adverse effects on first-year students' academic performances and persistence. Consistent with these authors' observations about stress and student persistence, Krumrei-Mancuso et al. (2013) added that students who experienced stress in college found it difficult to adjust to the college environment over time effortlessly. Krumrei-Mancuso et al. further observed that stress, time management, and involvement in college activities were the strongest predictors of students' academic performances and, ultimately, persistence to complete college.

The American College Health Association (2012) and Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) (2015) reflected these authors' notations in their several data reportages on stress and college students. According to American College Health Association (2012) data, about a quarter of college students admitted that stress is a major factor affecting their academic performance. Nearly 39% of students reported "more than average" overall stress levels within the last one year (American College Health Association, 2012). HERI's (2015) reference group data report indicated that 40.7% of students surveyed responded that they experienced stress in the spring of 2015. About 19.5% and 7.5% held that they either received lower grades in their exam or course because of stress. Compared with HERI (2014) fall percentages of 38.7%, 20.6%, and 6.7% in the same categories as the HERI (2015) spring report, there is an approximate increase of 2.0% in the number of students experiencing stress in a semester at higher



education institutions per year. There is equally a significant increase of 0.8% in the number of students whose courses are affected by stress (HERI, 2015). This apparent upward thrust in the percentage of students having negative academic experiences because of stress speaks to the dangerous effects of stress on students' academics. In summary, findings from these studies suggest the cumulative circumstances that might eventually deter these students from persisting in college to completion (Chand & Koul, 2012; HERI, 2015; Johnson et al., 2013; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013).

How to avoid stress to boost persistence remains an issue of grave concern to both college students and their institutions. Johnson et al. (2014) stated in their study that the increased level of stress among college students emphasized the need for these colleges to fashion out strategies that will not only lessen students' stress but that will also create a positive college environment as well as assist students to persist in college to completion. Acknowledging mixed results from prior studies, Johnson et al. admitted the existence of contradictions and variations in relationships between stress and persistence especially as they applied to students of various races in their study. The researchers, however, concluded that general stress negatively affected students of color while financial stress accounted for students dropping out of college for at least a semester in an academic year (Johnson et al., 2014).

### **Finance, Financial Stress, and Persistence**

Community colleges in the United States of America are open-accessible and affordable institutions (Meier, 2013). These colleges provide millions of low-income and multi-racial ethnic minority students with access to higher education each year

(Castleman & Page, 2016; Meier, 2013) and low tuition costs and fees (Baum et al., 2011). For example, Baum et al. (2011) stated that the average cost of tuition and fees charged by community colleges approximates one-third of cost and tuition at four-year institutions of higher education. Notwithstanding the low tuition cost, McKinney and Burrige (2015) pointed out, most of community college students cannot afford the total costs associated with attendance. Hence, they resort to taking loans.

The impact of finance on first-year students stands as one of the key factors affecting persistence (Gill, 2016; McKinney & Novak, 2013; Rubin & Wright, 2017; Tinto, 2012a). According to Tinto (2012a), financial support directly impacts students' persistence. Tinto argued that the greater the amounts of financial aid students (especially those from low-income backgrounds) receive, the higher the rate at which they might remain in and complete college. Tinto further pointed out that low-income students especially face financial problems in college, hence financial support is crucial to whether these students persist in college.

To buttress his argument, Tinto (2012a) attempted to establish a link between finance, engagement, and persistence vis-à-vis work-study programs. He stated that the essence of work-study programs in colleges, for instance, is to ensure students' retention; arguing that there is an indirect correlation between financial aid and students' engagement in their colleges. According to Tinto, work-study programs provide financial assistance for students while, at the same time, giving them the opportunity to engage with fellow students in other campus activities. McKinney and Novak (2013) made a similar point to Tinto's. Using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Student Study,

McKinney and Novak (2013) examined the relationship between the persistence of first-year community college students and the filing of FAFSA.

McKinney and Novak (2013) indicated that filing FAFSA was related to higher odds of one year of continuing persistence among all students. Other scholars of student persistence, retention, and finance (Bartik et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2016; Gill, 2016b) hold similar views with Tinto (2012a) and McKinney and Novak (2013) on the impact of funding on community college students' persistence. For instance, Gardner et al. (2016) pointed out that student loans, grants, scholarships, and work-study opportunities are sources of financial aid and provide monetary support for students' education. They further emphasized that only a few students who attend college have the capability to fund their education without some forms of financial aid. Gardner et al. (2016) also pointed out that for most students, funding is a primary source of assistance that enables them to persist in and complete college.

Other studies (Gardner et al., 2016; Gill, 2016b; McKinney & Burridge, 2015; McKinney et al., 2015) extended the discourse on finance and student persistence by exploring the effects of student loans on persistence in community colleges. Loans are a form of financial aid (Gardner et al., 2016). Despite the construed positive nature of financial aid on student persistence, these studies argued that federal student loans (Stafford and Perkins loans) negatively impact student persistence (McKinney & Burridge, 2015). In their study on loans and community college students, for example, McKinney and Burridge (2015) observed both the increase in the number of community college students taking loans and the rising debt among these group of students.

McKinney and Burrige (2015) decried the disconcerting borrowing trend among community college students. They pointed out how overrepresented community college student borrowers are among loan defaulters; adding that in such overrepresentation, this group of students are often cited as dropping out (McKinney & Burrige, 2015). The negative tell-tale of loans is that community college student borrowers end up subsumed in debts even after they dropped out of college. Results from McKinney and Burrige's study revealed, among others, that: first, part-time attendance, when compared to full-time attendance, was a significant barrier to community college persistence. Students who enrolled part-time and took out loans were susceptible to dropping out of college within the three- to six-year time span.

Given the high odds of dropping out, McKinney and Burrige (2015) advised the use of caution on the part of part-time students when taking student loans to finance their education. Second, taking out loans during the first year of college had a positive effect on persistence, at least until the end of that year. In part, this particular finding supported the claims of Gardner et al. (2016), McKinney and Novak (2013), Bartik et al. (2017), and McKinney et al. (2015) that financial aid, scholarships, and loans have positive effects on student enrollment, persistence and college completion. However, the second part of the same finding suggested loans had an adverse impact on student persistence three to six years after initial enrollment in college. Third, measured against the prospects of attaining a degree, borrowers more than non-borrowers, dissatisfied with returns on their educational financial investment, may choose to drop out of college instead of incurring additional debts. Fourth, the need for a review of policies and practices on loan

to community college students. Taken together, the findings of McKinney and Burrige's (2015) study emphasize the negative impact of loans on community college student persistence and completion of college.

Financial difficulties and situations cause stress to college students. Termed financial stress, Heckman et al. (2014) concluded in their study on factors related to financial stress among college students that financial stress, with all its attendant adverse health and academic effects, posed serious concerns to college students today. In their study, Heckman et al. (2014) reported that approximately 71% of their respondents complained of stress from personal finances. These authors further observed the magnitude of financial stressors through the categories of students mostly affected by financial stress. According to them, students who are likely to face financial stress fall into about four categories. These are those who: (a) spend more than they can afford (through borrowing or credit card use), (b) cannot pay their bills on time, (c) are indebted but do not have enough knowledge of the extent of their debts and, (d) first-year college students. According to Heckman et al. (2014), these categories of students are susceptible to quitting college.

The study by Heckman et al. (2014) might, to a certain extent, be discounted given its attendant limitation to a four-year college setting. However, the results are quite revealing and validate the efficacy, consistency, and relevance of previous researchers' (Gill, 2016b; Trombitas, 2012) arguments on the effects of financial stress on the first-year college students in particular and college students in general. For example, Trombitas (2012) conducted an online survey of college students nationwide to determine

the sources of financial stress and their impacts on students' academic progress and performance. Of the respondents, 19% were either 2-year or technical college students (Trombitas, 2012). The study found that (a) first-year college students were more susceptible to financial stress when it came to the cost/funding of their education and the cost of living, and (b) that the need to repay loans, the cost of education, borrowing money for college, and the need to find a job after college were among the top five stressors for enrolled students (Trombitas, 2012). Results from the study further indicated that 74% of the respondents worked throughout the academic year, 15% worked full time, and a third stated that financial stressors had negative impacts on their academic performances and progress in college (Trombitas, 2012). Findings from the study further suggested that working students reported the negative impact of financial stress on their academic progress and performance. Some students said they reduced their academic course loads because of financial stress" (Trombitas, 2012). These findings corroborate the results of the Heckman et al. (2014) study. They are also troubling considering the effects of these financial stressors might have on students' academic performances and, most importantly, their decision to persist in college.

### **College Success Seminar Faculty Perceptions of Persistence**

Astin (2015) stressed the importance of teachers and other professionals saddled with the responsibility of students' success; stating that the core function of faculty and other professionals are to ensure the success of their students. Thus, the involvement of faculty and other professionals in determining what best serves their students and what outcomes produce outstanding qualities in their students is crucial to these students'

success and determination to stay in college to completion (Astin, 2015). Michael (2007) underscored the importance of Astin's argument regarding professionals' (including faculty) determination of what outcomes yield outstanding qualities. He emphasized, for example, that while the students' role was to learn, the job of their teachers was to assist these students to learn. In which case, the premise of Michael's (2007) argument highlighted the held perceptions of faculty members in recognizing their roles as facilitators of the students' learning process.

Although there exist numerous studies on college student persistence and retention (Cuseo, 2012; DeBate, 2010; Morrison & Silverman, 2012), studies on faculty perceptions about issues surrounding student persistence especially in 2-year community colleges are sparse. The few studies that reference faculty's perceptions intertwine discussions on support systems with programs (Cuseo, 2012; DeBate, 2010). These studies also mix faculty-student interactions (Hoffman, 2014) with how faculty members who work with first-year students perceive students' persistence (Astin, 2012; Hoffman, 2014; Tinto, 2012b). For instance, Astin and Oseguera (2012) in their study on institutional influences on degree attainment, broadly mentioned faculty and other staff's views on students' retention and graduation without any further discussion about teachers and other staff's views on the issues of students' persistence. Astin and Oseguera (2012) observed that faculty and other workers considered retention and subsequent graduation of each student as the result of their successful efforts in ensuring each of these students remained in college to graduation.

In another instance, faculty members working with first-year college students perceived that students derive their support from other professionals such as academic advisors (DeBate, 2010; Hatch & Garcia, 2017). DeBate (2010) pointed out that community college faculty agree on the effectiveness of academic advising on students' persistence and the positive relationship their perceived roles as academic advisors have created between them (faculty) and their students. In contrast, Cuseo (2012) and Bir and Myrick (2015) framed teachers' perceptions in the context of their observations interacting with first-year students who took college success seminar courses. Cuseo, for instance, posited that faculty members believed students taking first-year college success seminar courses exposed themselves to the realities of college, the college environment, and life experiences. By such exposure, these students cultivate a sense of belonging and purpose (Osterman, 2000), motivation and hope (Davidson & Blankenship, 2016; Wells et al., 2014) that eventually propels them to decide on staying in college to completion (Cuseo, 2012; Pittendrigh et al., 2016). Like Cuseo, Kimbark et al. (2017) underscored the influence of success seminar courses not only on students' success, engagement, but also on their decision to persist in college to graduation.

Other existing studies (Michael, 2007; Patrick et al., 2016) that also examined faculty perceptions did so with a focus on active learning and barriers to active learning rather than on the issues surrounding persistence. For example, in their study on the perceptions of faculty and students on the effectiveness of active learning techniques in the classroom, Patrick et al. (2016) observed faculty perceived that despite its biggest challenge of time allotment, active learning techniques were effective in improving active



learning and should be widely encouraged in college classrooms. Michael (2007) exploring barriers to active learning, made similar observations as Patrick et al. According to Michael, although faculty members agreed on the effectiveness of active learning in the classroom, they claimed it posed several barriers that might invariably dissuade students from learning. This situation might lead students to decide against staying in college to completion. In sum, these studies discussed faculty perceptions and touch on the importance of other professionals that work with first-year students to persistence. However, none of these studies really focused on what faculty members teaching the college success seminar considered as impediments or supports to the persistence of first-year college students, especially in community college settings such as MCCC.

### **Summary of Literature**

In 2016, Gardner et al. reported that more than 1,400 2-year colleges in the United States enroll about 7 million students annually. Although there are numerous studies on student persistence, retention, and successful completion of college that span several decades (Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012a), few places enough focus on first-year student persistence at two-year colleges in the United States. Experts in the field of retention, persistence, and successful completion of college have concentrated their studies on four-year institutions of higher education (Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012a). The review of current literature revealed that students' commitment to their institutions of choice (Wardley et al., 2013), students' institutional fit (Bowman & Denson, 2014), and the degree to which students become stressed in their college environments (Johnson et al.,

2014) might affect persistence and successful completion of college. The review of literature also showed that programs that institutions develop can be tailored to affect the persistence of students in college (Barefoot et al., 2012; Cabrera et al., 2013; Cuseo, 2012; DeBate, 2010).

Furthermore, the complexities involved in students' transition to college (Budgen et al., 2014), support systems (Budgen et al., 2014; Seidman, 2012; Tinto, 2012b), finance (McKinney and Novak, 2013, Tinto, 2012a), and financial stress (Heckman et al., 2014) might affect first-year college students' persistence. Other studies stated that self-efficacy (Bandura (1977, 1995), motivation (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Wells et al., 2014), engagement and faculty-student relationship (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) might predict first-year students' persistence issues.

However, the literature review revealed that, notwithstanding the abundance of the research regarding persistence, retention, and successful completion of college, most of these literatures focused exclusively on four-year universities (Astin, 2012; Seidman, 2012). There are insufficient research studies on persistence and especially on what hinders or supports first-year student persistence through the first year of college at 2-year educational institutions such as MCCC. In addition, there is little or no evidence of studies on what faculty members teaching the college success seminar at MCCC might perceive as what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year students through their first year of college.

Given the revelations in the reviewed literature, there appears to be a gap in the application of Astin (1984) and Tinto's (1993) theories to a local setting such as MCCC.

Therefore, the thrust of my study is twofold. First, it will explore what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year students to college completion specifically at U.S. two-year community colleges such as MCCC. Although the review of literature highlighted certain variables that might bare relevance to student persistence, there is need to find out from faculty members teaching the college success seminar whether there are parities or disparities in their perceptions regarding impediments and supports to first-year student persistence at MCCC.

Second, to further explore this gap in the literature, focusing on what faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar thought can assist in enhancing first-year student persistence in U.S. two-year community colleges like MCCC. As Gardner et al. (2016) observed, the singular goal of such two-year community colleges anchors on helping their students graduate from college and become successful in their future careers. Faculty members teaching the college success seminar are in the fore-front of ensuring that this singular goal of two-year community colleges is met (Astin, 2015). Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski (2011) concurred, adding that understanding what is either right or wrong with students might highlight new aspects of successful experiences capable of application to supporting students, especially to persist in college through the first year to completion.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of my study was to explore the perspectives of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar at MCCC on what impeded or supported the persistence of this group of students through their first year of college. Using the

conceptual framework gleaned from Tinto (1993) and Astin's (1984) theories, I took four steps. First, I explored the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar to determine what impedes or supports this group of students' persistence at MCCC. Second, I interviewed this group of faculty members to get their perspectives on first-year student persistence. I listened to these experts as I invited and encouraged them to speak thoughtfully about their experiences, their students, and what they thought supported or impeded first-year students in their persistence at MCCC. I also asked this group of faculty members to share their thoughts on approaches to addressing impediments and enhancing supports to first-year student persistence at MCCC.

Third, I analyzed the data after I have gathered and organized participants' views. I accomplished these four steps using the qualitative methodology and the basic research design as outlined in Chapter 3. The qualitative methods helped me apply Astin and Tinto's theories and the literature to understanding what my respondents shared in their interviews. Fourth, I made recommendations for further research and actions that arose from data I collected in my interviews.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

This study was conducted to clarify what impedes and supports the persistence of first-year, full-time students through the first year at an urban multi-campus community college by exploring the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar. I intended to shed light on the challenges facing these students that affect persistence through the first year of college. In this chapter, I restate the RQs that guided the study, discuss my role as researcher, describe the methodology and design used, and discuss its appropriateness and relevance to the study. I also identify and justify the participant population selected, sampling strategy, data collection process, and analysis techniques. In addition, I address issues of trustworthiness. Finally, I describe ethical procedures, the treatment of data, and the steps in data analysis to be used to interpret the data gathered from interviews.

### **Research Design**

In my study I employed the basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to focus on persistence through the first year of college at MCCC. The concept of persistence can be defined as the desire and actions of a student to stay in higher education from the beginning of the school year through degree completion (Berger et al., 2012; NSCRC, 2016, 2017). To persist to graduation with a 2-year degree, students must choose to persist through the first year of enrollment so that they can continue into the second year.

Qualitative research is based on how people construct meaning. The basic qualitative method has four key identifiable characteristics: it focuses on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the qualitative method is inductive; and the product of the process is elaborately descriptive. Basic qualitative studies are interdisciplinary, widely employed in applied fields of practice, and frequently used to conduct qualitative studies in education. The basic qualitative design explores how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, how they make meanings of their created worlds, and how people make sense of their lives and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The RQs for my study were designed to probe and reveal the perceptions of these faculty members regarding their experiences of working with first-year community college students with the purpose of supporting these students in persisting to successful completion of their first year:

RQ1: What do of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar who work with the first-year, full-time students at MCCC perceive as impediments and supports to the persistence of MCCC students through the first year?

RQ2: What suggestions do these faculty members have for overcoming impediments and improving the support of first-year student persistence at MCCC?

I selected a qualitative mode of inquiry for my study as this form of research was ideally suited to explore experiences, personal points of view, and how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By contrast, quantitative research methods assist the researcher in investigating a subject using

numbers and statistics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Exploring the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar at MCCC regarding what impedes or supports student persistence would be difficult to quantify. Quantitative methods could provide a profile of students who do or do not persist but could not help discern the perceptions of relevant of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar as they consider their own experiences in this area. Additionally, human beings view the world through a constantly shifting lenses and perceptions (Koch, 2010), which may be difficult to approach or investigate from the statistical standpoint requisite in a quantitative study; therefore, qualitative methodology is preferable to collect the data necessary for analysis.

In selecting the qualitative approach suited for my study, I examined three qualitative methods: the case study method, grounded theory, and the basic qualitative interview method. A case study describes a context and investigates issues and interactions—the case—within that real-life context (Yin, 2014, p. 16). A case is something tangible, an entity, something functional—for instance, an individual, a group, an organization (Stake, 2006). A case study describes and analyzes a case in-depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013), using multiple sources of information such as documents, reports, interviews, observations, and audiovisual materials (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study method would be more elaborate and complex than is necessary to respond to my RQs, especially when a less multidimensional, basic interviewing approach should suffice.

Grounded theory is an inductive qualitative method of inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It emphasizes discovery rather than description and verification and seeks

to inductively generate a theory that is “grounded” in the data generated. It is useful where there is little previous research on a topic. However, there are well-developed theories and significant recent research regarding persistence through the first year of college.

The basic qualitative research study is interested in how people construct meaning from or about common aspects of their lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the basic qualitative study seeks to uncover and interpret the meanings people construct and make of their lives and worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although the case study also has this characteristic, the basic qualitative study is distinct in its depth of probing, sources of data collection, and how the study is constructed. For instance, unlike the case study, the basic qualitative study does not focus on the unit of analysis (the case), which for this study are faculty members at MCCC. Rather, it concentrates on the topic of investigation, which were the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar who interact with the first-year students at MCCC.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, I conducted all the interviews that generated data for my study. Interviewing requires a complex set of skills and competence to achieve adequate data collection (Maxwell, 2013). The data collected and analyzed must be comprehensive and reliable; therefore, it requires skills to manage the interview as well as respond and adapt to unexpected situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These qualities along with an in-depth understanding of the events experienced by those in my group of interviewees were necessary for obtaining data that were sufficient and dependable (Merriam & Tisdell,



2016). In conducting interviews, I sought to process data immediately, clarifying and summarizing materials, checking with respondents for accuracy, and exploring unusual or unanticipated responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used these tools and techniques as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.

The potential participants in my research consisted of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar at MCCC. And excluded my current or previous supervisors or those I currently or previously have supervised. All participants were fully interactive with first-year, full-time students at MCCC. Although we worked for the same organization, MCCC, I do not have any professional or personal relationship with the target population from which I recruited potential interviewees for my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

### **Methodology**

In pursuing basic qualitative interview research design, I intended to carry out a series of steps and procedures. In this section, I proceed to describe these steps and procedures.

#### **Recruitment and Sampling Criteria**

I selected participants for my study using a purposeful sampling strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), which is used to recruit a population based on a set of criteria aligned with the objective of the study (Barratt et al., 2015). Many qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling because it solves qualitative problems such as discovering occurrences, finding the implications of happenings, and establishing the relationships linking occurrences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling

allowed me to identify interviewees who were interested, available and willing to participate in, and who were able to communicate their experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2). In using purposeful sampling, I also applied the snowball approach in case the initial nomination/referral approach did not yield enough participants.

I selected participants who worked directly with MCCC first-year students to gather relevant information about their experiences with these first-year students. The faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar population from which I selected my samples for this study was diverse. These faculty members come from, among others, different sociocultural backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual orientations, educational specializations, and expertise. The College Success Seminar, being an interdisciplinary course, allows them to teach on several MCCC campuses and hence work and interact with first-year, full-time students from diverse backgrounds. The relevancy of this group derives from diversity of their experiences. Specific criteria for selection included having taught the college success seminar at MCCC within the past 2 years. I intended that the first criterion should ensure sufficient depth of experience to fit into the set of interviewees, whereas I the second criterion was to ensure that the experience is reasonably fresh in the memory of each interviewee.

MCCC has several autonomous campuses. To identify initial interviewees for my study, I visited each of the campuses of MCCC to speak with departmental chairs and faculty members from which I drew my sample. During my meeting with departmental chairs, I requested from them the nomination of potential participants. The nomination of

other potential participants equally came from those with whom I conducted successful interviews.

If necessary, to reach saturation, I expanded my search by asking others for initial nominations. This was to ensure that I located enough potential participants who met the established criteria for my study and who might be able to recommend other would-be participants. In addition, it might have been necessary to select participants from a group of faculty members who previously served or worked with first-year students at MCCC for no more than 2 years ago (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

### **Sample Size**

For this study, I interviewed 10 participants at MCCC. The number of participants selected for a study should generate enough information for clear patterns to emerge (Seidman, 2013). If clear patterns did not emerge within the interviews, the number of participants selected should be expanded based on the interview process, the nature of each study, and the researcher. If I was unable to carry out 10 successful interviews within the multi-campus MCCC, I was prepared to extend my search to additional urban community college campuses that served similar student populations within the same region of the country where MCCC is. On the other hand, I was vigilant not to go beyond the number of 10 interviews, if those interviews generated sufficient data for a useful satisfaction of my RQs, bearing in mind the labor-intensive nature of data collection and analysis in qualitative research (Mason, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). The use of a large sample size might yield no meaningful results after the saturation point and might encumber the timely completion of the study (Mason, 2010; Seidman, 2013).

Thus, a sample size of 10 successful participant interviews was adequate for the planning of this study.

### **Instrumentation**

Before collecting data for my study, I obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval from Walden University (approval number 08-23-19-0287139). Upon receiving the approval, I emailed, phoned, or contacted potential participants face-to-face, inviting them to participate in my study. I obtained potential participants' emails and phone numbers from the existing MCCC multicampus directory. I sent out a letter of introduction and informed consent to formally invite each potential participant to take part in the study. I also visited departmental chairs on the various campuses to tell them about my study and requested the nomination of potential participants. If departmental chairs nominated potential participants, I informed the potential participants that they were nominated to participate in my study. The nomination of other potential participants equally came from those with whom I conducted successful interviews. The letter of introduction and informed consent included a brief description of the study, its purpose, and the reason for the invitation to participate. It also contained details regarding the nature of participation in the study and the time required. The invitation letter included my contact information (mailing address, phone number, and email) for potential participants who may have had questions or concerns.

I made a reminder call to participants a week before scheduled interview dates. I attached a copy of the letter of informed consent to the invitation letter. The letter of informed consent spelt out policies regarding the participants' rights to privacy,

confidentiality, withdrawal from the study, and data protection. The letter also stated how I intended to protect participants' rights, protect data, ensure confidentiality as well as discussed the voluntary nature of participation in the study (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

In consultation with each participant, I used interviews as my data collection method. I scheduled face-to-face interviews on dates and at times and locations convenient to both parties. I started every interview session with the reiteration of the purpose of my study, interview procedures, and my expectations from the interviewee. I completed the reiteration process with a review of the letter of informed consent to reaffirm the potential participant's readiness to join the study. At the end of each interview session, I transcribed the audio recordings to assist in the analysis of collected data. This process aligned with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) suggestion that interviewers conduct data analysis along with data collection. This was done to avoid losing or potentially misinterpreting data that may threaten the credibility of the study.

### **Data Collection**

After IRB approved my proposal, I commenced interviewing as my method of data collection. Interviews are a fundamental mode of inquiry in qualitative research (Seidman, 2013). Interviews are formal conversations designed to generate information that specifically addresses the RQs by gathering the meaning people make from their experiences (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). In my study, I used interviews to explore and understand the perceptions of faculty members teaching

the College Success Seminar regarding what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC.

### ***Semistructured Interview***

I used semistructured interviews to collect data from faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar at MCCC, which allowed me to have conversational approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). In a semistructured interview, the questions used are either flexibly worded or are a mixture of both standardized and open-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semistructured interview uses an interview protocol (see Appendix). The interview protocol contained a mixture of questions (formal and open-ended as well as potential probes fitted to each question and designed to solicit greater depth should the initial response feel incomplete) developed by me. These questions related to topics to be covered in the interview to elicit responses and follow-up questions from participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my study, I anticipated the semistructured interviews to generate data that reflect the perspectives and positions of MCCC College Success faculty members regarding impediments to students' persistence toward completion of their first year.

The appendix shows a list of interview questions developed for this study containing a mixture of open-ended questions as well as examples of probes to aid with clarification or additional information as necessary. In addition to a few demographic questions, this interview format contains open-ended questions that allowed me (the interviewer) to explore and respond to participants' worldviews, new ideas, and emergent themes during the interview sessions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It was anticipated that

the semistructured interview process will generate relevant data from all participants (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). I conducted the interviews face-to-face in each participant's designated location of convenience at MCCC. The duration of each interview session was approximately between 45 to 60 minutes. I audio-recorded and took notes during interviews as well as immediately after the interviews. After each interview session, I transcribed recorded interviews.

**Interview Protocol.** I used an interview guide that primarily contained open-ended questions aimed at exploring first-year students' persistence as perceived by faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar, working, and interacting with this group at MCCC. The use of open-ended (questions that open a topic and invite reflection) allowed participants to elaborate on their observations and experiences regarding the challenges of first-year community college students. First, it let participants describe what they perceived as impediments to persistence, circumstances that may have positive influences on students remaining in college through the first year, and what can be done to improve persistence at MCCC. Second, open-ended questions afforded me, the interviewer, the opportunity to probe issues surrounding first-year students' persistence and to follow up or seek further clarifications on points raised during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Pathak & Intratat, 2012). Third, asking open-ended questions gave participants the flexibility to respond to questions in a manner that they find reflective of their points of view and experiences. Fourth, using the interview protocol helped ensure I covered all aspects of the topic relevant to my RQs and investigation.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis involves finding meaning in what the researcher has seen and heard throughout the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Correctly analyzing data is crucial to producing meaningful results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data analyzed consisted of transcribed interviews and notes taken for each participant regarding his or her perception of what impedes or supports first-year students' persistence to graduation at MCCC.

The goal of my data analysis was to identify themes from the experiences and perceptions of the participants interviewed. To achieve this goal, I analyzed my data collected from the semistructured interviews using Creswell's (2014) six-step approach to data analysis. Creswell identified these steps as (a) organizing and preparing of data for analysis, (b) reading or looking through all the data, (c) coding of all the data, (d) using the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people and categories or themes for analysis, (e) presenting the results of the analysis, and (f) interpreting of the results of the analysis (pp. 197-201). Following Creswell's steps, I organized and prepare the data for analysis. This process entailed transcribing the interviews and sorting and arranging the data in accordance with how these data were gathered. Next, I read through the information gathered to understand and explore its meaning. After these steps were completed, data coding followed.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that coding has to do with labeling passages of text according to content. Retrieval, on the other hand, entails providing a means to collect similarly labeled passages of text. Saldana (2009) concurred with



Merriam and Tisdell, adding that coding involves identifying words or short phrases that are significant and sum up or capture salient or essence-capturing information. My data analysis process was iterative; I analyzed the data as I gathered them. Doing so enabled me to look for tentative themes and questions that I might want to add to future interviews.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is important to evaluate the worth of a qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is because professionals in applied fields, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p.237), rely on research results to intervene in the lives of people. As such, these professionals need to have confidence in and trust that study results are credible. Lincoln and Guba emphasized that guaranteeing credibility in a qualitative research study is important in establishing trustworthiness its findings. I ensured the credibility of this study using several strategies.

One of the strategies I used to guarantee the credibility of this study was member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) believed that member checking is the most important instrument with which to establish the credibility of a study. After transcribing each interview, I provided each participant with an opportunity to review the document to ensure I represented his or her perspectives correctly (Ang et al., 2016; Creswell, 2014). Immediate member checking, therefore, made sure participants and I agreed on the transcripts prior to analysis of the data. I also used the iterative questioning and probing strategies to establish credibility of results (Shenton, 2004). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that credibility has to do with how research findings equate with reality. Since my

study explored the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar, who work with first-year students at MCCC, my line of questioning probed these faculty members' experiences and what they perceive as impeding or encouraging persistence of this group of students at MCCC. Using probing questions provided me with the latitude to elicit detailed data (Shenton, 2004). Returning to themes initially raised by interviewees and rephrasing questions allowed me to extract more data (Shenton, 2004) and know when data and emerging findings have reached the saturation points (that is, hearing repetitions with no new information surfacing) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Shenton (2004), both strategies afforded me the opportunity to detect emergent contradictions and falsehoods and discard suspect data. Shenton further added that these strategies also provided greater transparency of my study through highlighting, in the findings, discrepancies and possibly offering explanations.

To further establish the trustworthiness of this study, I carefully sorted through my data to create common themes. Creswell and Miller (2000) and Ang et al. (2016) agreed that determining trustworthiness was crucial to research and note that the researcher can determine reliability by eliminating overlapping data and finding common themes. This technique assisted me in removing repetitions, inconsistencies, and misrepresentations from my study results.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I obtained all needed approvals specified from Walden University's IRB before conducting and collecting data for this study. Obtaining IRB approval is often an iterative process in which the proposer will be asked for a series of clarifications some of which

may lead to revisions in the research plan. I also got permission needed to interview any of their employees from MCCC. After securing all necessary approvals, I emailed, phoned, and contacted (face-to-face) would-be participants, inviting them to participate in my study. Seidman (2013) suggested that the researcher should contact potential participants directly, without the use of a third party, as this begins the relationship-building process necessary for successful interviews. According to Seidman, "Building the interviewing relationship begins the moment the potential participant hears of the study" (Seidman, 2013, p. 50). Seidman explained that personal visits with prospective participants before the interview has numerous advantages. For instance, aside from building a participant-interviewer relationship, these visits assist the researcher in selecting would-be participants. During my visits to potential participants, we had the opportunity to gain each other's trust as well as assess the likelihood of having a positive interviewer-interviewee relationship.

The privacy of the participants and their confidentiality was paramount throughout the course of my study including the data collection process and its analysis. I ensured that the identities of individual participants from this study were not shared and details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, were not be revealed. I did not use the participants' personal information for any other purpose outside of this research project. I assured participants that their names will not be included in the study, and the information they provided will be used exclusively for this research.

I properly briefed participants regarding the purpose and nature of the study and sought their consent to participate, requiring all participants to sign a letter of informed consent. The letter explained and detailed the policies and procedures aimed at protecting participants' privacy and data confidentiality. I emphasized that participation was voluntary and that participants were free to exit the study at any time should they find it inconvenient or uncomfortable. If this occurred, I discarded all data collected from withdrawing participants. I explained to prospective participants that there were no incentives or compensations if they elected to participate in the study. To guarantee participants' comfort, I emphasized their freedom to respond to interview questions with frankness. I advised participants they were free to share as much information as they deemed fit, but that they were also under no obligation to answer questions that made them feel uncomfortable.

To further preserve data confidentiality and protect the privacy of participants, I kept the participants' identities and data confidential throughout the study (Creswell, 2014). Although I collected personal information (names or addresses) from participants, I used pseudonyms (e.g., Faculty Member) to refer to participants and their data sets during the study. I also used a pseudonym for the community college(s) where the participants are employed. As the interviewer, I was the only individual with access to the interview recordings; however, I made plans to employ the services of a reputable transcriber to convert audio recordings into written form. Seidman (2013) suggested erasing all participants' names and identifiers prior to submitting the audio recordings to

the transcriber. Undertaking such an action might mutilate the recordings hence compromise the authenticity of the interviews and the credibility of the data.

Rather than erase all participants' names and identifiers before submission to a transcriber, as suggested by Seidman, I already planned to request the transcriber to sign a letter of confidentiality for each of the participants. This step will protect the privacy of participants by preventing the transcriber from disclosing any information to a third party without authorization. During any presentation on this study or publication of materials, I will take necessary steps to properly disguise the identities of participants (Seidman, 2013). These steps will further protect the participants' confidentiality and privacy.

I implemented data storage procedures to protect participants' information, keeping all soft and hard copies of data collected for my study (including storage devices, field notes, draft notes, and printouts of transcribed interviews) in a safe and properly secured filing cabinet in my personal office. I protected all electronic data with passwords known only to me. For continued security of data, I will destroy all data 5 years after the completion of my study.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The University of Alaska Fairbanks Office of Research Integrity referred to conflict of interest as "a situation where two or more competing interests creates the perception or the reality of an increased risk of bias or poor judgement" (University of Alaska Fairbanks Office of Research Integrity, 2015, para. 1). Competing interests can be in form of monetary or personal gains. This study is not funded by any organization, group, individuals, or the institution (MCCC) where this research will be conducted. I

hold no position of authority at MCCC other than in relation to the students with whom I work; therefore, I am unable to pressure or coerce individual faculty members into participating in this study, neither would my position as a teacher at the college be likely to inhibit their response to my questions.

### **Summary**

In this study I proposed to employ basic qualitative research design to examine what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year, full-time college students through their first year at U.S. community colleges such as MCCC. I placed emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar. This chapter discussed the selection and appropriateness of the qualitative research design and method for my study. The basic qualitative method guided my study, using the basic design of semistructured face-to-face interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I analyzed the data using Creswell's (2014) six-step approach which includes organizing and preparing of data for analysis, reading through the data, coding the data, describing the setting or people involved and establishing categories or themes for analysis, presenting the results of the analysis, and interpreting of the results. I discussed the results of the analyzed data in Chapter 4. In this chapter I also addressed my role as researcher, as well as ethical considerations including procedures used in establishing the trustworthiness of this study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In this basic qualitative study, I explored the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar course at MCCC, asking what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year, full-time students through their first year of college. Two RQs guided my study: “What do faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar, who work with the first-year, full-time students at MCCC, perceive as impediments and supports to the persistence of MCCC students through the first year?” and “What suggestions do these faculty members have for overcoming impediments and improving the support of first-year students’ persistence at MCCC?” Chapter 4 includes sections on setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a chapter summary.

### **Setting**

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted and delayed the phase of my data collection in which I had planned to follow up my initial interviews with requests for clarification and elaboration. Because a face-to-face approach became impossible, I was forced to conduct such follow-up inquiries by phone. Moreover, my informants were concerned about the disruption of their students’ lives by the dislocations associated with the pandemic as well as the changed circumstances of their own lives. These conditions exerted influence on my interviewees might have affected the data I collected. Considering this likelihood, I eliminated anything gathered in the follow-up phase other than clarifications and elaborations of data obtained in my original interviews.

Nevertheless, even these clarifications and elaborations were gathered in the time of this pandemic and could be affected in some way by this substantial change in setting.

### **Demographics**

Ten faculty members, four men and six women, who teach or have taught the College Success Seminar course at MCCC (see Table 1) participated in my study. As shown in Table 1, all the participants combine their main duty (as faculty members—full time or adjunct) with other responsibilities in the college. These added responsibilities might include college advising, mentoring, tutoring, administration, or program coordination. Given their combined responsibilities, respondents have had enough experiences that allowed them to speak to what impedes or engenders the persistence of first-year, full-time students through their first year at MCCC. Table 1 contains a breakdown of the demographics of these respondents.

**Table 1**

*Breakdown of Participant Demographics*

Participant pseudonyms	Gender	Main responsibility	Other responsibilities	Years of service	Interact with first-year students?
Dan	Male	Faculty	Club advisor	11	Yes
Jasmin	Female	Faculty	Mentor/Advisor	11	Yes
Kristal	Female	Faculty	Tutor/Mentor	7	Yes
Erick	Male	Faculty	Tutoring	6	Yes
Josh	Male	Faculty	Program coordinator	17	Yes
Elisa	Female	Faculty	Admin/Mentor	11	Yes
Fiona	Female	Faculty	Program coordinator	11	Yes
Aaron	Male	Faculty	Mentoring	13	Yes
Roslyn	Female	Faculty	Program coordinator	6	Yes
Temika	Female	Faculty	Admin/Recruiter	20	Yes



### **Data Collection**

Before I recruited participants, I visited study site to speak with deans, departmental heads, and faculty members about my study and to compile a tentative list of probable participants, which included faculty members who teach or have taught the College Success Seminar course at MCCC within the past 2 years and who work directly with MCCC first-year students. The relevancy of this population derives from the diversity of their experiences, especially given their sociocultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, expertise, ethnicities, and educational specializations. I also made calls to those suggested to me by the deans, departmental heads, and faculty members, briefing them about my study and noting their interest to take part in the study. This phase completed, I then emailed the letter of introduction and informed consent to potential participants to formally invite them to take part in my study. The formal invitation letter contained a brief description and the purpose of the study, contact information, schedule of interview sessions, reason for the invitation to participate. It also included an expression of intent clause, among others, in case potential participants were willing to partake in the study.

When participants accepted to participate in the study, I sent them an informed consent form, which contained the confidentiality clauses. I assured participants that I will store all data gathered during the interviews, their identities, and other information in a secured location for 5 years, after which I will destroy such information. I then scheduled interviews according to the times and places most convenient to the participants.

I conducted interviews at times and in locations participants chose as most convenient to them. After initial face-to face interviews of 40- to 50-minute duration, I conducted follow-up interviews by phone to gather clarifications and elaborations of participants initial responses. I audio recorded all interviews and follow-ups and took notes directly after each interview to capture my initial reflections.

After conducting and transcribing each interview and before initiating analysis, I sent the initial transcripts out to the matching interviewees for each interviewee to double-check, effect any necessary transcription correction, and to approve that the transcribed words were theirs. As my initial analysis raised the need for some clarifications and elaborations of the texts transcribed from the interviews, I conducted follow-up interviews by phone and gained the needed clarifications and elaborations, which I added to my data.

### **Data Analysis**

Once I had the interviews transcribed and each transcript member-checked, including transcripts of follow-up interviews, I began to analyze the data gathered. I performed a thematic qualitative analysis of the interviews to extract themes and occurrences that addressed the purpose and RQs of my study. I then systematically analyzed the data for this basic qualitative study to identify and authenticate themes from the experiences and perceptions of the participants interviewed. Following Creswell's (2014) 6-step approach, I organized and prepared the data for analysis. This process involved transcribing the interviews, sorting, and arranging data according to how I gathered them. I read through the information gathered to understand and explore their

meanings. These steps completed, coding followed, which served to identify words, phrases, occurring and recurring themes, and essence-capturing information (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2009). I coded the responses myself. The coding process helped in two ways. First, it gave me a preliminary understanding of the gathered data vis-à-vis the problem under study. Second, the coding assisted in my organizing the themes and structuring them to establish a narrative flow.

Next, I performed the actual thematic analysis of the data to identify related themes regarding the perceptions of respondents interviewed. I reviewed the interview responses several times to establish thematic clusters, convergencies/divergencies, and organized similar ideas that correlated with the study's RQs. This process enabled the assigning of themes that were not only similar or related, but which also addressed my RQs. I categorized these themes to sync with three major sections of my RQs.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the issues of trustworthiness and the essential elements of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The systematic nature of this study, which includes the use of common interview protocols for data collection and Creswell's (2014) 6-step approach to data analysis, was to attain its credibility. I also performed a member-checking with the 10 respondents by asking each of them to review the transcript from their interview to validate the transcriptions and interpretations were accurate.

To achieve the transferability of the study, I made certain that data gathered from the interviews were comprehensive and reflected participants' perceptions. These data

came in form of respondents' stories and examples, which helped authenticate the generalization necessary to convergent and divergent data collected and analyzed. I made sure therefore, that each theme reported had an authenticating story or set of stories. I intended this step to not only aid readers in understanding my findings but also to enhance the usefulness of the data to those interested in follow-up research or in considering my findings in relation to their own settings and practices. Additionally, to ensure the dependability of my study, I pursued consistency in the use of open-ended interview questions from interview to interview. I also engaged in member-checking as a measure to ensure dependability.

Lastly, to ensure the confirmability of my study, I did an audit trail of the research steps to verify that the process of my study conformed to its intended systematic nature. This meant my reassessment of the instruments used in both data collection and data analysis. First, I looked at the common interview protocols to ascertain I used open-ended questions across the board to gather data from the 10 respondents. Second, I double-checked to make sure that in analyzing the data collected from interviewees, I followed Creswell's (2014) 6-step approach accordingly to verify the systematic nature of my study.

## **Results**

Ten participants were interviewed with a focus on the two RQs. In these questions I sought to explore respondents' perceptions on what supports or impedes the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC. I analyzed my interviewees' responses to my interview questions systematically. For a better understanding of the results, analysis of

interviewees' responses, I present RQ1 and RQ2 separately and according to themes, starting with RQ1 and ranging from most convergent (merging of seemingly related themes) to outlying (themes that are similar to complaints one might expect to hear in almost every academic institution) themes.

### **RQ1: Supports and Impediments to First-Year Full-Time Students' Persistence**

Several themes emerged as supporting or facilitating the persistence of first-year students from the beginning to the successful completion of their first year at MCCC. Of these themes, motivation, sense of belonging, and early connection to knowledgeable advisors stood out as convergent themes. Familiarity with college services, mentorship, faculty support and assistance, academic structure of MCCC, and the provision of free non-traditional credit classes followed as divergent themes.

#### ***Theme 1: Motivational Elements***

Four of the 10 interviewees believed that motivation was one of the most important elements that serves to support and/or facilitate first-year, full-time students at MCCC to successfully remain in college through their first year although the sources of motivation varied. Jasmin pointed to one student's personal history as a source of the student's internal motivation:

I believe motivation is a good reason for students to excel and persist here in MCCC. If our students are motivated properly, they will have something to look up and hold on to as they continue their academic pursuits. I have heard quite a lot from my students about these. Let me give you at least an example: A student told me the story of her childhood. Raised by a single mother who worked multiple

hours to make ends meet but at the same taking evening classes to achieve a bachelor's degree. This student remembered her mom's words, "I do not want you go through hardship in the future, so I am committed to working hard and to be an example to you." There isn't any gainsaying the fact that her mother was this student's motivation to work hard to complete her college. As far as I know, this student successfully graduated from MCCC. Look, the power of motivation can't be overemphasized, and I mean it!

Kristal spoke of catalyzing student reflections on their motivations by sharing that motivational quotes, if carefully crafted into class lessons in such a way that students can apply these to themselves, can be powerful instruments capable of encouraging first-year students to persist in college. According to the faculty member,

At the end of one of our classes, a student said that my quote, "Education is the key to success," matched her motivation to excel. She shared a list of what she hopes to achieve, i.e. associate degree, get a job, transfer to a four-year college, and study up to graduate level. "It is your motivational statement that has kept me in MCCC till now," the student added. In my opinion, teachers have a lot to do in encouraging their students to persist in college. You see, each of these students had something they held unto or someone they looked up to...that motivated and supported them to remain in college from the beginning.

Several others posited that motivation associated with non-curricular programs is vital to first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC. Aaron referenced the

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) requirements from which, according to his student, internally motivated the student to stay at MCCC. Aaron stated,

I believe that motivation, either from within the college or outside the college environment, is one important factor that helps students to persist here at MCCC. For instance, a student told me that being enrolled in College Success Seminar at MCCC enabled him to meet the requirements as “able-bodied adult without dependent” to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Let me explain this: adults without dependents are expected to work or participate in school training programs to receive public benefits. These public benefits serve as a motivation for some students to be persistent in our college. This might sound surprising and ludicrous to you, but it’s true.

Another faculty member reasoned that identity-based and belonging-based motivation are crucial to intrinsically enabling most students, especially foreign or immigrant, to persist in college. Josh stated that because of strong community affiliation and support, these students commit themselves to persist in college through the first year to completion:

I have observed over the years that students from foreign countries, especially immigrants and refugees from African countries, persist in school because of strong community affiliation and support. They are motivated by their communities both home and abroad to succeed. School dropout is considered a community disgrace that may result in social isolation and a recipe for mockery for the student’s family. As one of my students from Africa once told me,

“Although we came to America as refugees, my parents never failed to remind me of the importance of education and what community disgrace and mockery failure to complete school or excel in education and career can bring to our family. I don’t want to bring shame and disgrace to my family. I want my family and community to be proud of me. That is why I take my schooling seriously...I work so hard!” You see, the motivating factor here is obvious—fear of family and community letdown.

### ***Theme 2: Students’ Sense of Belonging***

Of the 10 respondents interviewed, three said that first-year, full-time students’ having a sense of belong in the college facilitated their persistence from the beginning to the successful completion of these students’ first year at MCCC. Erick pointed out that first-year students feeling or having a sense of belonging, especially to the college, is crucial to supporting them to successfully persist in college like MCCC through their first year:

In my experience, students who feel like they belong are most likely to persist. This can be accomplished through student activities, campus events, and athletic pursuits. But since students spend so much of their time in class, it’s imperative for faculty to share these opportunities, to take classes to attend these events and/or offer extra credit, and to require group work and social learning. From my limited perspective, I can say that students who find instructors and subjects they enjoy, tend to take multiple classes with those same instructors, which tells me the



students have found an academic home with particular faculty or within a given department.

Students who make themselves belong, either by obtaining leadership positions within the Student Government Association or through specific work-study assignments, also may have that sense of belonging that binds and/or commits them to the college.

Several students who have completed work-study positions for College Success at the College stay with the role for multiple semesters, often until they graduate or transfer.

Elisa explained:

Look, some of my students have from time to time confided in me that they are in this college because they feel they belonged here...that they have a special affinity for this college. Asked why, one of them replied, "Take it or leave it, Professor, I feel I belong here. If my senses didn't tell me I belonged in this college, I would've left...I'm into sports and games...on the team. That's all I can tell you." You see, that is why I told you at the onset that students who feel like they belong are most likely to persist.

Temika concurred with the other respondents who have expressed similar perceptions on how supportive feeling a sense of belonging is to students' ability to persist at MCCC.

This respondent believed that:

Students being able to relate or feel a sense of belonging is also key in their persisting to completion in college. Mega City Community College, especially

this campus, is a diverse institution not only ethnically, culturally but economically, and socially. Like I mentioned, we have first-time college students, different age groups, and international students. So, I believe a student can assimilate better and relate to the environment better if they see similarities around them. We have many languages spoken on campus, and many cultures represented. Even our faculty/staff is well diverse, and when they mentor these students or become sponsors of various clubs, students get encouraged to work with them with ease outside of classroom. That, in essence, encourages and assists students to persist in this college to completion.

***Theme 3: Early Connection of Students to a Reliable Advisor***

Two of the interviewees stressed that connecting students early to knowledgeable advisors played a major role in keeping first-year, full-time students at MCCC through the first year. According to Roslyn:

The other key piece is connecting students to knowledgeable advisors as early as possible. Students who define paths for themselves after MCCC are most likely to succeed. For instance, many of my students have told me stories of how being connected to their advisors from the get-go got them to especially redefine and focus on their academic plans such that they got through MCCC and onward to a four-year college without hassles. I recall one of the students telling me, “My advisor was the reason why I went through this college without any problems. He knew his stuff and guided me every step of the way to focus on my academic plans...I owe my success to him!” This is exactly what I mean. When students are

connected from the beginning with advisors who, to use my student's language, know their "stuff," and are capable of guiding their students towards the right direction, these students will stay in college and, ultimately, succeed.

To Dan, advisors assisting students to easily navigate course offerings at MCCC campuses as well as dialoguing in a meaningful way with these students about their plans post-college, are crucial to engendering their persistence at MCCC through the first year:

I can say that numerous students have shared their positive experiences with advisors in terms of navigating the course offerings at the college, as well as engaging in meaningful dialogue about their plans after college. On the other hand, students occasionally express frustration about scheduling and communication with their advisor. While this obviously isn't ideal, it does indicate a proactive approach to the students' own education, which I can assist the students to rectify. The students who have nothing to say about their advisers concern me the most, since they most likely haven't attempted to meet with them!

#### ***Theme 4: Familiarity with College Services***

Familiarity with college services can support first-year, full-time students' persistence from the beginning to the successful completion of these students' first year at MCCC. Fiona observed that when students are familiar with the services available to them in the college, they will utilize these services to their success and smooth transition.

As Fiona explained:

Knowledge is power, and I feel that familiarity to college services, and being well informed about policies and procedures, is key. I have observed that when

students are aware of services around the college, they are more likely to succeed or transition smoothly. For example, if they know tutoring service (writing lab, reading lab, etc.) is there, as soon as they feel they need extra help outside the class, they will avail themselves with that opportunity. If they are experiencing personal issues, they will visit the Wellness Center to speak with an individual to help overcome the situation. I have heard stories from some of our students that being aware of the existence of such services I mentioned gave them (the students) comfort of mind and strong determination to stay and finish the academic pursuit here in this college. Some students have even told me of how visiting the Wellness Center, for instance, and knowing what services the center renders has helped them overcome or cope with personal issues like stress and anxiety.

#### ***Theme 5: Mentorship Program and Persistence***

An interviewee contended that mentorship program plays important roles in supporting first-year, full-time students to successfully persist at MCCC through their first year. According to the Temika:

I believe that mentorship program is an important reason for students to persist here in MCCC. For example, a student shared with me that for him, academic failure was not an option. Being the first born and the first to go through tertiary education in his household. His late father's brother who is also his mentor is a positive influence on him. He spends time with him weekly to review his academic activities and also share life experiences worth emulating.

***Theme 6: Faculty Support and Assistance***

Another interviewee also identified faculty assistance as an important element that supports the persistence of first-year, full-time students through their first year at MCCC.

Jasmin expressed:

Students say what supports or facilitates the persistence of their first year is the care and concern they feel from instructors. Char [pseudonym] stated that she came to MCCC after having graduate from high school and entering the work world ten years prior. Because she recently started a family, she felt she needed to do something to build her skills to get a better job. As a high school student, she feared writing and the composition instructor took his time to help her overcome her fear. For the most part instructors were the support that helped her complete her first year more than resources available on campus.

***Theme 7: Supportive Academic Structure***

A respondent mentioned that the academic structuring at MCCC enabled the persistence of first-year, full-time students to successfully complete their first year at the college. Erick stressed:

The academic structure of MCCC greatly supports some first-year students' ability to remain in college. Most of the students in the College Success Seminar class are young adults that are either working and trying to create academic pathway for themselves or are ready to enter the labor market. The academic structure of MCCC provides adequate environment and flexibility for these groups of students to thrive with the ability to maneuver and take classes at

different campuses to balance and accommodate their work schedules and other daily activities. For example, a student told me that he was to about to drop out from college when his schedules at work was changed, which makes it impossible for him take classes at his preferred campus, but his advisor informed him that he is free to take classes at any of the campuses that tally with his schedules and needs, and it does not require transfer of transcript. Having such opportunity at MCCC was his saving grace to persevere in college.

***Theme 8: Provision of Free Non-Traditional Credit Classes***

Aaron pointed to the college's ability to provide free non-traditional credit classes like English as a second language (ESL) to many non-native English-speaking students:

Provision of free non-traditional credit class such as ESL program for adult students helps students from non-native English-speaking countries to persist in college. This program serves as morale booster and helps adults who fled to the United States as refugees or asylees because of political upheavals or persecutions in their native countries to pursue and fulfil their dreams of having a college degree. In fact, one of the students that was in my College Success Seminar attested to the fact that she came to the United States with limited English proficiency, but she was able to take ESL classes and as her English improved, she decided to continue her studies here, enrolled in college credit classes, and eventually pursued her professional degree in Accounting.

## **Impediments to First-Year Full-Time Students' Persistence**

The second part of RQ1 focused on impediments to the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC. Various themes emerged as impediments to first-year, full-time students' persistence. Of these themes, lack of support systems, finance-related issues, and students' involvement appeared as most important impediments to this group of students' persistence. Other themes including, resources and services, family dynamics/obligations, employment-related issues, and college/campus environment, provision of information about college, mandatory FYS orientation, mentorship program, student-faculty, advisor-relationship, and attendance/transportation, also emerged as key inhibitors to first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC.

### ***Theme 1: Lack of Support Systems***

Seven of the 10 respondents felt that lack of support systems from the college, peers, and family hindered first-year, full-time students from persisting at MCCC through their first year. They argued that crucial support systems were either lacking, inadequate, or that those available at MCCC were underutilized. Kristal stated:

Lack of support from a spouse or significant other greatly impacts some students' ability to persist in college. One instance that comes to mind is a promising, young female student who was enrolled in my College Success Seminar a few years ago. She stated in class that as the economy and job market improved, her boyfriend was pressuring her to work and earn an income instead of going to school. This student soon stopped coming to class, and I wonder how she is

faring. In my opinion, if this student had the support of her boyfriend, she wouldn't have stopped coming to school.

Fiona explained support systems like housing, daycare, and availability of hours for students at the college support centers, for example, the Wellness Center, were crucial to the persistence of students in the college. The respondent, however, observed that housing insecurity, lack of daycare, and lack of hours of availability for students from support centers like the Wellness Center were key elements which can impede first-year students' persistence at MCCC:

Key elements that impede persistence? I would say housing insecurity would be a big one. Anecdotally speaking, a good number of our students are either homeless and live in shelters/halfway homes or have housing issues. This is quite logical, for how can we possibly expect anyone to be able to focus on their studies if their housing is uncertain?

I would also say that day/childcare is a big issue. The recent teacher's strike for our students did not assist those who are parents. Last fall semester, a student in my class told me she'll be coming late to class every class day because she must take care of her child first, ensure her child gets to school, before thinking of coming to class. The student eventually dropped out. My best guess is that her childcare situation didn't improve and so the student had to forgo school to take care of her child.

In particular, the Wellness Center's lack of hours available to our students do not support students' dire need to process the trauma they are dealing with.



Thus, our students are unable to continue without this very important assistance. I would also argue that staff must be supportive and provide more customer service (which they aren't really doing) in order to encourage our students to continue instead of discouraging them. All too often, I hear of misinformation our students receive or rude dealings with reps from the "administrative" building. This condition can discourage students. It shouldn't be so!

Other respondents tended to concur with the first respondent that lack of family support and social resources were a barrier to first-year, full-time students' academic participations, achievements, and subsequent persistence through the first year at MCCC.

Josh emphasized,

Lack of family support and social resources impacts students' academic participation and outcome. For example, I have a student whose primary guardian, her grandmother, is ill and currently being hospitalized. According to my student, the prognosis for the illness is not favorable and her two younger siblings who live with them now need a caretaker. She has opted to drop the class for fear of losing her only known home and losing her siblings to the foster care system. I have attempted reaching out to this student to no avail. However, with no immediate resolution, there is not much to do from my end. An opportunity for MCCC is creating housing and childcare services in collaboration with the government for severely vulnerable/at risk students like this student.

Roslyn questioned the role parents in supporting their children; emphasizing that a disruption of their children's academic endeavors can force these children (students) not to persist through their first year in college:

What of the role of the parents providing all that are needed to help their child/children achieve their academic objectives? Some parents sometimes exhibit some lukewarm attitude towards rendering the necessary assistance to helping out their child(ren). Almost all students need all forms of assistance to enable them to succeed. For example, some parents don't provide school fees and textbooks and other necessary needs on time to their child(ren). Such lukewarm attitude causes a disruption of their child(ren)'s school activities.

Elisa observed that if students are unfamiliar with available support systems in the college, they might fail to take advantage of them (the support systems). Such a situation can frustrate students; leading them to decide not staying in college:

Students have told me stories that not being aware of the existence of such support systems or of staff entrusted with the responsibility of orienting students on what systems are in place to support students which can assist them to remain here in this college not doing their jobs properly. Let me give you an example: A year back, one of my students approached me complaining about how these support systems we were discussing in class sounded strange to her. Sounding frustrated, she asked, "I'm not familiar with all this...and I've been in this college for almost two semesters now... Professor, you mean these supports and services exist in this college? How come then don't know of them...why weren't we

informed fully about these from the onset?” She might have been right, given what I know. Some pieces of information given to students aren’t in-depth and, sometimes, those tasked with the responsibility of orienting students about the college and its services do superficial jobs that aren’t helpful to these students in the long run.

Aaron also stressed that support systems presently in place at MCCC do not help first-year, full-time students to understand “the practical sides of their lives” let alone make them appreciate the values of college; hence they end up not even completing their first year of college at MCCC. According to this respondent:

Students understanding the practical sides of their lives, especially in concepts, practices, culture, and values will shape their decisions to appreciate college, hence decide to stay to graduation. Students who don’t understand the concepts of value, happiness, of their individuality, and a passion for what to do, accompanied by lack of experience, end up frustrated and thus might drop out of college. In my many years of work in higher education institutions including MCCC, I have come across countless number of students would tell me, “I don’t know who I am,” “I don’t know what I want,” or “I don’t even want to be here...why am I here in the first place?” Such responses, retrospections, introspections, and questions suggest a deep unappreciation of the practical sides of their lives especially in concepts, culture, values, and practices that will shape their lives; hence their decisions about college.

Also, Jasmin pointed out that lack of support and assistance from faculties is an important impediment to first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC. According to Jasmin,

Interestingly enough, the same student in the example I already gave you also told me she thinks she would have earned a better grade in her most difficult subject, science, had she received more help from her instructor. Char (*pseudonym*) reported she relied heavily on tutors because the teacher lectured and “talked at “and did not stop” to ensure she “understood the material.” She stated he did not seem to care whether or not she understood and never reviewed material either before after a test. Char told me that the teacher’s attitude put her off and not only “killed” her interest in science but also debate the essence of being in college. She added that but for the persistent supports she received from teachers like her composition teacher, she could have quit college.

Finally, although tending to concur with others on how lack of or inadequate support systems can affect students' persistence, Temika argued these support systems were already in place at MCCC but that it was the responsibility of these students to know when to utilize them (the support systems):

Currently, MCCC has several supports that help students persist and complete their degree. For example, Academic Advising, the Wellness Center, the Disabilities Access Center, the Veterans Center, and discipline-specific tutoring. The main element that makes a difference between successful persistence and failure to persist is a student’s ability to understand when they need to seek

outside help. For example, engaging with a tutor. You know, most times, students are responsible for their plights...they look for who to blame for their failings.

***Theme 2: Finance-Related Situations***

Another important theme which emerged from participants' responses to the second part of the first RQ was finance-related situations. More than half of interviewees felt finance-related situations, for example, financial quests, financial obstacles and obligations, and the state of the economy, were likely predictors of first-year, full-time students' not wanting to persist at MCCC through the first year. Fiona asserted:

Like I told you before, financial situation is another thing that can cause our students not to persist in college. Listen, one of my students shared with me that since she is the primary provider for her family, financial loan service offered by the college is a source of income, therefore she does not use the funds to purchase necessary educational resources but rather spends the funds on family needs. To balance out the family's financial demands, she feels pressured to work several hours in order to make ends meet; therefore, academic work is not a matter of priority. I have observed several instances of her inattentiveness in class due to sleep deprivation from overwork. She had also verbalized dropping out of the class as her grades were not improving and since she can't renege on her financial responsibilities to her family.

There was the likelihood that for financial reasons, some first-year students can overload themselves with courses to their detriment and inability to persist in college.

Dan stated:

They (students) take too many classes...just taking classes to get the reimbursement check. And once they get the check, they disappear. You might say it is mind-boggling for these students to do that. I might rather put it differently. It is saddening to see financial resources meant for students' academic pursuits being diverted for reasons of financial hardship. What else can I equate it to?

Let me give you an example. At the beginning of the semester, my classes are filled to 35 or almost. By the end of fourth or fifth week (appropriately matching the Financial Aid refund check period), attendance has dropped drastically to near half of the class. When I ask the remaining students where their fellow students were, they laugh answering, "We have received our refund checks. Don't forget that things are hard for some of us. The refund check is the only way of making ends meet." From experience, I know what might have happened. Sometimes, "financial hardship" in whatever form, can breed ingenuity (positive or negative)!

Tending to acquiesce with Dan, Jasmin pointed out that financial hardship can also result in first-year students dropping out of college in their first year:

I currently have a nontraditional student who has encountered life-altering hardships. She is seeking help through the Wellness Center. They have referred her to resources she can access, but she said she no longer has a [transit pass] card and was having hard time traveling to the places she was referred. I provided her with bus fare for the day, but wonder what about tomorrow and next week?

Without mincing words, I can tell you this students' ability to meet up her appointments lies with her getting money to refill her [transit pass]. Let's be real, where would she get the money or assistance from?

Also, to reiterate how financial quests and the state of the economy can impede first-year students' persistence at MCCC, Kristal doubled down on an example already discussed under support systems:

One instance that comes to mind is a promising, young female student who was enrolled in my College Success Seminar a few years ago. She stated in class that as the economy and job market improved, her boyfriend pressured her to work and earn an income instead of going to school. This student soon stopped coming to class.

Still on how financial obstacles and the state of the economy can impede first-year students from persisting through their first year at MCCC, Josh corroborated the arguments of previous respondents by elaborately summing up:

From personal interaction with some of the first-year students, the fear of completing their academic career as a result of financial issues plays a fundamental factor on their chosen disciplines. Some students come to school without even an item as common as a pencil to write. Others rely on copying a whole textbook from their fellow students to properly study and do their assignments. In other words, financial obstacle is a serious impediment for the progress of some students. The economic situation of a country, state, or county can act as a heavy obstacle for a student to achieving his or her academic goals.

For example, a student who is brilliant or intelligent can be awarded a scholarship to continue on the path of his or her studies. Financial Aid restrictions (factual or perceived) often encourage students to forgo classes they might otherwise enjoy (world languages, arts, humanities, literature, etc.).

Elisa observed that because first-year, full-time students still view college as “an extension of high school” and as such, they demonstrate a lot of carefree attitude towards their studies which, at the end impacts their Financial Aid’s standing and, invariably, causes them (the students) not to persist through their first year at MCCC. Reflected Elisa:

Many of them (first-year students) think MCCC is an extension of high school rather than a college. Once the reality hits them, it is sometimes too late.

Frequently, these students find themselves on a SAP hold, and have to figure out how to pay down their balance before they can return to school...It is difficult to see them struggle to get back to school. Some of these students seeing how messed up their financial aid situation is don’t even try to return. They simply stay away.

### ***Theme 3: Students’ Involvement***

Five of the 10 interviewees perceived lack of students’ involvement in one form or another posed a serious impediment to first-year, full-time students’ persistence at MCCC. Erick argued that not getting involved in the social aspect of college can contributive impediment to the persistence of first-year students at MCCC; noting:



One key element that impedes student persistence is the social aspect of college. Even for students who are intellectually and emotionally prepared for the rigors and rewards of higher education, the social dynamics and expectations of self-sufficiency can be doubly challenging for students at MCCC. Unlike university, which affords wrap-around services, on-campus living, built-in social events and communities, and numerous opportunities to meet people seven days a week, MCCC students have many other obligations besides coursework and socializing, including work and family commitments.

One example from Spring 2020, a student in my English 102 class worked from 9:00a-5:00p, then commuted to college for class from 6:00-9:00p. That student had markedly fewer opportunities to engage in the extracurricular learning that results from socializing and networking outside of class.

Expressing similar thoughts on how first-year students' lack of involvement in extracurricular activities in college, especially because of family responsibilities, can impede their persistence, Temika shared,

I've met other students who are responsible for taking care of their siblings or children, which also means they have less time to spend on campus outside of class. The informal education that occurs through student activities and campus events provides additional skills and knowledge that many students literally cannot afford to enjoy.

Also, Jasmin observed that first-year students were slow or reluctant to engage or not open to engaging at all with their instructors. This interviewee asserted that this

reticence to openly engage with instructors undermined to this group of students' determinations to persist in college through the first year:

When working with first-year traditional students, I found them reluctant to engage with the instructor right away. They seem reticent—taking a wait and see attitude before they feel comfortable expressing their opinion. On the other hand, nontraditional students were much more open to sharing their feelings and opinions. For example, when I introduced an icebreaker in which each student was asked how they felt personally, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, many students (especially male students) felt tired. Emotionally, they said they felt 'no particular way.' My interpretation was it was not cool at that time to express joy or sadness; they wanted to convey a neutral, middle ground.

Aaron tied not persisting in college to lack of students' involvement which results from poor attendance. Aaron noted that the extent of students' involvement or non-involvement with the college is most times tracked through their attendance; pointing out that a student's approach to attendance is "one of the strongest indicators" of whether they will persist in college; stating:

Attendance seems to be one of the strongest indicators of whether a student continues on to the next semester, next year, etc. Students with spotty attendance (attend once a week, miss several classes in a row, are consistently tardy...), especially in the first half, who struggle academically are withdrawn from the course. It is hard for them to play catch up and often too overwhelming. Some don't even attempt or make the effort to catch up and stop attending altogether.

Often, I write to students I observe are behind inviting them to a face-to-face conversation so we can map out how to help them catch-up. You know the reply I get? A flat out, “No way! I’ve missed a lot and can’t catch-up...I’ll rather forget about your class, Professor.” In that case, these students either drop from class themselves or are administratively withdrawn from class.

Finally, Josh noted that the failure of teachers to engage students in sincere conversations about themselves (students), life, and the future, in their classrooms debars these students from extracting themselves from a conservative culture. According to the Josh, failure of teachers to engage students in such conversations does not allow them (the students) to truly reflect on and/or identify their purposes in life and the meaning of success; hence these students are left to flounder and end up not persisting in a college like MCCC:

Teachers engaging first-year students in a sincere conversation about themselves, life, and the future and, helping them to relate to their personal lives, detaches and extracts these students from the conservative culture which holds their consciousness, understanding of their purposes of in life, and the true meaning of success hostage. When teachers don’t do this, cultural change doesn’t occur, and these students are left in a limbo. They do whatever makes meaning to them. I work with a lot of first-year students in this college. One thing I’ve observed with some of these students is that they are eager to engage if given the audience. Some of us teachers don’t give these students the chance to have meaningful conversations with us. By not doing so, we hinder students from not only

expressing themselves but also not getting the help they need to truly know who they are. Under such circumstances, these students end up making poor choices and judgements that sometimes make them end up dropping out of college.

***Theme 4: Lack of Resources and Services***

Several respondents pinpointed the lack of resources and services as what impedes first-year, full-time students from persisting through the first year at MCCC. Jasmin stated that lack of resources and enough hours of Wellness Center services for students to avail themselves of at MCCC impeded the persistence of first-year students in the college:

I also believe that outside personal issues and drama with our students are also big factors as to their inability to persist. The lack of resources, in particular, the WC's lack of hours available to our students do not support students' dire needs to process the trauma they are dealing with. Thus, our students are unable to continue without this very important assistance. The other day, a colleague of mine told me of how one of his students complained of not being able to get the assistance he needs from the Wellness Center. The student, my colleague explained, suffered from anxiety and needed to speak with a Wellness Center counselor. But, by the time he got there, the office has been closed and the wait times and days for appointment were too long for students like him [the student].

Erick argued that the lack of support services was instrumental to first-year students not persisting at MCCC through the first year. According to Erick:

The number one thing I have noticed is how difficult it can be to support students after they leave my College Success class. For some time, I've wanted to offer students further opportunities to work together. Understand that I've thought of this offering because these opportunities aren't existent in the college. But it's difficult because offering further opportunities to students meaning working outside the confines of one's official time. The college doesn't really approve of this kind of move and people like me don't want to hear the popular refrain, "you're on your own," if anything unexpected happens.

In a counterargument, Roslyn maintained the college has enough resources to cater for first-year students but that the failure of first-year students taking time off to find out about and use these resources can lead to their leaving the college:

We have a robust number of resources to support first-year students; however, I honestly do not know if students are finding out about it in a piecemeal way or not at all. For instance, at the beginning of my class, I usually introduce what I called "harbinger hunt" to my students. The exercise was expected to make students find and locate resources, resource-offices, time of operation, contact personnel, phone numbers, and other important information around campus that can be useful to students in the future. Can you believe some of my students return to class empty-handed? Some students complain it was too tedious. Others (students) tell me they'll find out at their own time. Now, who's to blame, the absence of resources on campus, or the students who fail to take time off to find out about the availability of these resources and utilize them (resources)?

***Theme 5: Family Dynamics/Obligations***

Family dynamics/obligations (including personal issues) also emerged from interviewees' responses as sometimes responsible for first-year students' failure to persist through the first year at MCCC. A couple of interviewees shared that family dynamics/family obligations (including personal issues) can cause first-year, full-time students not to persist through the first year at MCCC. Jasmin believed that:

Family obligations can inhibit these first-year students from tarrying in college. What I have noticed about working with first-year students and their ability to persist to college completion is how determined they are. For many of these students, they are the first person in their family to earn a college degree. In addition, many of these students may have started their degree, but never completed it. It becomes very important for them to persist to college completion. However, most of them are either parents or siblings to younger ones constrained to place family obligations first before their education. Some of these students are single parents. As parents, they need to provide for their family before thinking of completing college. One painful example comes to mind. One of my previous students told me of how immediately after high school she became pregnant. A year after the birth of her first child, she became pregnant again. In-between pregnancies and childbirths, she had to take several low-paying jobs to cater for herself and children. Anxious, to improve herself educationally, this student came to college. She was doing pretty well in all her classes. Unfortunately, her second

child became sick and needed continued care. I was pained when this student told me she was dropping out to take care of her sick child.

Elisa stated that lack of will on the part of first-year students to follow-through with their decisions owing to family obligations was a drawback to their persistence in college through the first year:

In the years I have worked with first-year students at MCCC, I have noticed that students may express a desire to complete their studies at our 2-year community college, but the will and follow-through is weak. For example, one male student showed me a photograph of his newborn baby. He came to class a couple of times after the baby was born; however, he soon stopped coming to class. I believe the responsibilities of being a new parent consumed his time thereby relegating his studies to the back burner.

However, Aaron attributed first-year students' inability to persist at MCCC to home background, family dynamics, and lack of parental upbringing. Expressed this interviewee:

Some first-year students lack parental upbringing which is a solid bedrock for enabling them to achieve their academic goals. Research has shown that students from homes of two parents do better than those from single homes. For instance, in a home headed by a single mother, students from such homes tend to perform less than from those containing both parents. The facts are clear. The presence of a father in the home makes it a little harder even for the roughest student to calm down and not study hard but to pay attention to details. Some students like to

party all the time at the expense of their studies. In a rigid or strict home where the father is the head, such recalcitrant attitudes do not always prevail. On the other hand, homes headed by single moms seems porous or leaky, does inevitable give most students free access to doom. Those who fall on such categories will eventually have themselves to blame.

***Theme 6: Employment/Job Situations***

Employment also received attention as a major indicator of first-year, full-time students not persisting through the first year at MCCC. Interviewees responded that employment or job situations of students coupled with overlooking opportunities at their disposal posed a problem to these students remaining in college through the first year at MCCC. Fiona shared:

Others (students) have disclosed conditions to me that have gotten in the way, too much on their plate (i.e. full-time student, full-time job). I had a student who took full-time classes and worked full-time too. To worsen matters, she is a single parent of two kids—six and ten-year old. I don't know how she juggled both but every time she came to class, this student looked tired, stressed, worn out, and always late. Every attempt to convince her to cut down on her classes fell on deaf ears. Her excuse was that if she stops going to work, she and her kids will die of starvation and will be homeless because the father of her kids never took any responsibility...(sobs)... One day I got an email from her informing me she can't make it anymore... (more sobs).



Dan attributed this group of students' not persisting in college to long hours of work:

Recent high school students from CPS have unrealistic expectations about college. They still expect the lower expectations from high school. They (the students) want to finish as soon as possible without trying to adjust their jobs schedules and family responsibilities to the new college reality. Because of this, some of them work long hours. And they come to class exhausted. At one time I had more than six of these students in my class. Because of their working long hours, they couldn't cope with the class and they quit...all six of them!

Josh also stated that getting jobs can constrain students from staying in college: I also know that many of our students get jobs during the semester and often they are then unable to return to class due to their jobs. Let me give you a quick example. Kyes [pseudonym] is a student. He just got a job as a delivery driver with Amazon. Kyes told me this job will pay him more than \$15 an hour, give him good incentives plus the fact that if he does extra, his paycheck will be huge. This kind of inducement captured Kyes' attention away from his academics and, like I said earlier on, he was unable to return to class because of this job.

### ***Theme 7: College/Campus Environment***

There was also the perception that the nature of college/campus environment itself could impede the persistence of first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC. Several respondents perceived that first-year, full-time students could not persist through

their first year at MCCC because the college/campus environment might not have been conducive for or welcoming to these students. Kristal stated:

I also believe that the classrooms themselves are in no way conducive for learning half of the time. They are either way too hot and there is no circulation of air or way too cold. Students are not going to be able to learn if they are not comfortable. The computers, SMART boards and projectors are often on and off as well.

Temika said that an unfavorable, unfriendly, and a less welcoming college/campus environment and culture can cause first-year, full-time students not to persist at the college through the first year to completion:

Since the college has a diverse student body—economically, socially, and ethnically—the curriculum, personnel, and services need to reflect that. In order to succeed, they (the students) need to be able to relate. The opposite is the case...the college does not truly reflect its diversity. Students can't relate because the college atmosphere isn't conducive for them. Feeling a sense of belonging is important. And they don't because the college environment isn't favorable or accommodating...We have lost many good students because our expression of diversity ain't it!

Aaron tended to concur with other respondents on how the unconducive nature of some campuses could impede first-year students' persistence at MCCC; pointing out:

A conducive environment is an effective ground that enables one to successfully complete one's academic objectives. For example, a notorious school that lacks

discipline amongst the student body or where all forms of vices such as immoral behaviors exist may not allow students to perform well academically. Some schools encourage students to form clubs that are academically embedded. I'm not saying that immoral conditions exist in the college. I've observed though that some of our campuses aren't friendly or welcoming. Some students told me, for instance, that social or academically-embedded clubs of their interests weren't existent in the college. And, "our efforts to bring this to the attention of students affairs have yielded no results...it's just frustrating!" expressed one of the students.

***Theme 8: Lack of Mentorship Programs/Professional Mentors/Coaches***

A couple of participants shared their perceptions on the effect of lack of mentorship programs or presence of professional mentors/coaches on first-year students at MCCC. Josh stated that lack of established mentorship (faculty and peer mentoring) programs on MCCC campuses can dissuade first-year, full-time students from persisting at the college:

I've already shared with you the story of a student who looked up to his uncle for mentorship. Being the first born and the first to go to college in his household, this student looked up to his uncle for mentorship. And true to expectation, his uncle had a positive influence on and became a role model for this student. He spends time with him (his uncle) weekly to review his academic activities and listen to his uncle share life experiences worth emulating. See? That's external. Internally, outside the advisors and a couple of faculties interested in mentoring

these students, there isn't any established mentorship programs in this college. Neither are there visible presences of professional mentors and coaches whom these students can turn to learn life experiences order than academic activities. Some people might argue that there are advisor and counselors in the college. I agree, there are. But counselors and advisors have job descriptions which put them at parallel with the requirements of mentoring. I can also tell you on authority that some of our students are neither enthusiastic to meet with their advisors nor comfortable to see the counselors at the Wellness Center. Because of the way they feel, they bottle up their feelings or whatever is happening to them. Result? Your guess is as good as mine.

Dan pointed out that there was also non-existence of or minimal presences of professionally trained mentors on these campuses to serve first-year, full-time students' needs can lead them to decide not to stay through their first year at MCCC:

Faculty AND peer mentors are minimal. They should be required. Mentored students achieve their graduation goals. Those that have mentors, use a tutor, ask for help, visit their instructors are the ones that achieve their goals in graduating. Those that don't achieve the opposite. Some students have complained to me about the absence of faculty and peer mentor on campuses. When you point to the availability of advisors and counselors, students often brush that off, *"Those people don't have my time. Why should I go to them? I need someone I can go to any time without appointments, to discuss my issues and he or she would have enough time for me."* What I'm saying, in essence, is that the paltry presence of

faculty and peer mentors on our college campuses is hurting rather helping our first-year students especially. They need time from faculty and peers. You can say this is an unnecessary demand giving the nature of faculties schedules. Tell you what? That's one of the biggies...we're losing these first-year students!

***Theme 9: Lack of Student-Faculty/Advisor-Relationship***

Lack of student-faculty/advisor-relationship was identified as inimical to first-year students' persistence. A couple of interviewees asserted that lack of relationship between students, faculty members, advisors, and mentors can cause first-year students not to stay in college through their first year to completion. According to Aaron:

Not being in good communication with their instructors or mentors or advisors put s first-year students in jeopardy of not being able to confront the challenges of college. As you already know, college advisors assist students to plan and tract their academic pathways and progress in college. On the other hand, mentors serve as role-models to students who look up to them and share in both their (mentors) social and academic experiences. For students to have the best out of their social and academic experiences a in college like ours, there must be an established proactive relationship; call it a kind of "bond" between faculty and students, or students and mentors, or advisors and students. A number of my students tell me they don't have any relationship with either their instructors or advisors. Some tell me in a semester, for instance, if they visit their advisors at all, it's just once! Some students also say their relationship with their instructors begin and end in the classroom. That speaks volumes, right? Without such

bonding, students can hardly confront and/or overcome the challenges of college.

When they cannot confront the challenges of college because of a lack of relationship between them, faculty, mentors, or advisors, students end up dropping out...they drop out even before the completion of year one.

Dan added that frustration can result from students' inability to secure meetings with advisors; hence taking decisions that can lead to their not persisting in college through the first year. Reiterating an earlier story to emphasize the above point, Dan stated:

Like I said earlier on, students occasionally express frustration about scheduling and communication with their advisor. While this obviously isn't ideal, it does indicate a proactive approach to the students' own education, which I can assist the students to rectify. The students who have nothing to say about their advisers concern me the most, since they most likely haven't attempted to meet with them! Keeping things to themselves can result in frustration and, ultimately, lead these students into deciding to quit college.

***Theme 10: Problems with Provision of Information About the Demands of College***

A couple of respondents observed that first-year students' inability to persist at MCCC through the first year stemmed from lack of awareness of and misjudgment about college demands. They argued that these students' unawareness of and misjudgment about college were as a result of improper provision of information about the college.

Stated Fiona:

I have encountered some students in their first year who truly demonstrate lack of awareness and clearly not understanding college expectations. For instance, at the beginning of the school year, I provide my students with information on the school library, course syllabus and course outline. I still hear students say, *“I did not know we have a test today so did not study for it”* or *“why did you send us an email reminder?”* or *“I have the right to be given a makeup test if I failed.”*

These excuses show how shallow these students’ understanding of the demands of college is...I bet you, overwhelmed by what they are into can force these students to drop out of college.

From Roslyn’s perspective, failure to familiarize first-year, full-time students at MCCC with the college experience tantamount to their being unwelcomed at the college; a situation that can impede their persistence. Roslyn observed:

Students, especially first-time college students, are not familiarized with the college life, processes, policies, and challenges they may face. Lacking in this college is a mandatory districtwide orientation of ALL first-year students. Going through the first year experience by way of well-defined FYS orientation, they are given the opportunities to do that exactly. They become more knowledgeable about the college programs, services, and meet many key staff members, that can assist them through their educational journey. But these provisions are lacking. and students, in their characteristic way, complain of not being well familiarized with the college experiences. Sometimes, these students talk about this situation in comparison with what their peers in other colleges are experiencing. They feel

unwelcomed here. Would you blame them if they don't complete their first year of college here?

***Theme 11: Lack of FYS MCCC-Wide Orientation***

Temika contended that first year experience (FYE) existed at MCCC. However, it is neither built up, strengthened, nor harnessed properly across campuses; a condition that can confuse students and drive them to deciding not to persist through the first year at the college:

I can tell you this much: no, there isn't any properly organized FYS orientation in this college. Students felt going through an organized FYS orientation could have helped improve their knowledge of college and its expectations. Many students have confronted me to know why such doesn't occur in the college.

That said, I must point out that FYE exists across MCCC campuses. The problem is as we speak, FYE is not well built up, properly strengthened or harnessed across these campuses. I know something is being done about it, but this effort is going at a snail pace. Look, right now, we have the College Success class, but as a stand-alone, it can only do so much, and it varies across the college so is how it is offered, if at all. Since the course isn't combined with other first-year supports, it can't improve FYE or student persistence.

***Theme 12: Transportation Difficulties***

Finally, Elisa observed that a key pointer to first-year students not persisting at MCCC was transportation difficulties:



External factors, like transportation difficulties, a long commute via public transportation with multiple transfers to get here (which goes back to attendance—they don't come, they arrive really late). Several of our students take trains and buses to come to school. Because of multiple transfers involved, the long commute has taken its toll on the students. By the time they get here, these students are either frustrated, or tired or, for most part, disinterested in any college activities (academic or social). A number of my students have told me how uncomfortable they feel with these long commutes and how reluctant they are in returning to this college.

## **RQ2: Addressing Impediments/Enhancing Supports to First-Year Student**

### **Persistence**

To address impediments and thus improve supports for the persistence of first-year, full-time students through their first year at MCCC, themes ranging from increasing support systems on campuses, instituting and maintaining students' involvement, provision/expansion of available resources and services, advising students on employment-related matters, and strengthening of student-faculty relationship, emerged. Early connection to a reliable advisor, easing of Financial Aid restrictions, broadening the scope of student evaluation, use of former students as speakers in class, and the utilization of infographics were other emergent themes.

### ***Theme 1: Increase of Support Systems***

Five of the 10 interviewees suggested that increasing or expanding the support systems on MCCC campuses will boost support for the persistence of first-year students

at MCCC. Jasmin suggested the increase in support from faculty, staff, and administration, noting:

Campus support—college advisors, tutors, and student activities! Most of our student body is first-generation college students and are working students. They need help in balancing their work, family and school life. They are looking for guidance in time management as well as with their educational journey. Let me give you an example. Last semester, I observed several students in my class were either coming late to or sleeping in class. I decided to have a conversation with each of them. I was shocked to hear each of them tell me how they were struggling to combine school and work, how their family situation is affecting their academic focus and balance, or how they're yet to come to terms with college life. We had a long conversation. Bottom line, I took it upon myself to discuss these issues with my dean and some advisors. We mapped out how to register this category of students, that is, should they survive the semester and return the next. We also decided on how to connect to available support systems and also to get them involved in extra/cocurricular activities on campus such as the Wellness Center, clubs, student government, sports and games. Some of these students came back this semester. With more involvement from advisor and instructors, connection to needed support services, and changes in their course enrollments, these students are still here with us.

Fiona recommended that faculty and staff job descriptions should be expanded to accommodate the needs of first-year students; stating that such an expansion of job description will remind:

Faculty and staff that they serve students in more ways than just classroom teaching and office preparation. They mentor student in the educational and career fields, in further education universities selection, scholarship and grant process, writing recommendation letters, assist in finding financial resources to fulfill their dreams. With the support of our faculty/staff and administration, our students can excel in all areas (academically and socially) they are prepared for their future endeavors (further studies or workforce).

Full exposure of first-year, full-time students to available campus support systems can help to overcome and/or improved the persistence of this group of students at MCCC.

Temika pointed out:

Currently, MCCC has several supports that help students persist and complete their degree. For example, Academic Advising, the Wellness Center, the Disabilities Access Center, the Veterans Center, and discipline-specific tutoring. The main element that makes a difference between successful persistence and failure to persist is a student's ability to understand when they need to seek outside help. For example, engaging with a tutor, advisors, and counselors. On the other hand, exposure to on-campus support centers and students actually using these centers (not just being introduced to them, but being required to use them, as appropriately, in some capacity). If students note that class requirements are tied

to their using available support systems on campuses, students will take things seriously. Some students who took my class in the fall admitted the usefulness of our “icebreaker” exercise in class which involved locating, cataloguing, and journaling the use of support centers on campus. One of them told me, “Professor, I’m glad you made that icebreaker exercise compulsory for us. I don’t know for others but for me, that exercise was more useful to me than the grades I got from participation. Now, I can easily find whatever support I need not only on this campus but also on other campuses of MCCC where I take other classes.” Maybe if the college adopts this strategy, it might help to improve the persistence of these students.

Also, Elisa suggested that the MCCC needs to hold regular enlightenment sessions with first-year students’ families to acquaint them (the families) with what supportive roles they need to play in their children’s/wards’ lives while they (children/wards) are in college:

I believe that the students who have support from home are much more likely to persist than other students. I believe, for instance, that daycare is a big reason that our students miss. Often students report that their babysitter is no longer available or is not reliable. This is where family members can step in to help. I have also heard transportation is a big one. A student’s car breaks down and they do not have money to fix it. Elements that make a difference between persistence and failure to persist. I am aware that family members might have their own concerns to take care of. But if they’re made to understand that their contributions can

make the difference between their children staying in college and dropping out, things might work differently.

Finally, Kristal suggested giving more financial support to students who, given their circumstances, might not be eligible for financial aid:

As I said before, from personal interaction with some of the first-year students, the fear of completing their academic career as a result of financial issues plays a fundamental factor on their chosen disciplines. I gave you a scenario where some students come to school without even an item as common as a pencil to write. Others rely on copying a whole textbook from their fellow students to properly study and do their assignments. In other words, financial obstacle is a serious impediment for the progress of some students or for making some students not to achieve their academic goals. For example, a student who is brilliant or intelligent might not be awarded a scholarship or qualify for FA [financial aid] to continue on the path of his or her studies because of certain financial circumstances. My suggestion in that case is that the leadership of MCCC thinks of other ways to provide more financial support for students who are not eligible for FA [financial aid].

### ***Theme 2: Instituting and Maintaining Student Involvement***

A couple of participants interviewed recommended that MCCC should put in place viable programs and activities (social and academic) that will involve first-year students in one form or another to keep them involved with the college. Asked what type

of programs or activities can involve these students to cause them to remain in college through the first year, Erick responded,

Create more clubs (social and academic), the TRiO program [TRiO is a term coined to represent three federal programs—Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services], or similar organizations on MCCC campuses to cater for students who want to join! I teach and coordinate the TRiO program on campus. My position keeps me in constant contact with students enrolled in this program. I can attest to how exuberant and engaged my students are every time we meet. The creation of more clubs, programs, and activities for the students, for instance, would improve their positive memories, connections with their fellow classmates and would likely lead to their persistence as well I would think.

Aaron submitted that MCCC should encourage first-year students to form and join clubs to involve with others; adding that a show of seriousness to get involved improves their academic performances as well as support their persistence in the college through the first year:

Some schools encourage students to form clubs that are academically embedded. For example, the formation of a literary club does provide its members the opportunity to engage or forced to finish required number of novels before the end of a given semester. This positive idea propels students to set themselves apart from other students of the institution who may lack such membership. This is what MCCC should do.

Students that fall within the group of those who are serious will do well in their academic career. For those who associate with those who indulge in frivolous ways of life will not perform well in their academic pursuit. For example, students who prefer joining some bad gangs or cult activities will end up getting into serious problems that will disrupt their academic enhancement. Those who seek wise counsel from their parents and their teachers, including their classmates who are serious will not deviate from being successful. Because they persisted in following the right path, their effort will yield maximum dividend.

***Theme 3: Provision/Expansion of Available Resources and Services***

To assist in improving first-year students' persistence, a couple of the interviewees proposed providing more or expanding available resources and services on MCCC campuses. Noted Temika:

As of now, resources, services, and opportunities for students' growth exist but are limited in this college. Providing more and expanding the resources and services available and, of course, encouraging students to assume positions and responsibilities will keep them involved and stabilized. If an institution is providing opportunities for students to grow in many competitive fields, students will be more ready to face any obstacle that come along their way to completion or transitioning into more challenging roles. For example, giving them opportunity to grow as leaders and as mentors. This can be experienced under student clubs, as student government officers, serving on college committees, college senate, having them be part of decision-making roles. I have observed

students taking lead roles in recruitment/registration events, campuswide or districtwide. These roles engage students, provide them with opportunities to grow, and expose them to future responsibilities as leaders. Like I said earlier, if an institution is providing opportunities for students to grow in many competitive fields, students will be more ready to face any obstacle that comes along their way to completion or transitioning into more challenging roles...they (students, I mean) will not want to leave until they've achieved their goals.

Jasmin suggested more outreach to students to acquaint them with the availability of useful resource and services on MCCC campuses. The interviewee also suggested extending the hours of services on campuses so students can take advantage of them:

I believe that much more outreach is necessary. The WC must be open longer hours Monday–Friday. I also wonder if we could offer a drop-in daycare. There are so many single parents who don't have anyone in the family to turn to last minute. I also feel strongly that the food pantry must be better advertised. A student drew my attention to the food pantry when she asked me whether there was somewhere, she could go to get some free groceries for her use since she had no money on her to purchase the groceries. Then it struck me I have wanted to tell my students about it, yet I don't even know where it is. That is a shame and should not be happening. Too many students are dealing with so much drama and desperately need those services. Those services should be well advertised for students to know they're available for their use.



***Theme 4: Employment-Related Matters***

To enhance supports for the persistence of first-year students at MCCC, Dan recommended MCCC leadership advising first-year students who combine full-time jobs with full-time school to reverse either their job or academic schedules:

Encourage students that work full time to be part-time students or reverse could be a better beginning for some of our students. From experience, it is tough to combine full-time job with full-time schooling. A young man in my program consistently decried the effect of this combination on him. “I am always tired and look beat-up. Sometimes, I can’t think straight or do anything useful...I’m always late on my schoolwork because I’ve to sleep and sleep and sleep...!” I had to advise him to think of being either a part-time student or take on a part-time job, that is, if he really cared about his education. The young man took my advice and opted for a part-time job while taking on full-time schooling. He graduated from MCCC last year. Now he holds a full-time well-paying job.

Josh shared that one important strategy to adopt is teachers talking to these students about their future especially as it relates to college and their future career:

Teachers need to talk with students about the benefits of college and the future of new jobs or careers and the new economy. Teachers also need to have a serious but sincere conversation with students not only on how acquiring a college degree positively impacts their career/job choice but also on the concept of making money. A serious, sincere conversation might convince students not to quit college but to take their academic pursuits seriously. Several of my fellow

instructors have told me of how having serious conversations with their students on college and career have turned things around for their students. Listen, I tell my students the choices they make today will determine what they achieve in future. And they get it. Sincere conversation yields positive results.

***Theme 5: Strengthening of Student-Faculty Relationship***

A couple of interviewees expressed that to enhance support for the persistence of first-year students at MCCC, the relationship between students and faculty must be strengthened. In Jasmin's opinion:

I remember my telling you the story of Char earlier on in the interview, right? Like I said then, Char believed she would have earned a better grade in her most difficult subject, science, had she received more help from her instructor. Char reported she relied heavily on tutors because the teacher lectured and "talked at" and did not stop to ensure she understood the material. She stated he did not seem to care whether or not she understood and never reviewed material either before or after a test. Char told me that the teacher's attitude put her off and that it not only "killed" her interest in science but also made her debate the essence of being in college. She added that but for the persistent supports she received from teachers like her composition teacher, she would have quit college.

This example presents us with two sides of the coin—care and concern versus not showing care or concern for our students. In my opinion, showing our students more care and concern will counter any decision students like Char would have made to quit this college. So, what should we do? Simple, both the

administration and teachers should seek more proactive ways to show care and concern to students like, Char's composition teacher did. This might mean the administration calling for a meeting of departmental heads, teachers and students to fashion out best practices that would strengthen student-faculty relationship in the college and demonstrate to students that the college cares about their (students') welfare and supports their academic progress and success.

Aaron reechoed his believe in strengthening student-faculty relationship. He further suggested two strategies for strengthening this relation; but cautioned that although these strategies worked for him, they were not a one-for-all fit:

As I told you in our last interview, I strongly believe adopting workable strategies that will strengthen the relationship between lecturers or advisors and students will likely build confidence in and cause our students to persist at MCCC. Mind you, strategies can't be the same...so I can't suggest to you anything concrete. Whatever workable strategies there are depend on the individual lecturer or advisor. Because the lecturer or advisor must be interested and prepared...it isn't an on-paper-talk...it must be practicalized for students to see and believe. So, here're two strategies I adopted at the beginning of my classes every semester while at the MCCC:

One, I tell my students to appoint or nominate a fellow student (male or female) to represent them. This individual acts as an intermediary between me and the students. If there is any issue or information to be disseminated, the class representative would assume that responsibility by informing the entire class. The

lecturers can delegate some important duties of trust to the class representative. Two, I try to practically make myself available to my students. That means, maintaining an open-door policy with my students keeping appointments at a minimal... that way, they know I'm always there for them. How do I mean? I waited for students to ask questions or discuss their concerns (class or not class related) after every class session. Also, I extended my office hour every class day by an hour (except when I have other engagements). These practices ensure quick information flow, ease tensions, promote communication, and strengthen the relationship between my students and me. Like I said earlier on, these strategies might or might not work for others. But they worked for me. Point is, we must find every workable means to win the trust of our students so they can remain at MCCC.

***Theme 6: Early Connection of Students to Advisors***

Roslyn emphasized the need for the college to connect first-year students to knowledgeable advisors; arguing that taking such an action can improve the persistence of first-year, full-time students to successful completion of the first year at MCCC:

I beg to repeat myself. The earlier these students know their academic direction and plan towards it the better prepared they will be. That is why I will emphasize that if we want to stem impediments to the persistence of first-year students in this college, we need to connect them as early as possible to knowledgeable advisors in the college. My position is rooted in numerous positive experiences with advisors students have shared with me, especially in terms of navigating their

course offerings so as to successfully complete their program here. For example, a student told me, “Mr. Xi [pseudonym] was my advisor. I was connected with him in my first semester on this campus. Mr. Xi helped streamline my academic plan and advised me on what to do to successfully complete my associate degree in applied science. He also assisted me in my transfer to a four-year college plan. But for him, I wonder what I could have done.” Like I said, the earlier the connection to knowledgeable advisors, the better for our students.

***Theme 7: Easing Financial Aid Restrictions***

Erick advised that to further improve the persistence of first-year students at MCCC, Financial Aid restrictions need to be eased to enable students to register for the course(s) they are interested in taking at MCCC. For this to happen, Erick called on the college administration to:

Make it as easy as possible for students to take whatever classes they want.

Financial Aid restrictions (factual or perceived) often encourage students to forgo classes they might otherwise enjoy (world languages, arts, humanities, literature, etc.). If this means recommending the Associate in General Studies “pathway” for more students, I’d recommend it. Students have told me how difficult it is to register for courses, which means they either give up, enroll in whichever classes are easiest to secure, or go with whatever courses their advisors recommend without question. Unfortunately, the MCCC registration software prioritizes certain subjects and fails to recommend others, such as the arts and world languages. Students have also said that they have been prevented from registering

for a particular course because it's "not part of their program." This is a failure on the part of recommendation software, as well as the advising process, since every degree the College offers requires a certain number of elective credits, which can be satisfied with just about any course in the catalog.

***Theme 8: Broadening the Scope of Student Evaluation***

Josh suggested MCCC broadens the scope of students' evaluation by redefining the metrics of success, as one crucial strategy which might assist to improve the persistence of first-year students through their first year to degree completion at MCCC:

Broaden the scope of how we evaluate student success. Just because students don't persist or complete doesn't mean they didn't get or have a valuable experience. As the largest community college system in the Midwest, MCCC has the ability to re-define measures of student success. Students have told me that they decided to enroll in courses at this college because their older sibling attended courses here. Let's suppose the older sibling decided not to transfer and simply stopped taking courses before completing a degree. By popular measures, that student is not counted as a success. However, if the older sibling's recommendation led to the younger siblings enrollment, persistence, and completion, I'd argue the older sibling's experience at the college had a direct impact on younger sibling's "success." These are much more difficult metrics to employ, but they'd yield a far more complete picture of student "success" at this college.

***Theme 9: Use of Senior or Former Students as Speakers in Class***

An interviewee suggested the use of senior or ex-student speakers during class sessions to share their FYEs at MCCC; with an aim of externally motivating and helping first-year students not only learn from others' experiences but also to stay their academic course at MCCC. Jasmin stated,

One of the strategies I constantly used to help my students overcome their challenges and fears during their first year in college is making it possible for them to gain testimonies from former students. I invite former students who are either in their senior year in college or have graduated to my class. They will narrate their experiences during their first year and the approaches they adopted to overcome their challenges. In that case, my first-year students would be able ask questions and relate to these experiences of the former students; thus, it helps them to boost their confidence and overcome their personal barriers and obstacle and as a result improve their persistence in school.

***Theme 10: Utilization of Infographics***

Finally, Josh recommended the use of infographics to help overcome as well as improve the persistence of first-year students at MCCC. According to Josh,

To help my students overcome impediments and improve their persistence in School I used infographic to explain cost and benefit analysis of having a college degree and non-college degree. These graphic pictures help students to 1) overcome the fear of perceived high college tuition through the lens of tuition versus earnings 2) that college is a good personal investment 3) it prepares them

for a lifelong career. Again, I demystified the fact going to college is not all about incurring debts because there are various scholarships and grants available, with different requirements. Once they are aware of the advantages of getting a college degree and that there are free funds at out there, it become a motivation for hard work and persistence to succeed.

### *Outlying Themes*

Two outlying themes, bureaucratic inconsistency and information technology (IT) problems at MCCC, emerged from the interviews. Erick questioned MCCC leadership's bureaucratic inconsistency, especially in relation to inconsistent practices in training advisors and assigning personnel to teach the College Success course. The respondent also expressed dissatisfaction with IT problems such as website dysfunction and other online problems. This respondent believed that the poor handling of these problems was inimical to students' academic success at MCCC. As Erick stated,

I think you should ask us how bureaucracy and reinvention is affecting the academic performance and the college at large... Here is my list: application process is too long, too many steps and too many mistakes; new student portal is difficult to use and more time-consuming. Most of the students do not know how to use it. MCCC websites are not updated...sometimes they are updated with wrong information. I personally taught CSS 101 a couple of times, I am a college advisor, I have two master's degrees, one of them in Psychology, and they will give the CSS 101 section to any teacher who needs to meet their caseload without



taking into account their competencies to teach this class. So, politics prevail over quality, which is what is happening at all levels.

These themes are similar to complaints one might expect to hear in almost every academic institution. Nevertheless, they were perceptions that arose from interviewees in response my questions. Although not expressed by all, no other of my interviewees disagreed with these perceptions.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the findings from the analysis of the initial and follow-up interviews with the 10 faculty members who teach or have taught the College Success course at MCCC. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of these faculty members on what impedes or supports first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC and what can be done to improve the persistence of this group of students through their first year at the college. Using Creswell's (2014) six-step strategy, I analyzed the data collected for emerging themes. Two main RQs guided my data collection and analysis: "What do faculty members teaching the college success seminar who work with the first-year, full-time students at MCCC perceive as impediments and supports to the persistence of MCCC students through the first year?" and "What suggestions do these faculty members have for overcoming impediments and improving the support of first-year students' persistence at MCCC?"

Several themes emerged from the data analyzed for both main RQs. Themes such as motivation, sense of belonging, early connection to a reliable advisor, mentorship programs, and faculty support and assistance, academic structure of MCCC, and the

provision of free non-traditional credit classes, emerged as what supported or facilitated the persistence of first-year students from the beginning to the successful completion of their first year at MCCC. Other themes, for example, lack of support systems, finance-related situations, lack of students' involvement, employment-related matters, student-faculty/advisor relationship, resources and services, family dynamics/obligations, provision of information about college, mandatory FYS orientation, mentorship, college/campus environment, and transportation, developed as impediments to first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC.

On suggestions about improving supports for the persistence of first-year, full-time students through their first year to degree completion at MCCC, respondents had a medley of perspectives that generated themes which included: increase of support systems, students' re-involvement, provision of more resources and services, institution of mentorship programs, strengthening student-faculty relationship, early connection to knowledgeable advisors, and easing financial aid restrictions. Other themes that also emerged were broadening the scope of students' evaluation, employment-related matters, utilization of senior and ex-students as speakers in class, and the use of infographics. Chapter 5 will include the discussion of the findings of this study vis-à-vis the theoretical framework used and the literature reviewed. The chapter will also contain limitations of the study, implications of the findings, recommendations, and a chapter conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore what impedes or supports the persistence of first-year, full-time U.S. community college students during and through their first year in college from the perspectives of faculty members teaching or have taught the College Success Seminar at MCCC. Employing an interview protocol featuring open-ended questions, I interviewed 10 faculty members at MCCC to explore their perspectives.

I utilized two RQs to guide my research: “What do faculty members teaching the college success seminar who work with the first-year, full-time students at MCCC perceive as impediments and supports to the persistence of MCCC students through the first year?” and “What suggestions do these faculty members have for overcoming impediments and improving the support of first-year students’ persistence at MCCC?” In response to RQ 1, interviewees indicated that persistence of first-year, full-time students through the first year at MCCC connects to students experiencing a sense of belonging, early connection to a reliable advisor, students displaying motivation to persist, as well as mentorship program, faculty support, and supportive academic structure. Furthermore, interviewees also suggested that problems with support systems, finance, family, and employment-related situations, lack of students’ involvement, inadequate resources and services, mandatory FYS orientation, college/campus environment, student-faculty relationship/minimal presence of mentors impeded first-year, full-time students’ persistence through their first year at MCCC. In response to RQ 2, I registered the

following suggestions from interviewees for addressing and improving support for the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC: the increase of support systems, instituting and maintaining students' involvement, provision/expansion of available resources and services, advising students on employment-related matters, strengthening student-faculty relationship, and the use of former students and infographics in class.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this section, I focus on interpreting my findings and comparing them to those of the literature I reviewed in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework I employed in this study. I also reference additional literature that relates to data-based themes in my study.

#### **Interpretation of RQ 1 Findings**

In this section I interpret each of the main findings that emerged in response to RQ1: What do faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar who work with the first-year, full-time students at MCCC perceive as impediments and supports to the persistence of MCCC students through the first year?

#### ***Students' Motivations to Persist***

Aaron expressed, "motivation, either from within the college or outside the college environment, is one important factor that helps students to persist here at MCCC." Similarly, Frey et al. (2018) described motivation as one of the many intricate predictors of students' academic success and their decision to persist in college to completion. Jasmin also said, "I believe motivation is a good reason for students to excel and persist here," which Tinto (2017b) supported. Further, D'Lima et al. (2014) stated that motivation is either external or internal, intrinsic or extrinsic, and has positive impact

on students' academic performance and hence their ability to persist in college. For example, Kristal stated, "teachers have a lot to do in encouraging their students to persist in college." Research has also supported that students attribute their interests and motivation to their teachers (Astin 1984, 2015). Therefore, motivation, in whichever form, serves not only as an important influencer but also as a predictor of students' success and persistence in college (Wells et al., 2014).

### ***Students' Sense of Belonging***

Sense of belonging, as previously defined, is an important outcome that evolves from the college experiences and, invariably affects students' decision to persist (Tachine et al., 2017). Erick said, "In my experience, students who feel like they belong are most likely to persist." Elisa also explained, "Some of my students have...confided in me that they are in this college because they feel they belonged here." Students developing both social and academic sense of belonging in the first year exposes them to other forms of involvements which, in turn, boosts their learning and persistence (Tinto, 2017). Temika reflected, "a student can assimilate better and relate to the environment better if they see similarities around them...That encourages and assists students to persist in this college to completion." This view aligns with Denson and Bowman's (2015) observation that when students find similarities (social and academic) they can relate to within the college environment, these enable them to commit to and persist in that college.

Interviewees' thoughts in relation to the theme of sense of belonging also substantiate an aspect of Tinto's (1993) student departure theory. Tinto theorized that students' experiences before and during college can affect the extent to which they

integrate into the college's academic and social environment. In turn, the ability or inability of students to integrate into their college environment can predict their decision to either persist or not persist in the college (Tinto, 2017). As Erick noted, "Students who make themselves belong, either by obtaining leadership positions...may have that sense of belonging that binds and/or commits them to the college."

### ***Early Connection of Students to a Reliable Advisor***

Students are aware of the important role academic advisors play in their college life (Saba' Ayon, 2015). Roslyn acknowledged, "When students are connected from the beginning with advisors...these students will stay in college and, ultimately, succeed." Roslyn added, "we need to connect them as early as possible to knowledgeable advisors in the college." Academic advisors follow-up and discuss potential intervention strategies with students, assist in their educational decision-making, bridge personal connections to their institution, and provide students with personalized experiences (Donaldson et al., 2016; Reddick et al., 2014). Surmising, Dan reflected, "numerous students...shared their positive experiences with advisors in terms of navigating the course offerings at the college, as well as engaging in meaningful dialogue about their plans after college."

### ***Mentorship Program, Faculty Support, and Supportive Academic Structure***

Temika indicated, "I believe that mentorship program is an important reason for students to persist here in MCCC." This perspective connects with views of previous studies on this theme. For instance, Yomotov et al. (2017) found that peer mentoring helps students feel more involved, supported, and persistent in college. Mayo (2013) added that because of the criticality of first semester to first-year students' decision-

making to either stay or leave college, designing structured programs (like the mentorship program) that focuses on various strategies and interventions tailored toward helping students adapt, especially in their first semester, might cause first-year students to improve their learning, emulate worthwhile life experiences, and persist in college.

Additionally, Jasmin stated, “Students say what supports or facilitates the persistence of their first year is the care and concern they feel from instructors.” Jasmin’s opinion suggests a confirmation of previous studies that linked faculty-student interaction to students’ commitment and persistence in college (Nitecki, 2011; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004). Nitecki (2011), for instance, argued that faculty availability and faculty advisement were crucial to students’ decision to remain in college through their first year. As Jasmin noted, “For the most part, instructors were the support that helped her complete her first year more than resources available on campus.”

Erick also explained, “The academic structure of MCCC greatly supports some first-year students’ ability to remain in college. The academic structure...provides adequate environment and flexibility for...students to thrive...maneuver and...balance...their work schedules and other daily activities.” Flexibility in learning increases access to higher education (Andrade & Alden-Rivers, 2019, p. 1). The academic flexibility community colleges offer provides enough room for first-year students to navigate through the rigors of college as well as harness their work and other social schedules (Crisp & Mina, 2012). For example, Aaron noted, “Provision of free non-traditional credit class such as ESL program for adult students helps students...to

persist in college.” Nontraditional courses assist adult students to persist in college (Ellis, 2019).

### ***Problems with Support Systems***

Most of my interviewees raised concerns about problems with support systems available to their advisees. Fiona reflected, “Key elements that impede persistence? I would say housing insecurity...day/childcare is a big issue...In particular, the Wellness Center’s lack of hours available to our students.” Support promotes students’ success and is most useful when connected to and integrated into the learning environment (Tinto, 2012, as cited in Seidman, 2012); therefore, it is important to have support systems in place for first-year college students (Budgen et al., 2014). Conversely, inadequacy or absence of support systems might make first-year students feel discouraged and end up departing the college (Budgen et al., 2014). Elisa observed, “Students have told me stories of not being aware of the existence of such support systems in place.” Without support, first-year students, especially those who entered college underprepared, struggle to succeed or stay in college (Tinto, 2012).

Teachers play crucial roles in assisting and motivating their students, especially in engaging them in meaningful learning activities (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Jasmin also recalled that a student “told me she thinks she would have earned a better grade in her most difficult subject, science, had she received more help from her instructor.” Thus, faculty support in providing needed assistance to their students positively affects students’ decision to successfully stay in college through their first year (Nitecki, 2011).



Additionally, for students to succeed in their academic performance, they may need their families' support (DeFauw et al., 2018). Kristal noted, "Lack of support from a spouse or significant other greatly impacts some students' ability to persist in college." Expressing the similar view, Josh added, "Lack of family support...impacts students' academic participation and outcome." Roslyn also expressed, "Some parents sometimes exhibit some lukewarm attitude towards...helping out their child(ren)... Such lukewarm attitude causes a disruption of their child(ren)'s school activities."

### ***Finance, Family, and Employment-Related Situations***

Financial support directly impacts first-year students' persistence. Financial pressure is one of the factors responsible for students departing college (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012). Fiona said, "financial situation...can cause our students not to persist in college." Josh also asserted, "From personal interaction with some of the first-year students, the fear of completing their academic career as a result of financial issues plays a fundamental factor on their chosen disciplines." Giving an example, Kristal stated, "a promising, young female student...stated in class...her boyfriend pressured her to work and earn an income instead of going to school. This student soon stopped coming to class."

Community college students also have numerous demands outside college (e.g., being a new parent) that can affect their success and subsequent persistence in college (Porter & Umbach, 2019). Jasmin stated, "Family obligations can inhibit these first-year students from tarrying in college...most of them are either parents or siblings to younger ones constrained to place family obligations first before their education." Elisa also noted

that a student of hers, “came to class a couple of times after the baby was born; however, he soon stopped coming to class.” Additionally, Fiona explained,

I had a student who took full-time classes and worked full-time too. To worsen matters, she is a single parent of two kids—6 and 10-year old...every time she came to class, this student looked tired, stressed, worn out, and always late.

Work hours also affect students’ persistence at community colleges (Nakajima et al., 2012). Dan added, “At one time I had more than six of these students in my class. Because of their working long hours, they couldn’t cope with the class and they quit...all six of them!” Josh noted, “I also know that many of our students get jobs during the semester and often they are then unable to return to class due to their jobs.” Josh added, “Kyle just got a job as a delivery driver with Amazon. Kyes told me this job will pay him more than \$15 an hour, give him good incentives...he was unable to return to class.” When students’ abilities and expectations are challenged, they eventually stop coming to college (Tinto, 2012).

### ***Students’ Involvement and Persistence***

Involvement is an essential condition for students to commit themselves to and persist in college (Nagro et al., 2016). The more students are socially and academically involved (especially with their peers, faculty, staff, and the college environment), the more they are likely to learning, grow, and remain in college (Astin, 1984). On the other hand, noted that less social and academic involvement produces less motivation, aptitude, and a propensity to strive to succeed or persist in college (Huerta et al., 2018). Erick noted that an English 102 student worked from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. then took a class from 6

p.m. to 9 p.m., adding, “That student had markedly fewer opportunities to engage in the extracurricular learning that results from socializing and networking outside of class.”

Temika observed, “I’ve met other students who are responsible for taking care of their siblings or children, which also means they have less time to spend on campus outside of class.”

Teachers not engaging first-year students in meaningful conversations can also disengage first-year students from getting involved in their college. According to Josh, “Some of us teachers don’t give these students the chance to have meaningful conversations with us. By not doing so, we hinder students from not only expressing themselves but also not getting the help they need to truly know who they are.”

Involvement is a behavior-modification driver in students, and it is worth teachers’ recognition to enable them (teachers) device pedagogical strategies that incorporate meaningful learning activities in their classrooms (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). As Josh had observed, absence of these strategies might lead students to make “poor choices and judgements that sometimes make them end up dropping out of college.”

### ***Inadequate Resources and Services***

Consistent under-funding debars community colleges from catering for their students’ greatest needs—resources and services (The Century Foundation, 2019). Jasmin maintained, “The lack of resources, in particular, the Wellness Center’s lack of hours available to our students do not support students’ dire needs to process the trauma they are dealing with.” Roslyn observed, “We have a robust number of resources to support

first year students; however, I honestly do not know if students are finding out about it in a piecemeal way or not at all.” Community college students have competing priorities that can sway their focus away from finding out about resources and services on their college campuses (Porter & Umbach, 2019).

### ***College/Campus Environment and Persistence***

The college environment is a conduit for students’ academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993; 2012). Kristal observed that MCCC classrooms “themselves are in no way conducive for learning half of the time...Students are not going to be able to learn if they are not comfortable.” However, Temika noted, “the college does not truly reflect its diversity. Students can’t relate because the college atmosphere isn’t conducive for them.” Again, Tinto (1993, 2012) argued that a college environment motivates students to pursue their learning in a meaningful way and assists them to interact and connect with peers, faculty, other college staffers. But Aaron told me, “I’ve observed though that some of our campuses aren’t friendly or welcoming.” Additionally, according to Astin (1984), students must be involved in their college environment for growth and learning to occur. The responses of these interviewees, however, suggest a departure from Tinto (1993, 2012) and Astin’s (1984) postulations on the nature of a conducive college/campus environment.

### ***Absence of Student-Faculty/Advisor-Relationship and Minimal Presence of Mentors***

Research has noted a correlation between student–faculty relationship and the decision of students to persist or not to persist in college (Hoffman, 2014). Aaron observed, “Not being in good communication with their instructors or mentors or

advisors puts first-year students in jeopardy of not being able to confront the challenges of college.” Dan noted, “students occasionally express frustration about scheduling and communication with their advisor.” Ryan (2013) stated that students who have better relationship with their advisors perform well academically and are committed to the college. On the contrary, students who do not have better relationship with their advisors are susceptible to poor academic performance and departure from college (Ryan, 2013). Concluded Dan, “Keeping things to themselves can result in frustration and, ultimately, lead these students into deciding to quit college.”

Josh reflected, “Internally...there isn’t any established mentorship programs in this college. Neither are there visible presences of professional mentors and coaches.” Peterson (2016) stated that community colleges have well-run programs that promote, among others, one-on-one mentoring boosted peer-to-peer interactions. Dan added, “Faculty AND peer mentors are minimal... Mentored students achieve their graduation goals...Those that don’t achieve the opposite.” Gunn et al. (2017) asserted that mentees derive academic, psychological, emotional, and knowledge supports from their mentors.

### ***Lack of Mandatory First-Year Student Orientation***

Roslyn said, “Lacking in this college is a mandatory [MCCC]-wide orientation of ALL first-year students.” Hatch and Garcia (2017) characterized FYS orientation among the early procedures and processes first-year students need in college. Concurring with this view, Fiona noted, “I have encountered some students in their first year who truly demonstrate lack of awareness and clearly not understanding college expectations.” Roslyn added, “Students, especially first-time college students, are not familiarized with

the college life, processes, policies, and challenges they may face.” Temika explained that this is because “there isn’t any properly organized FYS orientation in this college.” These views corroborate existing studies on the importance of FYS orientation. For instance, Stoebe (2020) stated that in-depth orientation (on-ground or virtual) is important for first-year students because, as Pulcini (2017) explained, this orientation is a defining moment in the students’ transition to college process.

### ***Transportation Difficulties***

Elisa disclosed, “Because of multiple transfers involved, the long commute...these students are either frustrated, or tired or...disinterested in any college activities.” Elisa added, “A number of my students have told me how uncomfortable they feel with these long commutes and how reluctant they are in returning to this college.” These views align with existing literature. For instance, Troester-Trate (2019) noted that transportation-disadvantaged students stand the risk of not being aware of campus resources or able to access on-campus services.

### **Interpretation of RQ 2 Findings**

In this section I equally interpret each of the main findings that emerged in response to RQ 2: What suggestions do these faculty members have for overcoming impediments and improving the support of first-year students’ persistence at MCCC?

### ***Increasing Support Systems***

Jasmin suggested, “Campus support... Most of our student body need help in balancing their work, family and school life.” Tinto (in Seidman, 2012) noted that without support, first-year students struggle to succeed or stay in college, adding that

providing support systems to cater for these students is more important in the critical first year of college. As such, Fiona noted, “With the support of our faculty/staff and administration, our students can excel in all areas...” Crisp and Mina (2012) opined that adequate support systems targeted at students’ success can make first-year students persist in college.

In addition, Temika recommended the exposure of first-year, full-time students: “to on-campus support centers and students actually using these centers...” To achieve this goal, Tinto (1993, 2012) recommended holding a series of enlightenment sessions, especially during the first year of students’ college lives. Reason being that, in the first year, students make numerous adjustments to existing social relationships (old and new), while forming new ones on campus (Tinto, 2012). Elisa also stated, “I believe that the students who have support from home are much more likely to persist than other students...” This recommendation connects with existing literature. For instance, DeFauw et al. (2018) and Dorrance Hall et al. (2020) tend to concur that family support may help students in their academic performances and persistence in college. Kristal, therefore, suggested the college leadership “thinks of other ways to provide more financial support for students who are not eligible for financial aid.” Tinto (1993, 2012) already noted that many students struggle to succeed in or meet college expectations without financial support.

### ***Instituting and Maintaining Student Involvement***

Respondents proposed instituting and maintaining student involvement at the college. To do so, Erick suggested, “Create more clubs (social and academic...or similar

organizations on...campuses to cater for students who want to join!" Aaron added, "Some schools encourage students to form clubs that are academically embedded," with Erick noting, "The creation of more clubs, programs, and activities for the students, would improve their positive memories, connections with their fellow classmates and would likely lead to their persistence." These views are consistent with previous literature. For instance, Nagro et al. (2016) viewed involvement as an essential condition for student's commitment, persistence, and successful completion of college. Also, in his student involvement theory, Astin (1984) postulated that for students to grow and learn, they must get involved in their environment.

#### ***Provision/Expansion of Available Resources and Services***

Temika stated, "Providing more and expanding the resources and services available...will keep them involved and stabilized." Added Jasmin, "I believe that much more outreach is necessary...services should be well advertised for students to know they're available for their use." Troester-Trate (2019) stated that 26% of college student enrollees are parents with most of them attending community colleges and resources and services overarchingly impact their success on and off campus.

#### ***Advising Students on Employment-Related Matters***

Dan recommended, "Encourage students that work full time to be part time students or reverse could be a better beginning for some of our students." Nakajima et al.'s (2012) study concluded that work hours, amongst others, affected student persistence at community colleges. Therefore, Josh suggested, "Teachers need to talk with students about the benefits of college and the future of new jobs or careers and the



new economy.” Vespia et al. (2018) found that students view faculty members as knowledgeable career advisors.

### ***Strengthening Student-Faculty-Relationship***

To bolster student-faculty relationship, Jasmin said, “showing our students more care and concern will counter any decision students...would have made to quit this college...teachers should seek more proactive ways to show care and concern to students.” Zerquera et al. (2018) emphasized that faculty is the primary point of contact for college students, hence the pivot of faculty-students’ relationship. These authors stressed that such relationship causes faculty to play important roles not only in shaping the students’ experiences (in and post-college) but also in engendering students’ persistence and goal attainment. Aaron stated, “I strongly believe adopting workable strategies that will strengthen the relationship between lecturers or advisors and students will likely build confidence in and cause our students to persist.” Bowman et al. (2019) emphasized that students getting access to faculty prompts intellectual development and engenders educational goal setting and attainment. Lau et al. (2018) added that it enhances changes in students’ attitudes, induces more scholarly career orientation, and occasions in them a sense of belonging.

### ***Use of Former Students and Infographics in Class***

Jasmin stated, “I invite former students...to my class. They...narrate their experiences during their first year and the approaches they adopted to overcome their challenges.” Jasmin further indicated that this strategy could help “students overcome their challenges and fears during their first year in college;” stressing that it, “helps them

to boost...confidence and overcome...personal barriers and obstacle and...improve their persistence.” As Zou et al. (2019) noted, using guest speakers in the classroom can promote better learning outcomes and help both students and teachers contribute and gain from each other.

Finally, Josh respondent suggested, “To help my students overcome impediments and improve their persistence in school, I used infographics to explain cost and benefit analysis of having a college degree and non-college degree.” This suggestion aligns with views of existing studies on using infographics in the classroom. For instance, Bicen & Beheshti (2017) indicated that using infographics for teaching assists students to interpret visual knowledge (for example, analyzing costs and benefits of earning a college degree) and offers them vast learning options and grasp in education. Josh believed that once students “are aware of the advantages of getting a college degree...it becomes a motivation for hard work and persistence.”

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study arose from the population from which I drew the sample. I restricted the sample population only to faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar course at MCCC. In addition, whereas my results might interest others concerned with the persistence of first-year students, these results pertain directly only to the faculty members I interviewed and to the specific context in which they work. My own biases as the researcher posed another limitation. To address my biases, I maintained an impartial and neutral posture during the interviews. My approach to each interviewee was as an “outsider” trying to understand their views on first-year, full-time students’

persistence, especially in relation to the specific context in which they work. Although I related to some of the perceptions they shared (being a faculty member myself), I avoided imposing myself on or interjecting my own perceptions into the conversations. Using open-ended questions and without interrupting, I supported them to reflect and speak freely. I sometimes followed up with probing questions to gain more understanding and knowledge of their perceptions.

Also, looking over the notes I took immediately after the interviews and during the transcribing process, I noticed that all the interviewees expressed serious concerns about first-year students' persistence and underscored the need to combat it. For example, as one of the interviewees summed it up at the end of our interview session, "First-year student persistence is a serious issue and the necessity of more faculty involvement to combat this ailment in this college can't be overemphasized!" I reflected on these notes; promising myself to accurately represent their perspectives during the data analysis phase.

### **Recommendations**

Further study could expand beyond the population that I addressed to cover faculty members from other departments who also teach or interact with first-year students at MCCC. Also, I limited myself to the persistence of first-year, full-time students. Another study could widen its scope to explore faculty members' perceptions on the persistence of both full-time and part-time, traditional and non-traditional students at MCCC. That way, the outcomes of the new study might help in gaining more insights into persistence-related issues of first-year students at MCCC. Going beyond MCCC,

other researchers could use my study as a point of departure for their own qualitative studies on similar campuses. Another researcher possibly could use my themes to frame hypotheses that could be tested in a quantitative study of similar practitioners working at multiple urban community colleges with similar first-year programs.

### **Implications**

#### **Positive Social Change**

In expressing their perceptions on supports, impediments, and improvements to first-year, full-time students' persistence at MCCC, faculty members related stories and provided examples about the kinds of situations their first-year students face. The results of my study might lead to more focused efforts to expand and refine student-centered programs, services, support systems, as well as to improve the college/campus environment regarding the challenges that my interviewees identified that their first-year students face. In the short run, these programs and support systems might help students understand the importance of not losing the benefits of their social and financial investments in their education and getting a college credential (Cain et al., 2018). Understanding the grave consequences associated with losing the benefits on their educational investments because they chose not to remain in college, might occasion a change in students' attitudes toward persisting in college. A change of attitude in students might motivate them to be more proactive and involving, academically and socially. In the long run, supporting students to persist through the first year of college aids in their taking a critical step toward joining the ranks of professional achievements in society as

well as becoming economically self-sufficient and making a greater contribution to the socio-economic health of society.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The results of my study underscore an important area of practice relevant to first-year student persistence and retention. Often, colleges are more concerned with how to increase the retention of students (especially with an eye on heightened revenue outcomes) rather than on what impedes or supports student persistence through the first year and, ultimately, to completion of college (Tinto, 2017b). The results of my study demonstrate that, in the perception of those teaching the first-year College Success Seminar at this multi-campus urban community college, students are more attracted to key interests, and aspects of college that invite their involvement (for example, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, welcoming environment, availability of crucial support systems, and perceived value of the curriculum). These key interests motivate them to pursue their goals to successful completion of their first year in college, even in the face of challenges (Tinto, 2017). Considering these results, I recommend that institutions like MCCC focus more on key interests and involving aspects of college that tend to attract and motivate its first-year, full-time students to persist successfully in the college through their first year. In addition, my interviewees made some crucial suggestions I consider useful for practice as well as helpful to first-year, full-time student persistence. Given these suggestions, I recommend that community colleges' administrations and faculty device proactive strategies to show more care and concern and give a sense of belonging to their students. I equally recommend that these institutions create more academically and socially

embedded clubs, programs, and extra/co-curricular activities that will enable first-year, full-time students improve their positive memories, connections with their fellow classmates. As well, faculty utilizing infographics and ex-students as motivational speakers in the classroom, engaging their first-year students in sincere conversations especially regarding college experiences and future career choices, and adopting workable strategies to strengthen the relationship between faculty, advisors, and students will not only engender more students' involvement but also build confidence in and cause these students to successfully persist in college through the first year.

### **Conclusion**

My basic qualitative study explored the perceptions of faculty members teaching the College Success Seminar at MCCC regarding the persistence of first-year, full-time students at MCCC as well as the best practices these faculties identify for addressing impediments and providing support for students' completion of the first year. My data-based themes provide confirmation of the usefulness of the theories combined in the conceptual framework that I used to inform development of both my RQs and interview protocol. Moreover, these themes underscore the important roles faculty can play in helping to engender first-year student persistence, and the necessity of faculty to employ best practices in their classrooms as well as their perceptions about programmatic enhancements that would support their work.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

## Interview Questions:

1. As you work and interact with first-year students at MCCC, what stands out for you? Probe: Is there anything else that stands out for you? Probe: Can you provide me with some examples?
2. In your years working or interacting with first-year students at MCCC, what have you noticed about persistence to college completion of this group of students? Probe: Can you please provide me with examples?
3. In your opinion, what are the key elements that impede the persistence of first-year students at MCCC? Probe: Can you expand on this?
4. What supports or facilitates the persistence of students from the beginning to the successful completion of their first years at MCCC? Probes: What elements make the difference between successful persistence and failure to persist? Can you provide me with examples?
5. Is there anything more that could be done to improve the persistence of first-year students to degree completion at MCCC? Probe: Can you give me examples?
6. Is there other question I should have asked? Are there anything more that you want to add?
7. How long have you served in a faculty capacity at higher education institutions, including MCCC? Probes: When did you first begin working with

community college students? What is your current position at MCCC and when did you assume it?

8. What is your specific job description and how do you engage and interact with first-year students in your present capacity at MCCC? Probe: Can you give me examples?