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College Readiness and Persistence among First-Year Community College Students on a Caribbean Island

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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Caribbean Island

by

Karen Josiah

MPH, University of the West Indies, 2011

BSc, University of the West Indies, 2002

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The Suburban Boulevard Community College (SBCC), a pseudonym, has been
experiencing a low persistence rate among first-year full-time students. Further, a gap in
practice exists where college administrators at the SBCC were not assessing first-year
students' level of college readiness as a likely predictor of low persistence. The study was
grounded by two theoretical frameworks: Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure
and Conley's Readiness Model. This quantitative study aimed to determine if college
readiness, as measured by Conley's Readiness mini quizzes, *Mindset,* and *Self-
Management,* predicts first-year community college students' persistence as measured by
their return for the second semester. Ninety-one (91) full-time first-year students
completed a survey on Conley mini quizzes. The logistic regression model results
showed statistical significance $X^2 (1) = 42.01$, $p < .001$, meaning college readiness is a
predictor of students' persistence. The Nagelkerke $R^2 = .553$ indicates that 55% of the
variation in students' persistence could be explained by their college readiness scores.
Also, for every point increase in students' college readiness scores, the odd ratio is 1.29
times more likely that students will persist at college. The policy recommendations for
addressing the local problem include creating a 'student-ready' environment. This is to be
achieved through improving first-year orientation, academic support programs, faculty,
and student social integration, and continuous college readiness assessment along with
frequent professional development training for faculty and staff. A positive social change
is realized when more of SBCC students persist, graduate with credentials, find
meaningful employment, and contribute to the local island's economy.

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Dedication

This Project Study is dedicated to my two children, Jordée and Ajonté, who have motivated me during this long and challenging journey. It is my prayer that this accomplishment will inspire both of you to someday strive towards completing your terminal degrees. I dedicate this study to my mom and dad, who made tremendous sacrifices so that I could accomplish my goals. To my mom, Mrs Goldene Burton, you were my cheerleader who would constantly ask for feedback on my progress. I also dedicate this study to my siblings Julia, Desiree, and Devon. May each of you continue to fulfill your dreams. Finally, I dedicate this study to the hard-working and committed young nurses whom I have taught and inspired over the years. May you continue to serve the nursing profession with excellence and with compassion. Continue to reach for the stars and go after your dreams, and be encouraged that every small step will take you closer to your destination.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the invaluable contribution of my Research Chair, Dr. Sarah Inkpen. I am grateful for your attention to detail that shaped the successful completion of my project study. Thank you for assisting me to stay the course even though I felt like giving up numerous times. Your firm support remained resolute, especially at times when we disagreed, but you help shaped my analytical skills as a Walden scholar. I also acknowledge the research support of my Second Committee Member, Dr. Jennifer Mclean, and other research committee members. My journey could not have been possible without the guidance and support of each of the committee members who steered me in the right direction. Finally, I give my Sovereign Lord and Savior the glory and the praise for health and strength during this study's successful accomplishment.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The local problem that was addressed through this project study is the low persistence rate among first-year full-time community college students on a Caribbean Island. Students attending this public two-year Suburban Boulevard Community College (SBCC), pseudonym, on a Caribbean Island, are eligible to matriculate once they pass the minimum Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) subjects. The CSEC is an examination specifically designed for Caribbean territories and offers thirty-three CSEC subjects at the general and technical proficiencies. High school students who are successful in passing the prerequisite subjects satisfy the matriculation requirement for entering four-year universities, community colleges, and other post-secondary programs (Caribbean Examination Council, 2023). At the SBCC, to qualify for various programs leading to an associate degree, students are required to enroll with the minimum passes in five CSEC subjects including passes in English and or Mathematics, along with a satisfactory high school transcript. These requirements are intended to accurately reflect students' readiness and capability to handle college-level work and expectations.

However, in 2019, despite first-year students meeting matriculation requirements, the college cohort data from the Student Records database showed that 32% were recommended for remediation for failed coursework by the middle of the first semester. In addition, 37% of the total first-year cohort did not register for the second semester and eventually dropped out of their programs. I intentionally excluded the period 2020 – 2022 during the COVID-19 outbreak since this could influence the dependent variable.

The worrisome high early drop-out rate among first-year students at the SBCC remained steady over the last ten years (Personal Communications with Acting Principal of SBCC, 2022). The acting principal of the SBCC also shared the faculty's general student concerns from recorded minutes from academic planning meetings in 2019. One such concern was that faculty members from the various departments at the SBCC reported to their Department Heads, the observed academic and social adjustment challenges encountered, especially, by first-year students. Although the CSEC subjects were deemed to be a reliable predictor of academic success in the past, college administrators hypothesized that this indicator may be inadequate and that first-year students' poor academic performance and high departure rates may be linked to students' inadequate college readiness preparation (Personal Communications with the Acting Principal of SBCC, 2022).

Conley (2007) referred to college readiness as the level of preparation a student needs to succeed without remediation in a credit-bearing higher education program. He further identified four critical college readiness domains that are necessary to support academic success. The domains are termed cognitive strategies, content knowledge, academic behavior, and transition knowledge (Conley, 2017). Lewis and Brown (2021) posited that there are significant persistent gaps among students who struggle with inadequate college readiness domain skills. Invariably, a lack of college readiness is likely to lower the persistence rate and eventually lower college graduation rates (Evans & Christy, 2020). Hence, it is critical to assess the degree to which students' previous educational knowledge and skills equip them for the expectations and demands they will

encounter at college (Conley, 2012; Bettinger et al., 2021). It is also imperative that the SBCC administration understands the relationship between college readiness and persistence as it applies to their students. Knowing this valuable information could inform early support interventions before students' struggle undermines their motivation and desire to persist.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if college readiness, as measured by Conley's Readiness Mini Quizzes: Self-management and Mindset, predicts first-year community college students' persistence as measured by their return for the second semester. College administrators at the Caribbean institution are concerned about what college readiness preparation and skills first-year students enter with and ways to motivate them to persist until graduation (Personal Communication with Acting Principal of SBCC, 2022). A gap in practice exists where college administrators at the SBCC were not assessing first-year students' level of college readiness as a likely predictor of low persistence. In addition, no research has been conducted to garner empirical evidence on enrolled first-year students' college readiness status or the domains that better predict their persistence. However, college administrators are highly supportive of this study and the use of a validated college readiness survey instrument to garner supporting data on students' college readiness status to determine any link to persistence (Personal Communication with Acting Principal of SBCC, 2023). Measuring first-year college readiness status soon after enrollment could diagnose any gap deficiencies early and inform the SBCC first-year orientation programs.

Rationale

A Broader Perspective of the Problem

Community colleges remain strongly committed to their mission of providing many individuals with an opportunity to access postsecondary credentials. As part of their open-door policy, these institutions enroll a large proportion of low-income students with limited financial affordability for a degree (Daugherty et al., 2019). However, many students are unable to accrue the benefits associated with this opportunity due to their low persistence in completing their degree (Ortagus et al., 2021). Researchers noted that many community colleges, particularly, face high student drop-out rates since fewer than 45% of students eventually achieve their goal of degrees or certifications to graduate (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019; Ortagus et al., 2021). Almost 60% of first-year college students in the United States discover that, despite being fully eligible to attend college, they are not ready for postsecondary studies (Evans & Christy, 2020).

Moreover, two-thirds of community college students are assigned to one or more remedial or developmental courses with no college credits, which compounds their frustration and motivation since it further delays their enrollment in college-level courses (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Harrington & Rogalski, 2021). The students at the SBCC who failed courses were also advised to take remedial courses, but the majority of these students dropped out of their programs before even attempting remedial courses. When students lose motivation they are more likely to demonstrate poor academic success and are unable to graduate and accomplish their degrees (May et al., 2021; Weis et al., 2019).

Gregor et al. (2021) argued that community college students tend to face more barriers than their four-year college counterparts and are more likely to be academically unprepared for college. Studies have found that first-year college students, in particular, often find it a daunting and challenging experience as they transition from high school to college (Tevis & Britton, 2020; Van Herpen et al., 2020). The lack of collaboration and the vast disparity between high school graduation requirements and college entrance requirements were likely to contribute to students' inadequate preparation (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021). As high school graduates prepare to journey from a structured familiar setting to an unfamiliar learning environment such as a community college, they often feel disoriented and inadequate to cope with college expectations and responsibilities (Money et al., 2020). Admittedly, the level of cognitive skills utilized in high school is relatively lower than the higher-order critical thinking skills expected of first-year college students by faculty (Lane et al., 2020). College administrators must determine how well-prepared first-year students are for college and avoid derailing their persistence efforts (Motsabi et al., 2020).

Studies have linked first-year community colleges' low persistence rate to a lack of college readiness for college-level work (Daniel & MacNeela, 2021; Ortagus et al. 2021). Although other studies have addressed college readiness from mostly an academic or cognitive knowledge perspective, this study intends to focus only on students' non-cognitive aspects including their social skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Genthe and Harrington (2022) posited that students' ability to thrive at college is not only dependent on their pre-college repertoire of content knowledge, and core academic

abilities but also on their non-cognitive and social skills. In his college readiness model, Conley (2008) highlighted the first two domains or keys (cognitive strategies and content knowledge) as cognitively focused, while the latter two (academic behavior and contextual skills) are non-cognitive focused. These domains characterize a significant criterion that must be demonstrated to determine students' overall level of college readiness. He further acknowledged that many college-bound students enter college without first acquiring the fundamental skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are essential for college success (Conley, 2008). In addition, college students often lack skills such as critical thinking, communication, creativity, and social and emotional learning, including inadequate perseverance behaviors, and limited community involvement (Conley, 2008; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021).

Admittedly, community colleges are likely to have little influence on students' college readiness preparation from high school in terms of the knowledge and skills required for entering college. However, there are interventions that colleges can perform to make their institution more student-ready once students are enrolled. Caldwell et al. (2021) recommended that students should receive academic and social support upon transitioning to college, which is critical for increasing students' sense of belongingness on campus and likeliness to persist. Colleges can improve academic support by providing more academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, creating learning communities, and offering numerous opportunities for students to meet and interact with faculty during the semester. Likewise, institutional social support includes encouraging adequate extracurricular social activities provided by clubs, groups, and sororities, which fosters

students' sense of identity development as members of the college community (Caldwell et al., 2021). Further, Weis et al. (2019) found that when institutions provide academic support with emphasis placed on academic advising, planning, balancing college with responsibilities, accessing campus services, and interacting with faculty, it results in increased graduation rates. Moreover, those students who are highly motivated and have a growth mindset are better able to access these available resources and remain in the program despite their devastating personal challenges (Dweck & Yaeger, 2020).

Colleges must pay attention to nurturing first-year students since they are at a critical adjustment stage in college and provide them with the necessary support to assist them to succeed (Motsabi et al., 2020). Therefore, having an awareness of students' college readiness status would enable the SBCC administration to provide relevant support and alert students early of areas of deficiencies. However, the college preparation process is multifaceted, requiring the collaboration of stakeholders including administrators, teachers, staff, families, and communities to prepare students to be college-ready (Brookover, 2021). To increase college readiness among first-year students, several community colleges in the United States partner with local high schools to design various college readiness courses such as Advanced Proficiency (AP) programs to better prepare students to cope with college-level work (Harrington & Rogalski, 2021; Warren & Groins, 2019). These college-ready programs were found to make a significantly positive difference in college students' first-semester grade point averages (GPA) when enrolled in AP courses before college.

The students who attend the SBCC do not have access to college preparation programs before attending college. Hence, the college administrators have a responsibility to ensure that the first-year students' college readiness status is assessed early and appropriate strategies are employed to ensure optimum academic success. Hence, this study intends to identify if a relationship exists between college readiness and student persistence among first-year full-time students at the SBCC.

Definition of Terms

To garner a better understanding of the phenomenon and the characteristics of the population of interest, it is imperative to define the following terms that will be used throughout this project study.

College readiness: Refers to the level of preparation students need to acquire before enrolling at college and following through until completion without being assigned to remedial courses (Conley, 2010).

Student-ready institutions: Accept full responsibility for students' success and endorse a culture of access opportunities for all students using various integrative learning strategies and approaches (McNair et al., 2022).

Suburban Boulevard Community College (SBCC): An affordable public two-year community college that is heavily subsidized by government funding. The highest degree level offered is an associate degree (SBCC Prospectus, 2019).

Persistence: The intentional student-focused effort to remain at college. It is the rate at which first-year college students remain enrolled at the same institution from the start of the first semester through the start of the first semester of the second year

(Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021). However, this study will be based on the early return of first-year students to campus. The study included those who remained enrolled at SBCC from the start of the first semester and returned at the beginning of the second semester.

Retention: The institutions' focus and intention to retain the number of students enrolled at their institution as they progress toward graduation (Tinto, 2010).

Mindset: Students' personal belief that their intelligence can be improved and could influence their thoughts, behaviors, and ultimately their academic success decisions (Limeri et al., 2020).

*Successful First-Year Student*s: Students who demonstrate adequate first-year academic performance and can interact with peers and faculty comfortably by the end of the first semester (Van Herpen et al., 2020).

Significance of the Study

I affirm that this study is significant since it seeks to determine if there is a correlation between first-year students' college readiness and their persistence at SBCC. Using Conley's Readiness mini quizzes: Mindset and Self-Management, the study intends to determine the level of readiness skills students may have acquired before entering college and those skills that are needed to be successful. Studies have found that many students do not persist in college since they lack both the cognitive and non-cognitive skills for college (Harrington & Rogalski, 2021; Ortagus et al., 2021). Holman et al. (2019) asserted that identifying the variables that explain and predict college students' persistence is significant for education policymakers. Declining college

persistence could lead to an array of negative consequences including socioeconomic implications for individuals within the community (Patterson Silver Wolf, 2021). Hence, it is imperative that administrators at SBCC, a government-funded community college, determine if the variable college readiness contributes to a low rate of persistence, especially among first-year students.

Brookover (2021) asserted that adequate college readiness leads to higher levels of academic motivation with favorable learning outcomes. This study is relevant since students' persistence could lead to attaining a college degree, increase students' likelihood of employability, and improve their socioeconomic status (Margarit & Kennedy, 2019). Moreover, the results can inform SBCC administrators on ways to better narrow any deficiency gaps in college readiness educational practices. In addition, they can tailor first-year orientation programs to facilitate better adjustment toward completion (Money et al., 2020). Further, Tinto (2010) supported that students must integrate into the college environment with the right knowledge, skills, and readiness for learning. This could subsequently prevent early drop-out by the first year of college by influencing students' motivation to stay, persist, and earn their degrees (Daniels & MacNeela, 2021). In turn, a positive social change will resonate when more SBCC students can complete their college programs, graduate with their qualifications, become employed, and make a higher level of socioeconomic contribution to the Caribbean Island and its communities where they reside.

Research Question and Hypotheses

The project study had one overarching research question (RQ1) that was developed to determine if college readiness is a predictor of first-year community college students' persistence, as measured by their return for second-semester courses. The research question (RQ1) reflects constructs of Conley's Readiness Model inclusive of the non-cognitive third domain, academic behavior. The study will utilize Conley's mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset to measure college readiness.

RQ1. Is college readiness, as measured by the Conley's Readiness mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset, predictive of first-year community college students' persistence as measured by their return for second-semester courses?

Ho1. College readiness, as measured by Conley's Readiness mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset, does not predict first-year community college students' persistence as measured by their return for second-semester courses.

Ha1. College readiness, as measured by Conley's Readiness mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset, does predict first-year community college students' persistence as measured by their return for second-semester courses.

Review of the Literature

Students entering community colleges should be college-ready since they will encounter vast learning experiences that require mastering critical thinking, and academic and social skills upon enrollment. In addition, they must reflect sets of behaviors, skills, and attitudes integral to successful academic performance (Lindstrom et al., 2022). However, these skills may not be adequately reflected by their Scholastic Aptitude Test

(SAT) scores on cognitive tests. Historically, college readiness tends to only focus on students' content knowledge, particularly in reading, writing, and mathematics (Conley & French, 2014). College readiness should incorporate more than just students' basic prior cognitive and content knowledge but their non-cognitive skill preparation, which also impacts their potential to transition and succeed at college (Trimpe, 2022). Most educators agree that college readiness includes a core set of concrete academic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions required for higher learning. However, researchers recommended the emphasis on the non-cognitive or 'soft' or social skills, such as communication, group collaboration, critical thinking, and perseverance, which students must demonstrate to successfully traverse the postsecondary journey towards success (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Conley, 2007). Numerous efforts were employed to measure college readiness by the student's ability to traverse the academic rigors of high school courses such as college admissions tests, placement test scores, grade point averages, and high school achievement exam scores. However, these college readiness indicators were not adequate in aligning well with the required college preparation and the necessary knowledge and skills pertinent to postsecondary success (Lombardi & Conley, 2011). Understanding how to assess first-year students' college readiness status is crucial since college-ready students are more likely to have higher persistence rates, grade point averages, and graduation rates (Lane et al., 2020).

College students' persistence has been among the most discussed and researched topics of higher education for the last four decades (Tight, 2019). Implementing strategies to retain students in college until they complete their degrees requires a comprehensive

understanding of the dynamics influencing persistence. Arguably, the first year seems to be the most daunting period for college students when critical persistence decisions are made toward degree attainment (Tevis & Britton, 2020). College administrators must face the challenge of promoting successful learning and reducing early student departure from programs (Hoyert et al., 2019). Some community colleges have devoted considerable attention to students' first-year experiences and have designed interventions ranging from rigorous academic advising supports, learning communities, first-year seminars, and improving remediation policies for underprepared students (Bettinger et al., 2021). Moreover, evidence suggested that employing these strategies has increased the number of students who successfully navigate the transition journey to college and make considerable progress toward their degree completion (Bettinger et al., 2021).

Educators remain baffled in trying to understand what causes some students to persist at college and succeed in the face of tremendous challenges, while others simply do not succeed and are on the verge of dropping out (Ortagus et al., 2021). A low student persistence rate is likely to affect the graduation rate and the institutions' ability to receive funding and maintain perceived legitimacy and institutional ranking (Spight, 2020). However, students' persistence at an academic institution is a complex phenomenon, shaped by a plethora of factors contributing to first-year college students' low persistence, including students' personal and family life challenges, financial barriers, lack of institutional support, and low level of college readiness (Brookover et al. 2021; Ortagus et al. 2021; Genthe & Harrington, 2022).

Other researchers strongly argued that other non-cognitive factors of college readiness including students' motivation, time management, self-regulation, and self-management are also critical for first-year college persistence (Nagaeka et al., 2013; Conley, 2011; Noyens et al., 2019). Tinto (1993) posited that colleges should focus on strengthening the social support provided to students, particularly those in the first year. If given the right level of institutional support and social integration at their host institution, it could significantly enhance their persistence in higher education (Abdul-Rahaman, 2021). This in turn could give students confidence to navigate the social, academic, and cultural terrains of their colleges.

The low student persistence rate facing first-year students at the SBCC is worrisome to educators and college administrators. Especially as one considers that community colleges offer an opportunity for economic, social, and civic benefits to many low-income students who would otherwise not have afforded a post-secondary education (Ortagus, 2021). Therefore, efforts to improve college persistence rates at the SBCC will invariably influence higher graduation rates leading to acquiring academic credentials. It is tremendously encouraging that college administrators at the SBCC are eager to support initiatives to improve first-year persistence rates. This study intends to focus on the non-cognitive aspects of college readiness to determine if they predict students' low persistence rate at the SBCC. To further explore this phenomenon for the project study, I used several databases, including Walden's University Library, along with the following search engines: Google Scholar, ERIC, and SAGE Full Text. The following keywords were used in searching the databases: *college readiness, college persistence, community*

college students, first-year students, college student retention, student mindset, and

Conley's Readiness model.

Theoretical Frameworks

This project study was guided and grounded in the concepts of two theoretical

frameworks: Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and Conley's Readiness Model

(2008). Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure was selected as one of the theoretical

frameworks for this project study as it offers a comprehensive approach to examine the

phenomenon of first-year students' low persistence at a community college on a

Caribbean Island. This theory assisted me in determining the relationship between college

readiness and persistence. Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure was scaffolded

from Tinto's (1975) original model, which he designed to get a clearer understanding of

the drop-out problem that was occurring during the 1970s at colleges throughout the

United States and to adopt strategies to reduce the college dropout rates. French (2017)

posited that Tinto's 1975 work also sought to explain how self-motivation could

influence various undergraduate students' dropout rates. Tinto has made numerous

additions and modifications to his 1975 model to include new groups of students

attending community colleges. Tinto (1993) asserted that it is imperative that higher

learning institutions improve the quality of both their academic and social support

systems, and provide adequate opportunities for student inclusion in the educational

experiences. Tinto's (1993) model was used to examine first-year students' college

readiness during the first semester at the SBCC since this period is when the greatest

number of students are likely to make departure decisions (Motsabi et al., 2020). Tinto's

model readily connects the college environment to the student's college readiness and motivation. The model also described both academic and social integration as components critical to students' persistence. Students' degree of adjustment to their academic and social environment is believed to significantly influence their decision to persist in higher education (Lakhal et al., 2020).

Tinto's (1993) model described academic integration as students' ability to cope with the institutions' academic expectations, their level of intellectual development, and their perception of a positive learning experience (Byl et al., 2022). Students must demonstrate a commitment to time and perseverance to accomplish successful academic work. On the other hand, social integration refers to students' attitudes, beliefs, and involvement in extracurricular and cocurricular activities and developing a positive relationship with faculty and peers (Byl et al., 2022; Tinto, 1993). Further, Kraft (2021) supported that social integration also includes students' degree of ease and psychological comfort with their campus environment. As students submerge themselves on campus, they need to feel a sense of belonging, security, and acceptance to relate with others to accomplish academic goals. Belongingness or a warm feeling of welcome is shown to influence first-year students' persistence (Hoyert et al., 2019). Lakhal et al. (2020) argued that if first-year students' experiences are positive where they feel a sense of belonging, it could invariably strengthen their academic and social systems leading to persistence. Conversely, if experiences do not foster belongingness, it could undermine their ability to persist and increase departure rates. Tinto (1993) posited that students who adopt more meaningful academic and social integration will boost their persistent decisions.

Admittedly, students' attributes and decisions to persist at college are largely beyond the control of the institution. However, a college can control the settings in which students find themselves such as classrooms and laboratories making learning more engaging and increasing the likelihood of students remaining in college (Stewart, et al., 2017).

Conley's Readiness Model (2008) is another framework selected for this project study. Conley (2008) admitted that the current measures of college readiness are limited in their ability to communicate to students and educators the true range of what students should know and do to be fully prepared to succeed at college. Hence, a broader comprehensive model to assess students' readiness for college was developed and validated by Dr. David Conley during many years of high school and college research. Conley (2017) designed a survey instrument based on Conley's readiness model. The instrument is referred to as the College Readiness Index (CRI), which describes 42 action objectives with over 100 survey questions that educators and students can focus on to improve readiness and prepare for college (Conley, 2017). These objectives are further organized into the four broad domains or keys that Conley attributed as critical in determining students' level of readiness for college.

Conley's Readiness Model (2008) highlighted the first two domains as comprising cognitive skills while the latter two focus on non-cognitive skills. The first Conley's readiness key is cognitive strategies, or students' intellectual capabilities, dispositions, and critical thinking skills for college-level work. Content knowledge is the second key and is closely related to cognitive strategies. It encompasses foundational ability in writing, math, and science skills and concepts. Academic behavior (learning

strategies) is the third key and entails activating healthy personal habits such as study

skills, time management, self-management, motivation, and interpersonal skills relevant

to academic success. Lastly, contextual skills and awareness key refer to students' college

knowledge relating to information on various college types, faculty specialization,

resource availability, and knowledge to access financial support. Researchers opined that

having knowledge and skills in the four college readiness domains is essential for

navigating the norms, cultures, values, and expectations of the college system (Conley,

2008; Lane, 2020).

Justification for Selected Theoretical Frameworks

This project study was framed using both Tinto's (1993) Theory of Students

Departure and Conley's Readiness Model (2008). These theoretical models were selected

to better understand the pivotal role of the major aspects of college readiness and any

relationship to persistence among first-year community college students at SBCC. Tinto's

model aligns with and supports other college research that explores students' persistence

in academic programs (Spight, 2020; Tight, 2020). Tinto's (1993) theory highlighted two

interrelated student domains: academic integration and social integration. The theory of

student departure posited that the level of a student's preparation to fully integrate into

the academic and social environments at colleges significantly influences their decision

to persist or depart (Tinto, 1993). Students' academic and social integration is essential

for higher education. The more engaged students are on campus with faculty and peers,

the more likely they are to persist at the same institution and complete their studies

(Tight, 2020). Students may enter community colleges not well prepared to handle the

rigors of the new environment. But their sense of belonging is dependent on the integration of their social and academic experiences which must be promoted through the college support systems (Caldwell, 2021). Noyen et al. (2019) found a direct link between first-year students' academic motivation and their social integration experience on campus. They further highlighted that college students' academic success is greatly enhanced when students socially connect and participate with peers. Invariably, students will be more likely to remain enrolled at an institution if they feel connected to the social and academic life of that institution (Karp et al., 2017).

Conley Readiness Model (2008) also provided convincing support by describing four distinct domains or keys to college readiness. The model highlights four key constructs to illuminate the expectations of a college-ready student. The attributes of the domains can be measured to ascertain the level of college readiness. A college-ready student can understand the requirements for college-level work, can cope with the content knowledge that is presented, and can take away key intellectual lessons and concepts the course was designed to convey (Conley, 2008). Students can readily adapt and acclimatize to the new norms and expectations of college and are destined for greater academic success (Minnicozzi & Roda, 2020). Moreover, students are capable of navigating social relationships while communicating effectively with faculty and peers (Trimpe, 2022). In addition, the student is prepared to get the most out of their academic and social experience by adopting the kind of mindset and disposition necessary to enable a successful academic journey.

Measuring College Readiness

The increasingly global economy and shifting workforce demand that students leave high school ready with the necessary skills to successfully enter college or the workforce (Roberts & Grant, 2021). Moreover, education administrators have responded to this demand as a matter of national priority (Roberts & Grant, 2021). The college-ready student is capable of understanding college expectations and can cope with the program content knowledge since he has the mindset and motivation necessary to facilitate growth and development (Conley, 2007). However, the concept of college readiness remains complex, and challenging to determine the most appropriate measuring indicators. Conley (2014) also supported that measuring college readiness is insufficient if one focuses entirely on cognitive measurements such as high school Grade Point Averages (GPA), Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), and advanced coursework, and neglects the noncognitive factors namely academic mindset, motivation, study strategies, and social relationship skills. Conley (2014) further recommended taking a broader comprehensive perspective on measuring college readiness. Hence, this project study assessed the other domains of college readiness such as academic behavior which highlighted students' attitudes and mindset toward learning including their motivation, persistence, study habits, time management, and the ability to form social relationships to enhance learning outcomes.

Although Tinto (1993) initially measured college readiness by students' cognitive factors he later acknowledged that the non-cognitive aspect such as students' social integration into the campus is just as meaningful to students' success and decision to

complete their program. College-ready students are more motivated and eager to participate in informal peer group activities, seek extracurricular opportunities, and interact with faculty members, further enhancing a sense of belongingness and desire to persist (Lane et al., 2020). Arguably, college administrators are unable to enact preparation changes at the high school level or influence cultural and familial environments before college (Pratt et al., 2020). Thus, college interventions must focus on assessing students' level of college readiness and improving the college experience, particularly, first-year students from the moment they enroll. Moreover, various instruments were designed and used by educational institutions to measure students' college readiness and gauge institutions' retention rates (Lane et al., 2020).

One such instrument is the *Conley Readiness Index* (CRI), which is a readiness inventory instrument based on the foundational key domains of the Conley Readiness Model (2008). The CRI inventory is backed by decades of research on secondary, and postsecondary students and their instructors' perspectives regarding what it takes to prepare and succeed in higher education. The CRI is used by high schools and college students to assess their preparedness for postsecondary education or employment (Conley, 2017). He further proposed that when students are assessed using the CRI instrument, it determines each student's readiness by the degree to which they have acquired knowledge and skills in the four domains or key areas. These students can easily qualify and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses leading to certification without needing remedial or developmental coursework (Conley, 2017).

Conley Readiness Model Explained

The Conley Readiness model (2008), one of the theoretical frameworks for this study, is a comprehensive model validated by years of research. The model determines each student's readiness by the degree to which they have developed knowledge and skills in the four critical key areas: cognitive strategies, content knowledge, academic behavior, and contextual transition knowledge (Conley, 2008). Studies are limited in highlighting and explaining each of Conley's four key college-readiness domains. However, I will attempt to illuminate the key constructs and parameters of Conley's Readiness Model (2008) based on the available literature.

Cognitive Strategies

This is the first key domain in Conley's Readiness Model (Conley, 2008). Conley referred to this concept as students' ability to *think* and addresses their critical thinking capacity to engage in rigorous college-level courses. Cognitive strategies are the mental processes that influence how students learn, obtain, store, retrieve, or use relevant information (Gustani & Ayu, 2021). These strategies enable the learner to manipulate the learning material indirectly through reasoning, analysis, synthesizing, and reorganizing information. Conley (2008) determined the following five critical areas for cognitive strategies: Problem formulation where the student develops and applies multiple strategies to solve routine and complex problems. Research skills engage students in inquiry and dialogue about the subject matter and endorse evidence to defend arguments and explanations. Interpretation refers to the student's ability to analyze competing and conflicting issues to determine the strengths or weaknesses in each perspective.

Communication refers to the student's ability to construct well-reasoned arguments and defend a point of view. Precision and accuracy are determined by forming consistent conclusions on the subject. These abilities are necessary for preparing students to be able to handle college-level work and expectations. Further, students must be able to demonstrate a critical analysis of presented lectures, organize theoretical content, and apply scientific problem-solving skills to dissect relevant information (Neroni et al., 2020). Gustani & Ayu, (2021) found a positive association between cognitive strategies abilities and students' academic performance thus making students more likely to complete their programs.

Content Knowledge

This is the second key domain, which Conley referred to as what students '*know'*. It includes students' foundational knowledge gained in core subjects such as reading, math, algebra, history, arts, science, and languages (Conley, 2008; Conley, 2017). Knowledge of these courses enables students to critically engage texts and create well-organized and supported oral and written communication. Mastery of reading skills facilitates a better understanding of key learning concepts (ter Beek et al., 2022). Moreover, students with a thorough understanding of the basic content knowledge are more likely to succeed in entry-level college courses requiring analytic and scientific evidence (Conley, 2008).

Academic Behavior

This refers to specific student learning skills and behaviors that are essential to good performance. It is the third key domain that Conley referred to as how students '*act*'

and conduct their ownership of the learning experience. Students can reflect on their self-management skills, self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control processes necessary for academic success. Conley & French (2014) further pointed to students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for driving academic learning goals demonstrated by their study habits and time management skills in balancing various extracurricular activities while forming wholesome relationships contributing to academic success. They argued that setting learning goals also helps learners understand that they can have greater control over their learning. These students tend to develop stronger mindsets and a sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence (Stuart & Wolcott, 2021).

Contextual Transition Knowledge

Conley referred to the fourth and final key domain as '*go*' which involves knowing how to search and apply to colleges and deciding on the best educational option. It also includes understanding how to navigate financial aid opportunities, they can state approximate tuition costs, and be knowledgeable of available financial aids for various types of colleges to meet academic needs (Conley, 2008). Moreover, students with contextual transition skills understand the college admission process, college expectations, and college course requirements (Conley, 2017). Further, they are cognizant of the college preparation process and how to access resources to align themselves to accomplish their goals. Moreover, they are capable and willing to internalize the missions and vision of their selected academic institution.

Persistence at College

Successful students are not always the most talented or intelligent when compared to their competitors but those who adopt the right mindset (Mohan & Kaur, 2021). Such students have demonstrated the ability to motivate, evaluate, and self-manage their behaviors as they persist toward academic success and graduation (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022). Being persistent requires being intentional with academic actions. It is the deliberate conscious effort students make to maintain their academic status at a learning institution such as a college. Patterson Silver Wolf et al. (2021) described it as the rate at which first-year college students remain consistently enrolled at the same institution from the start of the first semester through the start of the first semester of the second year. Students' ability to complete successfully their first year at a higher learning institution indicates a likely graduation outcome. Invariably, the value of college student persistence is arguably significant to their employability and higher socioeconomic status. Hence, various educational institutions and policymakers try to explain and predict how students are motivated to persist in educational programs (Holman et al., 2019).

Knowledge of students' persistence provides an opportunity for colleges to support students' skills and confidence and maintain a sense of comfort toward success. However, applying appropriate intervention to reduce the low persistence rate would require early identification of students who are most at risk. First-year students returning to college for their second semester have demonstrated signs of early persistence which is likely to be consistence with their level of college readiness preparation (Tinto, 1993). Students who return to the same institution have also demonstrated the ability to find a

comfortable place of belongingness where they can grow and develop (Norvilitis & O'Quinn, 2022). Tinto (1993) reiterated the need for the involvement of learning institutions in the social integration of students' college experiences to enhance academic performance.

Conley (2008) in his third key domain, academic behavior, argued that one's persistence along with motivation, self-awareness, and self-efficacy are critical aspects of students' ownership of learning that connect intricately to their academic success. Students succeed since they have the drive to complete even complex assignments and solve novel problems creating impressive quality college work. Moreover, Conley (2017) determined that students' motivation and self-management abilities are key aspects of their college readiness profile and are predictive of their desire to persist. Studies have supported that students' ability to persist is multifaceted and influenced not only by their content knowledge but also by their non-cognitive factors, such as their beliefs, attitudes, values, motivation, and mindset (Altunel, 2019; Limeri et al., 2020). Although students may have adequate cognitive knowledge abilities, if they lack the necessary efforts required to remain and complete their programs their academic goals can be derailed.

Mindset: Motivation and Self-Efficacy

Motivation is closely linked to the construct of self-efficacy, popularized by Bandura's Cognitive Learning Theory. Self-efficacy is one's perceived capabilities to perform identified goals, while motivation is the sustaining personal drive to accomplish those goals (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Stuart & Wolcott, 2021). Motivation allows a student to view their learning experience as valuable and enjoyable despite challenges.

This ability is particularly critical at community colleges where students are required to manage their time and take responsibility for their learning (Conley & French, 2014). Students' intention to persist in educational programs is predicted by their level of motivation (Holman et al., 2019). Conley (2014) posited that college-ready students are more motivated, self-confident, and persistent in achieving their set academic goals. Invariably, if students are not motivated at college, it becomes an impossible task to stimulate their willingness to persist in their programs (Tinto, 1993).

Dweck (2007;1999) summed up motivation as pure grit or the kind of mindset that influences students' unwavering passion, efforts, and perseverance to complete long-term educational goals. Dweck and Yeager (2021) found that students' growth mindsets are significantly related to their motivation decision to persist at college despite encountering challenges and setbacks. Students who develop a growth mindset determine that their intelligence is malleable and can get better with hard work and training. Conversely, those with a fixed mindset are likely to interpret struggles or failures as an indication that they are intellectually incapable and hence they quit as they encounter hurdles (Dweck, 1999). McPartlan et al. (2020) also supported that students with a fixed mindset perceive their inability to improve their human condition despite their best efforts and are less likely to persevere in academic programs.

Self-Management Skills

Self-management skills are also critical to students' post-secondary success by influencing their desire to persist (Detgen et al., 2021). This is the student's capacity to control their emotions, ideas, and actions which motivates them to strive toward

achieving academic success (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022). Once students are

disciplined enough to regulate their learning strategies including setting goals, seeking

relevant help, and monitoring their time and progress, their academic success is likely to

be positive. One study found that self-management skills such as utilizing resources,

adapting to different environments, and being optimistic about the learning process

significantly influence one's self-efficacy, which in turn highly influences academic

achievement (Al-Abyadh & Abdel Azeem, 2022). If students demonstrate inadequate

self-management skills at college, this could lead to lower motivation levels to complete

their degrees. Students, in turn, may struggle with a lack of initiative, drive, or passion for

performing academically and eventually leave their program (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Invariably, a student must be able to demonstrate academic resilience, overcome

adversities that threaten their academic success, and maintain a positive life outlook

(Motsabi et al., (2020). College administration policies should therefore aim to create

classroom cultures in which motivation, a growth mindset, self-management, and a

passion for ownership of learning flourish (Dweck & Yeager, 2021).

Implications

Numerous studies have been done assessing students' level of college readiness

and the relationship to other variables (Lewis & Brown, 2021; Trimpe, 2022). Narrowing

the gap between those who are deemed college-ready and those who eventually persist

remains a challenge. Lane et al. (2021) in their study found that adequate college

readiness indicated higher persistence and graduation rates at higher-learning institutions.

Consequently, the low level of persistence among full-time first-year students at the

SBCC is worrisome as this could lead to low graduation rates also further reducing the amounts of qualified graduates who can function effectively in a competitive global economy. When students do not complete their programs and graduate, they are unable to successfully achieve their higher education qualifications and attain career goals (Detgen et al., 2021). Also, when a student drops out of college, others in the family and community are discouraged from trying, so a student's failure to complete resonates far and wide (Spight et al., 2020). Moreover, the local government invests heavily in the SBCC annual budget to ensure applicants receive access to higher education. The government expects that the majority of graduates will in turn contribute to national development after receiving qualifications. To facilitate more students persisting and completing the SBCC programs, college administrators would require empirical evidence to determine if students' persistence is predicted by students' college readiness status. Therefore, college administrators at the SBCC could find it beneficial to examine the results of this research project to inform the necessary SBCC enrollment and retention policies, reevaluate their first-year orientation programs, and create a student-ready environment and culture. Applying well-informed interventions based on empirical evidence would eventually advance efforts to create a successful student outcome at the SBCC.

Summary

The likelihood that students will enroll at college and perform successfully is often a function of their readiness or their prior college preparation influencing their completion (Conley, 2008). Increasing students' persistence in the educational

environment will invariably improve graduation rates and the possibility of earning a degree (Holman et al., 2019). College administrators at the SBCC face low persistence rates, which they perceive may be attributed to inadequate college readiness. However, empirical evidence is required to determine variable relationships. If first-year students' college readiness scores are assessed early in the first semester and found to be influencing the low persistence rate, then the SBCC administration would be able to implement early-warning systems and alert faculty of strategies to assist students. The college would be able to apply early intervention before student struggles undermine their motivation to persist (Tinto, 1993).

This project study was framed using Tinto's (1993) and Conley's Readiness models to address the problem at the SBCC. These theoretical models explained students' preparation for higher education and their ability to persist and succeed. Tinto (1993) supported students' integration into their academic and social environment, which influences their persistent decisions. Conley's Readiness model measures four constructs of college readiness. His quizzes: Self-management and Mindset reflect the non-cognitive aspect of students' academic behavior skills.

This quantitative study aims to determine if college readiness as measured by self-management and mindset skills predicts students' persistence at the SBCC. This project study follows with Section 2 detailing the study's methodologies, research design, setting, population, protection of participant's rights, data collection, analysis, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Section 3 provides the project justification details, while Section 4 provides the reflections and conclusion of the study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

The project study utilized a quantitative correlational design to address the low persistence rate among first-year, full-time community college students on a Caribbean Island. A gap in educational practice exists where the SBCC administrators are not assessing first-year college students' college readiness as a likely predictor for the low persistence rate among first-year students. A qualitative method of inquiry was not suited for this study because the purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine if a relationship exists between college readiness and student persistence among first-year, full-time community college students on a Caribbean Island.

This study, therefore, intended to give a better understanding of the statistical relationship between the variables, rather than to understand the 'why' behind the data. Burkholder et al. (2021) opined that a quantitative study allows the researcher to understand and describe a phenomenon, behavior, or occurrence using numerical data and statistical analysis, including accurately defining and measuring variables. A correlation design was selected as the most appropriate to answer the overarching research question (Burkholder et al., 2021). For this project study, the independent variable or predictor is college readiness, and the dependent *v*ariable is student persistence.

Sample and Setting

The targeted study population for this project study included all first-year full-time students who enrolled at the SBCC during the 2023-2024 academic year. The number of first-year students who enrolled for the academic year was 197 students. The study population consisted of students from all programs including the Department of Liberal Arts, Industrial Technology, Business, Teacher Education, and School of Pharmacy. Using Statistical Solution for Dissertation (2023), an online statistical calculator, a priori power analysis for linear regression with one predictor was performed using G*Power to determine the appropriate sample size for this study. An alpha of 0.05 and a power of 0.80 with a medium effect size of (d = 0.5) were used to calculate the sample size. Based on these assumptions, a sample size of 55 emerged as an adequate sample size to conduct the study.

Instrumentation and Materials

This project study assessed college readiness using Conley's Readiness mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset to determine if first-year students' college readiness predicts their likelihood to persist at college. Surveys are critical tools used to gather data about phenomena of interest by collecting numerical data from a sample with the intent of generalizing to a population (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The college readiness of the SBCC first-year full-time students was measured using two mini-quizzes designed, validated, and recommended by Dr. David Conley and was used with his permission. The two survey instruments, namely, the Conley Readiness mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset were developed by Dr. Conley and provide more subject-

specific insight into student college readiness status (Conley, 2021). Each mini-quiz consisted of only 12 questions and provided a parsimonious instrument in comparison to the longer seminal survey, the Conley Readiness Index (CRI) which is over 100 items long. The mini quizzes are deemed adequate in assessing critical areas of college readiness (Personal communication with Dr. Conley, 2023).

The project study assessed the relationship between the variables: college readiness, the predictor (independent) variable, and students' persistence, the response (dependent) variable. Binomial logistic regression was applied to understand whether students' college readiness scores predicted their college persistence rate using a total of 24 questions from Conley Readiness's two mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset. To quantify students' responses the following Likert-type scale range from 1 – 5, as recommended by Dr. Conley was used as follows: Not at all like me will score 1, A little like me will score 2, Somewhat like me will score 3, A lot like me will score 4, and Very much like me will score 5. For each of Conley's Readiness mini-quizzes, a score of 1 on each question was used to indicate a low college readiness while a score of 5 will denote a high or strong college readiness. The dichotomous response variable, students' persistence, was assessed based on whether the same students who participated in the survey registered and returned to college for semester two and was measured using the 'yes' or 'no' categories (Laerd Statistics, 2020).

Data Collection Process

I applied to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for permission to conduct the study and to determine that the research design, including the survey

instrument, met the highest research standards. The IRB approval reference number is 09-11-23-1053925. Walden University's research supervisor ensured that I followed all necessary steps to maintain minimal risk to participants. I sought permission from the partner organization to survey college students under Walden University supervision. I created a Survey Monkey link for the data collection process. The Information Technology Officer (IT) who is responsible for compiling, storing, and retrieving electronic data at the SBCC was identified to support the data collection process. A promotional email was shared with the SBCC IT Officer along with details and contact information about the study. The IT Officer at the SBCC was responsible for sending the promotional email and survey link to all first-year, full-time students who met the inclusion criteria. The same email also confirmed that participation in the study was voluntary, and there would be no penalties such as being treated differently by college administration if they chose not to participate. Students could access their emails at any time convenient by clicking on the survey link on their own devices and signing in once using their college email address. Those who did not have personal devices and wished to volunteer could go to the computer lab where the lab technician gave access to use designated computers for the survey purposes.

The data collection instrument consisted of 24 questions from Conley's mini quizzes: Self-management and Mindset. Additionally, there was one question requesting each participant's email address for future data analysis making a total of 25 questions. The survey requested 10 to 15 minutes of students' time to complete. Students who understood the study information and wished to volunteer could indicate their consent by

simply clicking on the 'yes' button on Survey Monkey's first page and proceeding accordingly. Once students were comfortable with their decision to participate, they could proceed to all pages of the survey by clicking on the "next" button. At the end of the survey, participants saw a displayed 'thank-you' message on the screen for their participation in the survey. The survey was administered by mid-October of 2023 to all first-year and full-time students who enrolled and who were in their first semester attending a two-year public community college on a Caribbean Island.

The research design required students who wished to participate to click on the survey link and sign in once using their SBCC email address so those who registered for the second semester (evidence of persistence) could be identified. As a result, I also sought the participants' permission to share their college email addresses with the IT Officer who later aligned each participant with their second-semester registration records. The SBCC IT Officer signed a confidential agreement that ensured that students' personal information entrusted to him would not be shared with any other person. The collected Survey Monkey data output was sent to the SBCC IT Officer who added a new data column to indicate a 'yes' or 'no' as the same participants returned to college and registered for the second semester in January 2024. After noting those who returned for the second semester, the IT officer removed the students' email address column before sharing the final compiled data on a flash drive with me. This flash drive was stored in a personal locked filing cabinet to which no one will have access except the researcher.

The survey data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.0. Descriptive statistics were applied to data using frequency,

means, and standard deviations. In addition, binomial logistic regressions were used to predict the probability that an observation falls within one of two categories of a dichotomous value (Laerd Statistics, 2020). The two validated Conley Readiness mini-quizzes, which totaled 24 questions were used in their entirety without any alterations. This decision assisted in maintaining the validity of the items among the study population. A summary of the results was shared with college administrators and emailed to all participants of the study.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

I wish to acknowledge a few assumptions, limitations, and delimitations during the conduction of this project study. Assumptions are the foundation of any research proposal and represent what a researcher presumes to be true about the study. I assumed that participants would answer the survey accurately and that those who responded would have met the study criteria. There were also limitations of the study that should be explained. One limitation is that the results of the study cannot be generalized outside of the study population since the study was conducted at one community college on a Caribbean Island. Another limitation is the fact that students self-reported their information through a survey and may encounter recall bias which could affect data accuracy. Recall bias can occur when participants find it difficult to remember previous events or experiences accurately, or they may purposely omit details (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). The first-year college student participants were expected to recall information about their college-readiness academic behaviors experienced when they first transitioned to a community college. Recall bias was reduced by narrowing the time gap when the

survey was administered, which was during the middle of the first semester of the first year. Finally, this project study recognized that college students attending the SBCC matriculate with the Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC), which is different from the matriculating standards for colleges in the United States that rely on the Common Core State Standards, for example, to determine students' college readiness profile (James, 2022). The study was delimitated to only full-time, first-year students enrolled during the 2023 - 2024 academic year. The survey consisted of Likert-type scale questions suitable to collect quantitative data. Therefore, the interpretation of the results will be subjected to interpreting responses limited to the scale of the items and the survey design.

Protection of Participants' Rights

I ensured that during the conduction of the survey, the participants' rights were protected, and there was only minimal harm or risk. Students were informed in the promotional email that their decision to participate was entirely voluntary and that they would not be penalized by anyone associated with the SBCC if they chose not to participate. In addition, they were reminded that there were no financial benefits for participating, but that their efforts would support future first-year orientation programs. I also sought permission from the participants to share their email addresses with the SBCC IT Officer for future alignment of data. Participants were further assured that their information would be kept confidential, and the results of the study would only be shared with college administrators to better inform any first-year orientation policy change at the SBCC.

Data Analysis Results

The following sections give a detailed description of the project study's population, the testing of binomial logistic regression, assumptions, study limitations, and the research findings. I showed how the study's results align with the problem statement, theoretical framework, research question, and hypothesis. The collected data were exported from Survey Monkey into SPSS version 29 for analysis. The number of participants in the survey was 91 full-time, first-year students from all the departments of the SBCC. This represented 46% response of the total first-year student cohort. The number of participants exceeded the minimum required sample size of 55. The sample size was calculated based on the 2023-2024 academic year intake of 197 first-year students at the SBCC. I used Statistical Solution for Dissertation (2023), an online statistical calculator to determine the appropriate sample size. A priori power analysis for linear regression with one predictor, an alpha of 0.05, power of 0.80 with a medium effect size of (d= 0.5) was used to calculate the sample size. The research survey instrument consisted of 25 items. Question 1 requested students' email addresses. Questions 2 to 13 focused on Conley's mini-quiz for Self-management skills, while questions 14 to 25 focused on Mindset skills.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequencies to determine respondents' college readiness scores and persistence data. Each participant's self-reported responses on the quizzes were used to gauge their self-management and mindset skills determined by the two validated mini quizzes designed by Dr. David Conley. Participants' responses were scored on a Likert scale rating from 1-5. Self-management

and mindset scores were then summed to achieve the overall participants' college
readiness total score.

College Readiness Data Results

College readiness was based on two of Conley's mini quizzes: Self-management
and Mindset. Each mini-quiz was scored out of a total of 60 points, and the overall total
score for both quizzes was 120 points. The mean college readiness score is 51.79. The
lowest college readiness score was 25, and the highest college readiness score was 72
with a standard deviation of 9.78 (See Table 1).

Table 1

College Readiness Descriptive Statistics

College Readiness	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
SM+MS Scores	91	25.00	72.00	51.7912	9.78152

Note: Valid N (listwise) 91

Further descriptive statistics analysis was completed to determine the means for
the sum of students' college readiness self-management and their mindset skills. Overall,
the respondents' mean score was low on both the sum of self-management and mindset
skills. The respondents scored slightly higher on self-management skills compared to
mindset skills. The mean score for the sum of self-management skills was 28.83, while
the mean score for the sum of mindset skills was 22.95. Both skills were scored out of a
total of 60 points.

When analyzing further the two components of college readiness (self-management and mindset), it was found that 45.1% (41) of the respondents reported a low level on the question related to belongingness at college. This mindset question (Q1), "I feel like I belong to college" was mostly rated as 'not at all like me' by the students. The respondents selected options from among the following: 1 Not at all like me, 2 A little like me, 3 Somewhat like me, 4 A lot like me, and 5 Very much like me (See Table 2). Feelings of belongingness are a key component in students' persistence and academic outcomes (Tinto, 1993). Kahu (2021) supported that a feeling of belongingness at college is critical to students' mindset. In his study, he found that students who are better prepared for college developed a greater connection with faculty and peers and were more likely to have a successful learning outcome.

Table 2
Results of Mindset Q1: I feel like I belong at College

	N 91	%
Not at all like me	41	45.1%
A little like me	28	30.8%
Somewhat like me	17	18.7%
A lot like me	2	2.2%
Very much like me	3	3.3%

Persistence Data Results

This study utilized an early definition of students' persistence, which was measured by the respondents returning for classes at the start of the second semester commencing 4th January 2024. Sixty-nine students (75.8%) who responded to the college readiness survey in October 2023 returned for the new semester to continue classes, while

22 students (24.2%) who also participated in the survey did not return for the second

semester (See Figure 1). When the data were compared with the overall persistence of the

total first-year cohort, 68% (134) returned while 32% (63) did not (Personal

Communication with IT Officer, 2024).

Figure 1

Return to College in the Second Semester
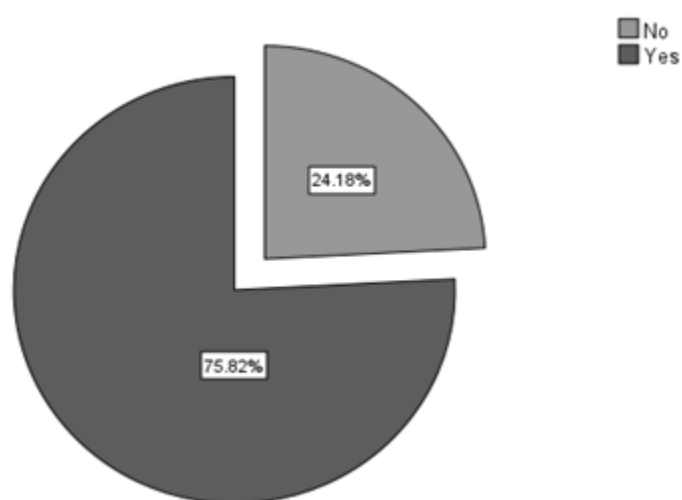
Testing Assumptions for Binomial Logistic Regression

I determined that binomial logistic regression would be most suited to answer the

research question. The binomial logistic regression test seeks to predict the probability

that an observation would fall into one of two categories of a dichotomous dependent

variable based on one or more continuous or categorical independent variables (Laerd

Statistics, 2020). During the data analysis process, binomial logistic regression was tested

to determine if the level of college readiness predicts students' persistence (return to

college second semester). The seven statistical assumptions for binomial logistic

regression were not violated but rather indicated that the data could be analyzed using this statistical test because all the assumptions were met before the analysis was carried out (Laerd Statistics, 2020).

The first assumption was met. This required the *dependent variable*, students' persistence, to be measured on a dichotomous scale of two groups which are the "yes" and "no" categories, indicating whether students return to college or not for the second semester. This variable was coded as an interval ratio, where 1.00 was ascribed to students who returned and 0.00 was ascribed to students who did not return in the second semester.

The second assumption was also met. This required having at least one independent variable that can be measured on a continuous or scale level, for example, using the Likert scale. This study measured the independent variable, college readiness, using two validated mini-quizzes structured on a five-point Likert scale. The independent variable, college readiness, was also given nominal values where students were ranked from very low to very high levels.

The third assumption specifies that there should be independence of observations. This requires that both categories of the dichotomous dependent variable and the independent variable are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Participants were also required to sign in to the survey using their email address and could only sign in once ensuring the independence of observation. Participants were later de-identified as email addresses were removed from the data by the IT Officer.

The fourth assumption subscribes that there should be a minimum of 15 cases per independent variable. The survey data met this assumption of fifteen minimum cases per independent variable. Ninety-one college students participated in the survey, which is more than adequate when analyzing, the independent variable, college readiness.

The fifth assumption supports that there should be no linear relationship between the continuous independent variable and the logit transformation of the dependent variable. The linearity assumption is one of the most critical assumptions as it verifies the validity of the binomial logistic regression method (Laerd Statistics, 2020). The linearity of the continuous variable, college readiness, was assessed via the Box-Tidwell process to determine if there is a linear relationship between the logit of the dependent variable, student persistence. The p-value emerged as .251, which is not significant, therefore the null hypothesis for linearity was accepted that there is no linear relationship between the continuous independent variable and the logit transformation of the dependent variable.

The sixth assumption supports that the data do not show collinearity. Multicollinearity exists when at least 2 independent variables have a linear relationship with each other. This project study has only one continuous independent variable, and therefore, multicollinearity does not exist (Laerd Statistics, 2020).

The final and seventh assumptions pointed out that there must be no significant outliers case-wise. The SPSS (Version 29) was used to determine the presence of outliers. Cases with a standardized residual greater than 2.5 could suggest that outliers may need to be eliminated from the general analysis results (Laerd Statistics, 2020). Since there were no cases with a standardized residual greater than 2.5, the SPSS version did not

produce a Casewise plot for this analysis indicating there were no significant outliers that could skew the results of the study.

Binomial Logistic Regression Analysis Results

I then proceeded with confidence after the binomial regression assumptions were met and applied the statistical tests in an attempt to answer the study's overarching research question. RQ: Is college readiness, as measured by the Conley's Readiness mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset, predictive of first-year community college students' persistence as measured by their registration for second-semester courses?

The results showed the binomial logistic regression model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 42.02$, $p < .001$. To further assess the adequacy of the model in predicting either category outcome, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test, chi-square goodness of fit test for logistic regression showed (p = .441), which is greater than .05, indicating that the selected model is a good fit (Leard Statistics, 2020).

According to the Nagelkerke R^2 result (.553), the model accurately explained that 55% of the variance in persistence was due to college readiness. The model also correctly classified 86.8 % of overall cases with a sensitivity of 92.8% and a specificity of 68.2 %. The Nagelkerke R^2 was used because the range of values was between 0 and 1. The model determined that college readiness based on self-management and mindset skills is a predictor of students' college persistence. In fact, for every point increase in students' college readiness scores, the odd ratio is 1.29 times more likely that students will persist at college. (See Tables 3 and 4)

Table 3

Classification Table: Return to College

Return to College in Semester 2 Observed		Predicted		Percentage Correct
		No	Yes	
Return to College Semester 2	No	15	7	68.2
	Yes	5	64	92.8
Overall Percentage				86.8

Note: The cut value is .500.

Table 4

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)	95% C.I. for Lower	EXP (B) Upper
College Readiness: SM+MS Scores	.257	.060	18.426	1	<.001	1.293	1.150	1.455
Constant	-11.134	2.75	16.354	1	<.001	.000		

Note: Variable(s) entered on step 1: College Readiness: SM+MS Scores.

Limitation of Research Findings

The data collection period lasted for three weeks. However, this selected data collection period inadvertently coincided with the mid-semester exams at the SBCC. This may have proven challenging for the data collection process since students are more likely to be overwhelmed by the stressful exam period and may not easily want to participate in a survey. Patterson Silver Wolf et al. (2021) defined college persistence. He used a later measurement for return which was at the beginning of the second year. This study used the early measurement, which is the return by the second semester of the

first year. The justification was based on the SBCC's earlier student records data showing that 41% of first-year students did not return for the second semester of their first year for several years. By using an early persistence measurement instead of waiting for the beginning of the second year, it was likely that the researcher missed those students who departed later and hence could not be captured in the data collection.

Summary of Results

The study received 91 full-time first-year students enrolled at the SBCC during the 2023-2024 academic year. The logistic regression model results showed statistical significance $X2 (1) = 42.02$, $p < .001$, meaning college readiness was a predictor of students' persistence. The Nagelkerke R 2 = .553 indicates that 55% of the variation in students' persistence was explained by their college readiness status. The results showed that for every point increase in students' college readiness scores, the odd ratio is 1.29 times more likely that students will persist at college. College readiness, as measured by Conley's mini quizzes: self-management, and mindset skills, predict college persistence. The findings also suggested that the higher the college readiness score, the greater the probability of a participant persisting at college.

The results showed a low to moderate college readiness score based on Conley's mini quizzes: self-management and mindset skills. The mean college readiness score was 51.79. This finding is consistent with earlier seminal work by Dr. David Conley who posited that first-year students are not well prepared for college since their high school curriculum failed to focus on mastering success skills including critical thinking, analytical, reasoning, writing, and problem-solving skills. The result is consistent with

other studies which found that better-prepared students who developed better integration and connection with faculty and peers are more likely to persist and attain degrees (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2023; Byl et al., 2022).

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

There is a significant national and international concern that the majority of first-year students are leaving higher education without completing their programs or meeting graduation requirements (Ntema, 2022). A local community college is facing similar high drop-out rates where over 40% of students who enrolled at college do not stay to earn an associate degree. Although colleges such as the SBCC may offer remedial services to support students, there is an institutional disconnect due to the belief that students should come to college 'college-ready' and should navigate through college effortlessly and successfully (Calwell et al., 2021). However, McNair et al. (2022) acknowledged that the reality is daunting as students often attend college unprepared. They suggested college administration flip the script and focus their concentration from college readiness to 'student readiness' instead. This strategy is crucial since college preparedness is really beyond the control and reach of higher learning institutions. Therefore, community colleges should accept the responsibility and strengthen their efforts to support their new students and enhance their learning outcomes. However, such an effort would require college administrators and education leaders to rely on empirical evidence to become more responsive in redesigning standards and policies to better support incoming students.

This study provided valuable evidence in better identifying the magnitude of the phenomenon that is necessary for informing education policy decisions. The SBCC IT Officer reported an overall 68% return and 32% who did not return among all the full-

time first-year students for the 2023-2024 academic year (Personal Communication, 2024). The findings of this study showed that the persistence data is 75.82 % and 24.18% who did not return in the second semester. This is consistent with earlier SBCC data reports of low persistence by the second semester of their first year. The reported high dropout rate among first-year students soon after enrollment at the SBCC remains worrisome both for the institution and local government, which invests heavily in providing nationals access to affordable post-secondary education. The findings also showed that the majority of first-year students at the SBCC were not college-ready which predicted their college persistence.

Providing access is essential as students who gain post-secondary credentials are more likely to find higher-paying jobs and improve their socioeconomic conditions. Invariably, this study led to the recommendation of an evidence-informed policy white paper intended to better support first-year students' learning environment and improve their academic and social success. This policy white paper offers practical recommendations with specific strategies to increase college completion by supporting students the moment they are enrolled in college. The following sections highlight the project description and goals, rationale, literature review, project description, project evaluation plan, and implications.

Rationale

Persistence in the first year of college is vital because it serves as an introductory and transition period to higher education, and increases the likelihood of attaining credentials (Motsabi et al., 2020). This quantitative study was relevant and timely in

addressing a local problem of low persistence rate at the SBCC. The study determined

that Conley's college readiness mini-quiz: Self-management and Mindset predicts first-

year students' persistence. The study findings provided empirical evidence for the

proposed policy recommendations to the SBCC with strategies to improve persistence

rates. Although the SBCC administration recognizes the annual low persistence rate, an

educational gap exists due to the SBCC administration not measuring students' college

readiness to determine the link to persistence. In addition, the institution does not

currently have a policy in place to address the low persistence rate exhibited particularly

by first-year students. Further, the SBCC has not assessed students' college readiness as a

likely predictor of low persistence. Thus creating a white policy with recommendations

and strategies was intended to close this educational gap in practice and enhance

students' likelihood of degree completion.

Review of the Literature

Adejumo et al. (2021) postulated that the greater the investment in human capital

particularly through higher education, the greater will be the return as human capital

evolves, develops, and increases positive social growth among diverse communities. It is

well established that the cost-benefits of higher education extend way beyond the

boundaries of society (Levin & Garcia, 2017). At the SBCC, the local government has

invested heavily to ensure nationals receive access to higher education and in turn, foster

a higher economic return. However, the SBCC continues to experience low levels of

persistence with reduced graduation rates. The magnitude of this local problem warranted

a comprehensive literature search to gain a clearer insight into the problem and offer an

appropriate solution. Further, I also intended to identify the best practices that are evidence-based in producing a white paper policy with recommendations that align with the institution's mission, goals, and objectives. In addition, the white paper policy also serves to guide the implementation of the recommended strategies to improve students' learning outcomes.

A thorough review of the literature was accessed through the Walden University digital library and, Google Scholar, which justified this policy recommendation paper for the stakeholders. The databases for the literature search included the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global, and SAGE Journals. A few keywords used in the search included *educational policy*, *community college reform*, *higher education policy*, *policy implementation*, *policy design, retention strategies*, *white paper policy, student readiness, college readiness strategies*, *education reform,* and *Caribbean education reform.*

Justification for a Policy White Paper

White papers were initially legislative documents that served to justify and support political positions but they are recently being used by various other disciplines (Kolowich, 2014). One such discipline is education where they can provide the impetus for responsive action in redesigning practices and policies. A white paper is also a suitable medium through which decision-makers can absorb the truthfulness of research in a manner that is easily understood. Policy white papers are designed to present research findings in a clear, concise manner persuasively to numerous audiences (Neupane, 2020). White papers also educate, provoke innovative thinking, and

communicate a point of view using statistically sound data and well-researched findings. Shih et al. (2020) proposed that a white paper policy could promote faculty responsibility, professionalism, conscientiousness, and a passion for teaching.

Problems in education require data-driven research methods and accurate scientific objective information to influence precise interventions. White papers in education commonly describe local problems at hand and provide evidence-based solutions to issues, by making recommendations to enact critical institutional changes. Additionally, college administrators and educational policy developers rely on educational research to inform and guide their decision-making. During the process, they select and use specific research evidence for particular purposes that provide rigor, reliability, relevance, and legitimacy to the development and diffusion of policies (Smith et al., 2021). These policies have the potential to impact negatively or positively critical college practices that invariably influence students' academic performance and their success (Ellegood et al., 2019).

The results of the project study were convincing in justifying the need to design this policy white paper. My chair and committee members concurred that it was appropriate to develop a policy white paper to convey the findings and recommendations of the study. I developed the policy white paper to assist the SBCC administrators and education policy developers in creating a student-ready culture and environment and designing enhanced first-year orientation programs to facilitate greater persistence outcomes. As I prepared the white paper, it was imperative to research the historical use,

purpose, and construction format of such a relevant document to ensure the greatest

benefits and validation for its successful implementation.

Theoretical Justification for the Policy Paper Recommendations

Policy papers can be used as a blueprint to guide education leaders at the local site

and other public community colleges (Shih, et al. 2020). They can address issues in

higher education such as among first-year students resulting in long-term positive social

change. Policy papers can set standards for delivering a high-quality education to a

diverse student population. However, students' expectations and preparedness for college

impact the way they learn and their success and satisfaction with the institution (Naoreen

et al., 2021). The policy white paper for the SBCC is grounded in the theoretical

foundations of Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure and Conley's Readiness

Model (2008). Tinto's (1993) theory will guide the development of improved academic

and social integration needed on campus. The theory will also frame the strategies and

procedural changes intended to create a student-ready culture and environment to

improve first-year academic outcomes at the SBCC.

The pivotal role of forming social interactions upon entering the college campus

cannot be overemphasized. Tinto (1993) argued that the students who persist were the

ones who were well integrated into the campus environment and had better relationships

with faculty and peers. Robinson et al. (2019) supported that college students with poor

instructor-student relationships were more likely at risk for dropping out before

completing their first year. Feelings of belongingness are critical to student retention or

departure. Also, feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in are key reasons students consider leaving the higher learning institution (Kahu, 2021).

There is extreme pressure on post-secondary institutions to redesign policies and practices to align with the institution's goals. Colleges are expected to be more accountable by creating a 'student-ready' culture and environment. This approach shifts the challenging responsibility from off of high schools to colleges instead (Caldwell et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2019). Colleges are required to optimize empirical evidence from research to deliberately align their student support programs. The theoretical underpinnings of Conley's Readiness Model (2008) will also guide these strategies and programs and justify the need for student and faculty incentives to promote greater persistence outcomes (Parks & Swanson, 2021). Conley's third domain, academic behavior, will guide students' development of better self-management skills, study habits, time management, and self-control processes necessary for academic success.

Reforming Higher Education

Educational systems worldwide are under extreme demand to produce trained and skilled individuals who are efficient enough to compete in a global economy yet adaptable to varying changes (Pang, 2023). One way to address this dilemma is through education reform, which is capable of transforming individuals into competent employees. According to ProctorEdu (2022), education reform highlights the systematic and intentional changes and improvements made to the educational system to address identified problems. The result is expected to promote equitable and better learning outcomes for diverse students locally and internationally. It is not surprising that

numerous political debates surround the management of higher education and its
continuous approaches to producing employable graduates who can contribute to society
(Põder & Lauri, 2021). Denny (2021) argued that education reform in the Caribbean,
although constant, has not kept pace with the social changes that are rapidly occurring.
Local education institutions are expected to adjust to the dynamic climate in education.
As the SBCC seeks opportunities to increase its standard practices toward accreditation,
the administration is willing to adopt evidence-based recommendations to bring change
and development to its learning environment. Christensen (2022) acknowledged that a
cadre of highly motivated faculty and staff can move the institution forward and deliver a
higher quality of education.

Implementing Policies in Higher Education

Caves and Oswald-egg (2023) postulated that higher education policy
implementation is just as critical as the policy design process. It requires the commitment
of those entrusted with carrying out the policy at various levels to accomplish educational
goals. During policy implementation, educational leaders are required to make data-
driven decisions involving efficient resource allocation for student success (Barton et al.,
2022). Invariably, education stakeholders are concerned with the quality of education
research and its ability to adequately support policy implementation (Gorard et al., 2020).
However, it is expected that local government institutions like the SBCC will rise to the
forefront, and transform the education milieu with evidence-based research that can
create rapid positive change (Neupane, 2020).

Commonly, education policies in higher education focused on improving graduation rates and boosting first-year orientation programs to increase persistence rates. However, for educational policy change to be effective and sustainable, it demands meaningful organizational support from significant stakeholders to steer students successfully (Tabatadze & Dundua, 2023). Engaging stakeholders in the process is critical as they may lose enthusiasm for the policy implementation if they are not provided with adequate opportunity to understand the changing institution's needs. A collaborative approach involving policy leaders and stakeholders' input is recommended as the best practice for policy implementation at higher learning institutions (Shannon, 2019).

Facilitating Organizational Change

Although numerous colleges were successful in enrolling more students on campus, they failed to bring awareness to the persistent barriers facing students upon arrival (Robinson et al., 2019). Community college students are unique and are more likely to enter college facing additional challenges such as deficient college-readiness skills and lacking a sense of belonging (Rodriguez & Rima, 2020). As colleges create a new learning environment, college administrators must understand the dynamics of the organization's culture and the challenges that may arise to reduce escalating conflicts. Thien (2020) acknowledged that culture strongly impacts employees' attitudes toward organizational change. The way employees think feel, behave, and are motivated influences the stability of the workplace (Demissie & Egziabher, 2022). Mokher and Jacobson (2021) argued that sound leadership at the SBCC is necessary for organizational

changes to be successful and serves as a buffer against the pressures that threaten a new mandate.   The adoption of a new policy at the SBCC hinges on faculty and staff commitment to a better learning outcome for first-year students.

Memon et al. (2021) recommended adopting Kurt Lewin's three stages of change management: unfreezing, moving, and re-freezing. During the unfreezing stage, the leaders can provide awareness and buy-in of the necessity of a student-ready environment. The moving stage requires support as resources are deployed in implementing the changes according to plan. The final and third stage, refreezing, requires leadership to maintain consistency in stabilizing the changing environment. As the SBCC embraces the policy recommendations, Kurt Lewin's Change Process can offer helpful direction for implementing the new culture and environment while managing conflicts that are likely to emerge. Moreover, faculty and staff must effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings as they consolidate their efforts within and across the institution to accomplish set goals (Caves & Oswald-Egg, 2022).

Project Description

A policy white paper is a document grounded in the theoretical foundation and empirical evidence, therefore it is an effective medium to inform education stakeholders and college administrators of the study results. The policy white paper will be designed with a cover page, an executive summary, an introduction to the problem, a scholarship addressing the problem, recommended solutions, and references. I will disseminate the white paper from my project study to stakeholders including college administrators, education policymakers, and supporters of the institution. This will be done via email and

face-to-face meetings to further clarify a better understanding of the problem and solutions. After discussing with the college administration, a copy of the white paper will be sent to the SBCC librarian to be made available at the Library Resource Centre to those having an interest in the policy paper and its recommendations.

Closing the Local Educational Practice Gap

The result suggested that the higher the college readiness scores, the greater the probability of a participant persisting at college. Intentionally, many industries have shifted their economic priorities and placed attention and focus on increasing adolescents' college readiness skills to influence their academic trajectory and eventually their employability (Knox, 2023). This study provided empirical evidence to support best practices for making the SBCC more student-ready, especially for first-year students who transition from high school to a less structured environment with vast expectations. The study found that first-year students' college readiness scores predict their early persistence. This justifies the need for the SBCC administrators to assess first-year students' college readiness status soon after enrollment so that appropriate interventions and approaches can be applied. Identifying college readiness as a predictor of students' persistence warrants the need to create a student-ready environment to support first-year students early upon their arrival to campus. This study provided the impetus for the policy paper recommendations to create a more student-ready culture that focuses on student's academic and social integration to improve campus comfort and the likelihood of completing their programs (Tinto, 1993).

Creating a Student-Ready Environment

Numerous college administrators have shifted from a college-ready focus to a student-ready focus for better students' academic success (Caldwell et al., 2021). McNair et al. (2022) posited that colleges are required to make changes in their institutional policies, practices, and culture to better serve students' needs. In addition, as they strengthen their institutional building capacity, they can achieve student-ready goals. Colleges expect first-year students to come prepared to handle the rigors of college and proceed successfully until graduation. However, the study found that the majority of the students reported low college readiness skills. This result is consistent with other studies that also found low college-ready skills among college students (Trimpe, 2022; Lane et al., 2021). Caldwell et al. (2021) further supported that colleges should ensure a student-ready environment since they have little influence over students' college preparation from high school. A student-ready college takes an intentional approach that is systematic, holistic, and transformative to strategically align student learning goals. In addition, they ensure that every student receives the support and resources needed to succeed (Caldwell et al., 2021). Students in this environment are motivated and look forward to regularly attending and participating at the institution. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnectedness are reduced as students readily engage in the new campus community (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2023). In addition, the environment cultivates a sense of belongingness as students navigate the social, academic, and cultural terrains. McNair et al. (2022) described that these institutions enhance students' academic support through academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, and opportunities to interact with faculty.

Students can negotiate assignments and due dates with faculty and engage in learning communities or with peers in the classroom. They also provide social and emotional support, which is crucial in stimulating students' sense of well-being and feeling of campus belongingness (Tinto, 1993). Students have access to counseling services and can participate in peer interactions, student clubs and organizations, and other extra-curricular activities. Kahu (2021) opined that students who are given adequate academic, emotional, and social support are less likely to feel isolated and depart prematurely from college.

Policy Support for a Student-Ready Environment

This study provided evidence for best practices to support a student-ready environment. The empirical evidence from this study suggested that first-year students reported moderate to low college readiness scores by the middle of the first semester. The students who reportedly had low scores in college readiness were more likely not to return by the second semester. In addition, the results supported that 55% of students' persistence could be explained by their college readiness preparations. Hence this policy white paper was designed to create an enhanced 'student-ready' culture and environment at the SBCC to warrant the most successful learning outcomes. The researcher via the policy white paper intends to make recommendations to the SBCC administration to assist in increasing first-year students' persistence rate. Such a decision requires intentional actions from the SBCC administrators to initially align the institution's vision and mission with students' academic goals.

The following recommendations along with their specific strategies are based on the research findings. They seek to address the local problem of low persistence through

professional development training for faculty and staff, continuous first-year college readiness assessment, improving first-year orientation and academic support programs, and improving faculty and student social integration.

Recommendation 1: Improve the First-Year Orientation Program

The results showed that the respondents scored low on the college readiness components. The mean score for self-management skills is 28.83 while the mean score for mindset skills is 22.95. The maximum score for each of Conley's mini-quizzes is 60 points. This evidence suggested the need to target first-year students during the orientation period and support their self-management and mindset skills. First-year orientation programs are dubbed beneficial as they introduce new students to a unique college culture when they leave a familiar environment to embark on the next step in their educational journey. These programs give students confidence and provide the relevant information and resources they need to be successful. Studies have found that new students who complete the required orientation programs at the beginning of enrollment do better in class, integrate socially, and persist toward graduation (Sharp, 2021). It is recommended that the SBCC improve its current first-year orientation program placing more emphasis on 'student-readiness' by adequately informing students on available resources and strengthening their academic, self-management, and mindset skills to increase their success. The following strategies support improving first-year orientation programs

Strategies

    1.1 Provide orientation agenda to new students in advance so there is an awareness of the expectations and pending activities

1.2 Create a welcoming student-friendly atmosphere supported by faculty and

staff so students feel a part of the community. Have welcome packages

available with promotional paraphernalia that would make students feel a part

of the institution such as tee shirts, water bottles, tote bags, folders, and other

stationaries

1.3 Provide adequate student-friendly information booths to introduce students to

available campus resources. For example, information on registering for

classes, navigating the campus, student groups, clubs, sports, and fun events.

1.4 Introduce a " buddy system" to bring support to new students who

require additional assistance

1.5 Encourage more student peer leaders to volunteer in planning and

executing areas of the orientation program for new students.

Recommendation 2: Improve Students' Academic Behaviors Support

Self-management skills include students' ownership of their learning experience,

academic behavior, time management, study habits, and balancing extracurricular

activities (Conley & French, 2014). Students with low self-management skills are at a

higher risk of performing poorly academically and eventually tend to leave their

programs unsuccessful (Banks & Dohy, 2019). It is recommended that the SBCC support

first-year students early in the first semester. McPherson and Arbelo Marrero (2021)

suggested tracking those who are in danger of failing courses by using early alert systems

to trigger the need for additional support. The identified academic gaps during the

assessment process could inform the relevant support needed to decrease failing courses,

remediation, and students' demotivation. The following strategies support improving students' academic behaviors.

Strategies

    2.1 Provide frequent educational sessions for students on building self-

       management skills, improving study habits, critical thinking,

       time management and balancing extracurricular activities (Conley, 2008).

    2.2 Provide academic advisement, mentoring, and counseling services on how to

       deal with failures, and overcome procrastination and exam anxiety.

    2.3 Strengthen remedial support in challenging courses by providing

       opportunities to those needing assistance to enhance academic success.

    2.4 Give incentives such as non-academic credits and awards to student

       leaders who provide remedial tutoring to peers to maintain initiative

       sustainability.

Recommendation 3: Improve Faculty and Students' Social Integration

The study showed that 45.1% (41) reported a low feeling of belongingness to the campus. Tinto (1993) acknowledged that once students are given the appropriate level of faculty interaction and institutional support, students are capable of integrating into the social structure of their college which enhances persistence rates. Robinson et al. (2019) supported that college students with poor instructor-student relationships were more likely at risk for dropping out before completing their first year. The following strategies would assist in improving faculty and students' social integration.

Strategies

3.1 Provide educational sessions to students on how social support can influence their academic success.

3.2 Encourage frequent meet-and-greet sessions between faculty and students to enhance social interactions

3.3 Introduce students to counselors, student advisors, mentors, peer facilitators, social groups, and clubs to assist students with social skills

3.4 Share Faculty available office hours on the college website as this demonstrates faculty willingness to support social interaction.

Recommendation 4: Continuous Assessments of First-Year Students' College Readiness Status

Assessing first-year students' college readiness is critical by providing empirical data to inform more student-ready decisions. This recommendation should become part of the standard practice at the SBCC. This intends to close the local educational gap as first-year students' college readiness is assessed early upon enrollment to determine likely persistence. The results of this study garnered data that showed that college readiness, as measured by Conley's mini quizzes: self-management, and mindset skills, predict college persistence. Also, for every point increase in students' college readiness scores, the odd ratio is 1.29 times more likely that students will persist at college. The results suggested that the higher the college readiness scores, the greater the probability of a participant persisting at college. Also, 55% of the variation in students' persistence can be explained by their college readiness scores. The following strategies support the

recommendation of assessing first-year students' college readiness to determine the likelihood of persisting at college.

Strategies

4.1 Assess first-year students as early as possible at the start of the new semester to have an awareness of their college readiness, and academic and social needs to be addressed.

4.2 Ensure the use of validated instruments for assessment to ensure valid data collection as part of the SBCC educational standard practice

4.3 Incorporate various research designs such as interviews and focus group discussions to garner adequate data and support student voices

4.4 Conduct a comparative analysis of the persistence and graduation rates for each first-year cohort

4.5 Share data with other stakeholders such as Heads of Departments at the SBCC to support buy-ins to new program initiatives and changes.

Recommendation 5: Facilitate Professional Development and Training for Faculty and Staff on becoming 'student-ready'.

Professional development and training at higher learning institutions is the continuous process of reflection, learning, and growing to increase one's knowledge, skills, and competence thus favoring improved practice (Stanley, 2023). It requires effective leadership, trust, and support to motivate and inspire faculty and staff to perform at their best, ultimately leading to better student outcomes (Kalig & Sasan, 2023). Collins and Smith (2021) argued that well-designed professional development

programs could improve the quality of teaching and ultimately better student outcomes. They recommended frequent professional development and training sessions to allow faculty and staff the opportunity to be better prepared to thrive in a student-ready environment. The program organizer should adopt the following strategies to enhance the professional development and training program.

Strategies:

5.1 Engage everyone on campus in the student-ready town hall discussions to garner their suggestions on areas where they may need training and development to support the new initiative.

5.2 Provide the opportunity for all staff members to receive the necessary training to better equip them based on expressed needs.

5.3 Partner with relevant stakeholders in providing education support for professional development training to enhance faculty and staff competency.

5.4 Incorporate frequent seminars, workshops, conferences, and staff retreats which are ideal for communicating various aspects of educational training in preparation for a student-ready environment

5.5 Encourage staff attendance at these sessions to build their confidence and competence in student support.

Needed Resources and Support for a Student-Ready Environment

The implementation of the white policy recommendations and strategies to transform the SBCC into a student-ready environment would require the by-ins and support of the entire SBCC faculty and staff. Implementing the policy white paper would not require additional staff but a firm commitment of current staff to improving the quality of service delivered to students. Initial leadership and adoption of the policies should come from the Principal and Vice Principal of the SBCC who are expected to share the vision with other members of the management and administrative team. They are also expected to delegate responsibilities as necessary to facilitate the new initiative. The other college stakeholders include all Heads of Department, the Campus Counsellor, the Director of Student Affairs, and the Senior Administrative Secretary.

Implementing the policy recommendations would require responsible persons to coordinate the various student-ready initiatives to ensure institutional goals are achieved. One of the Department Heads should be selected to assist in coordinating the two first recommendations and strategies: facilitating professional training and development and conducting assessments on first-year students' college readiness status. The Director of Student Affairs who already coordinates students' events and programs at the SBCC should be given the responsibility of coordinating the remaining recommendations and strategies for improving first-year orientation and academic programs along with improving faculty and students' social integration. It is also necessary that the SBCC partner with local private and business agencies to secure incentives and awards for students and staff. These partnerships will reduce the need for a special budget allocation.

The Ministry of Education could provide other resources and technical support to the SBCC for professional development and training further ensuring program sustainability.

Potential Barriers and Solutions

The policy recommendations and strategies for the SBCC are likely to be met with resistance by faculty to the new changes in creating a student-ready environment. The SBCC, a government-funded public institution employs a large percentage of adjunct faculty to reduce instructional costs. However, research showed that the increased number of adjunct faculty members can negatively affect student graduation and retention rates due to their lack of commitment to the institution (Rodriguez & Rima, 2020; Page, 2018). The adjunct faculty are also likely to be dissatisfied with their wages, healthcare benefits, access to full-time positions, and lack of job security. This could affect the faculty's ready buy-in of the recommended strategies.

Educators suggested building stronger learning communities with full-time and adjunct faculty to facilitate cooperative course integration and collaborative learning (Rodriguez & Rima, 2020. This would ensure easier communication and policy adoption for all stakeholders. Demissie and Egziabher (2022) purported that employees' ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving can influence workplace culture. This culture can either motivate employees to give their best and support change or it can destabilize the workplace. An understanding of the employees' feelings is relevant in securing cooperation among staff. Although these barriers may seem like obstacles, they should be seen as opportunities to engage all stakeholders in meaningful discussion at a higher level which can facilitate better communication and cooperation.

Implementation and TimeTable

The Principal of the SBCC leads the Management Team which consists of the Vice Principal, Heads of Departments, Director of Student Affairs, College Counsellor, and Administrative Secretary. The white policy document will be submitted initially to the Principal via email and a face-to-face meeting requested to share the research findings and the justification for the policy. The meeting will address the existing barriers and garner support for embracing the recommendations of the project. Although colleges face mounting challenges to increase accountability regarding student achievement effective leadership is key in guiding change (Zimmer & Keiper, 2021). Hence, the Principal's understanding of the policy is essential to shape the buy-in and acceptance of the document among the other members of the management team. Once the management team accepts and approves the new policy, the implementation process is expected to progress well despite expected challenges. I was surprisingly happy with the interest and support shown by the staff during the data collection process which sets the pace for better policy adoption. Implementing the policy recommendations could commence by the next academic year when a new cohort of first-year students enrolls. The policy implementation is expected to produce accrued benefits for students as well as provide professional development training opportunities for faculty and staff.

Roles and Responsibilities

Implementing a new policy at an organization can seem like a mammoth task to convince all employees of the required changes. Thus, each stakeholder needs to communicate effectively and work collaboratively with the group to achieve the goal.

This prevents stakeholders from losing enthusiasm for the policy implementation if they are not involved early and prepared adequately for the process. The Principal at SBCC is expected to delegate responsibilities to the Director of Student Affairs and to select Heads of Departments to execute and monitor the recommendations and strategies for creating a student-ready environment.

The Director of Student Affairs is responsible for improving the first-year orientation program which will be evaluated by increasing students' attendance and participation records and their accessing campus resources and services. This responsibility will be shared with the Information Technology Officer who will assist in promoting the activities and facilitating electronic communication with students. Further, the Director of Student Affairs will also be responsible for improving students' academic behaviors. This activity will be evaluated by their attendance records at workshops on time management, study habits, exam preparation, attendance at tutoring and remedial classes, and the decrease in failed courses per semester. In addition, faculty and students' social integration will be evaluated by the number of meetings and social activities between faculty and students and the increase in faculty office hours visits by students. The selected Head of Department will plan continued assessment of students' college-ready scores. The evaluation will be based on the collected data on all first years as part of the SBCC standard education practice at the beginning of each semester. In addition. another selected Head of Department will facilitate the professional training and development sessions. These sessions will be evaluated by participants' registration numbers, issuing attendance and participation certificates, completing evaluation forms at

the end of each session, and participants' review of training sessions with suggestions for future implementation.

Project Evaluation Plan

An evaluation plan is crucial to assess the effectiveness of the policy's recommendations and strategies designed to create a more student-ready environment at the SBCC. A well-functioning evaluation plan can identify changes caused directly by the intervention or the side effects of unintended circumstances (Bojtor & Bozsó, 2020). An effective policy is expected to improve student persistence rates which will eventually influence graduation rates. The Vice Principal, the selected Heads of Departments, and the Director of Students Affairs are the stakeholders who will continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the policy recommendations and report to the Principal of the SBCC per semester. A project Evaluation Plan, as part of the policy white paper, is designed to guide all stakeholders at the SBCC by providing a simplified outline of the specific evaluation targets highlighting the evaluation indicators, target periods, and the responsible persons required to implement and monitor the strategies.

Project Implications

Implications for Local Stakeholders

The results from this project study provided the impetus to support evidence-based practice in addressing a local problem of low persistence at the SBCC. These policy white paper recommendations and strategies were designed to create a student-ready environment to increase first-year students' persistence leading to their graduation.

The SBCC is a public institution funded by the local government which ensures that young men and women receive the opportunity for affordable post-secondary education. At the SBCC, students can achieve a professional or technical diploma with minimal financial investment. They are also able to find employment at local private agencies and build the country's economy. The SBCC remains committed to its mission of preparing students to meet the country's needs through training in academic, technical, vocational, professional, and paraprofessional programs (SBCC Prospectus, 2023). The college, for example, at the Department of Industrial Technology, students receive theoretical and practical training in electrical installation, refrigeration and air conditioning, motor vehicle, and engine systems. After graduation, students can either find jobs at various private and government establishments or create their businesses. It therefore behooves all students to persist despite facing various challenges and take advantage of a worthy opportunity to access higher education credentials. A positive social change is realized when more first-year students reach their fullest potential by persisting and completing their programs successfully.

Implication in a Larger Context

Access to higher education drives a nation's economic development and progress while achieving social equity and justice. Ma et al. (2019) in their study found that higher education has a benefit-cost ratio of 1.84 and a 23% social rate return indicating a high return with every investment made into higher education. The benefits of achieving a college education traverse beyond the boundaries of personal financial gains. Ma et al. (2019) further supported that more educated citizens have greater access to health care

and retirement benefits for those living longer. They are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and can make resource provisions for the next generation. Levin and Garcia (2018) postulated that the overall cost-benefit of increasing persistence rates toward graduation better supports students leading to employment opportunities. Salmi and D'Addio (2021) acknowledged that higher education offers substantial socio-economic, and cultural benefits to society in the form of improved overall health, higher lifetime incomes, and lower unemployment probabilities. The SBCC continues to receive government funding to ensure more citizens can afford to attend college, graduate, and support a healthier and wealthier society.

Summary

This policy white paper requires a college-wide approach to creating a student-ready environment for first-year students who transition from various structured learning environments including high schools to a more demanding and less structured college environment. In addition, students' college-ready skills may not be adequate and could jeopardize their decision to persist and complete their programs. The recommendations to create a student-ready environment at the SBCC to welcome first-year students are paramount. The recommendations are evidence-based and align with the SBCC's vision as a learning institution to develop a student-friendly environment that enhances human potential (SBCC Prospectus, 2021).

The literature review is arguably convincing and supports the justification for choosing a policy white paper as the best approach to address the local problem of low persistence at the SBCC. Further, these policy recommendations require very few

additional resources to implement. It demands a firm commitment from all stakeholders

to ensure the sustainability of the process for successful student outcomes. The following

Section 4 highlights the project's strengths, limitations, and benefits to all stakeholders. It

also offers practical alternative approaches, leadership change, reflections, and direction

for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

In this study, college readiness as measured by Conley's mini-quizzes was found to be predictive of students' persistence, and the finding was significant. The observation led to a white paper with recommendations and strategies to ensure a more student-ready environment that welcomes and supports students until graduation. Once the SBCC administration decides to implement the policy recommendations, it will guide the relevant stakeholders and address an educational gap in practice that could improve academic success. Caldwell et al. (2021) acknowledged that students should receive academic and social support upon transitioning to college, which is critical for increasing students' sense of belongingness and likeliness to persist. Ensuring the success of the policy paper would require consistent strong leadership and a firm commitment from faculty and staff to follow through on meeting the institution's goals.

Project Strengths

This project has strengths that provide valuable information about the phenomena. Firstly, it explores a local problem that affected the persistence rate at the SBCC. The research results provided evidence of the influence of college readiness, the predictor, on persistence rate. The project intends to close a gap in educational practice at the SBCC where first-year students' college readiness skills can now be assessed as a likely predictor of low persistence. The evidence also provided an impetus for the policy paper with recommendations to create a student-ready environment as a result of the reported low levels of college readiness. Also, I was careful to present the policy

recommendations using clear simple language by eliminating jargon and difficult terms.

Stakeholders can access the policy paper and easily understand and implement the

recommended strategies. Garcés-Ayerbe et al. (2019) noted that for stakeholders to adopt

a new change, effective communication is key to fostering cooperation to accomplish

institutional goals. The policy paper communicates practical solutions to an immediate

problem that is occurring among first-year students. Since the data are current, the

solutions are relevant for the SBCC to adopt and address the problem among first-year

students.

Another strength was the excellent support from key persons during data

collection at the SBCC. The college administration has expressed interest in finding a

solution to the low persistent rate and is awaiting the results to inform decision-making. It

is anticipated that there will be early adoption and support of the policy paper

recommendations by the SBCC administration and staff. The recommendations are

grounded in Tinto's (1993) theory suggesting that students who are academically and

socially integrated into the college community are more likely to persist and complete

their programs.

Limitations

This project study has limitations that should be borne in mind. The policy

recommendations were designed to address a local problem of low first-year persistence

at the SBCC. This institution is a public two-year community college funded by the local

government. Community colleges are unique in their open-door policy characteristics

which ensures access to post-secondary education to low-income students. However, the

recommendations should be used cautiously at other institutions that are not public community colleges.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

After conducting this quantitative study and the knowledge I have gained from the research courses at Walden University, I am convinced that other research designs are necessary to adequately study the problem. Although the quantitative design provided numerical data on the magnitude of the problem, I recommend that additional research be conducted that applies qualitative inquiry designs. This is to collect a deeper, richer understanding of the group's social phenomena in their natural niche (Burkholder, 2020). Further, the participants' voices, thoughts, and emotions are crucial in also interpreting the existing social reality. The recommendation is for the SBCC to facilitate various research designs to assess aspects of college readiness and incorporate the collected data as part of its standard educational practice. The SBCC could endorse qualitative designs utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the first-year students. This decision is to explore details of what drives them to want to stay or leave an academic institution.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change Scholarship

The last four years in the Doctor of Education program have prepared me as a scholar-practitioner who is capable of recognizing higher education local problems or gaps in higher education policies or literature. As a student researcher, applying robust research techniques is required for accurate data collection. My training also improved

my skills in collecting empirical evidence as the justification for addressing various issues in higher education and offering practical solutions. Further, I learned to use my knowledge to bring social change to vulnerable groups and communities. Making impactful changes in the lives of underserved communities is the impetus for the commitment and dedication of a scholar-practitioner.

Project Development and Evaluation

A project study was selected to address the local problem of low persistence at the SBCC. The researcher ensured that the study components were thoroughly aligned based on the theoretical underpinnings from the prospectus and the final study. An extensive literature search was done to identify the magnitude of the phenomena and provide guidance on the project development. A white paper policy with recommendations and strategies resulted after the study intended to transform the SBCC into a student-ready environment to increase persistence and improve first-year learning outcomes. The SBCC administrators will be presented with the new policy white paper to convince them of evidence-based approaches to improve college persistence. After policy implementation, the recommendations must be evaluated for their effectiveness in sustaining changes. An evaluation plan is designed to give clear guidance regarding the responsible persons, the target indicators, and the time frame to evaluate the student-ready initiatives.

Leadership Change

The implementation of the policy recommendations would require the SBCC administration's ability to successfully harness human passion and energy to execute the required change needed for the policy and ensure the goal's sustainability. The SBCC

administrators must clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the faculty and staff and set expectations so that their organization goals will exude the potential to achieve more positive outcomes for first-year students. In addition, the leadership must be responsible for facilitating team spirit and communication among all stakeholders as they work through the challenges of adopting the new policy. The camaraderie of working together along with effective communication to achieve institutional goals will support best practices for organizational change (Cheeseman, 2019). The overall success of the policy would be realized when a higher number of first-year students remain at college and complete their programs. Continued leadership from other responsible persons and stakeholders is needed as the SBCC forges through a new journey to create a student-ready institution.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

The journey through this project development in addressing a local problem at a public community college was challenging but rewarding. This project has the potential for social change since it seeks to address a local problem that has far-reaching importance in increasing the socioeconomic status of young people on a Caribbean island. It provides insightful data about the study population by assessing students' college readiness scores and identifying the likelihood of those students persisting and completing their programs. This project study was grounded in two theoretical frameworks namely, Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure and Conley's readiness model (2008), which provided the construct for a better understanding of first-year low college persistence. While Tinto (1993) highlighted the need for adequate social

integration at college, Conley (2008) supported the value of other academic skills and behaviors essential for raising students' college readiness scores leading to higher persistence rates. The empirical evidence suggested that college readiness scores predict persistence. Hence, once these policy recommendations are implemented to create a student-ready environment, first-year students will be more likely to complete programs at the SBCC.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications

The government of the Caribbean island invests heavily in the SBCC annual budget to ensure applicants receive access to higher education. When over 37% of each first-year cohort drops out, valuable resources are not utilized, which can create economic difficulty as employers are unable to find qualified persons to fill job vacancies. Every student at the post-secondary level can access college credentials and improve their socio-economic status regardless of their financial ability. The government expects that the majority of graduates will in turn contribute to national development after receiving qualifications. To facilitate more students persisting and completing the SBCC programs, college administrators would require empirical evidence for decision-making. Hence, this evidence-based policy, once implemented, could increase the persistence rate at the SBCC allowing more students to use available resources. A positive social change is anticipated when more students graduate with their degrees and become gainfully employed.

Applications

The research findings from this study cannot be generalized to other post-secondary institutions due to the limited sample size. However, the policy white paper recommendations and strategies can be adopted to address a similar local problem with a commitment to becoming more student-ready. Other post-secondary learning institutions can benefit from applying the strategies to create a student-ready environment. The evaluation plan could serve as a guide to evaluate the effectiveness of the initiatives by monitoring the target indicators.

Directions For Future Research

This study examined college readiness as the only predictor of students' persistence. However, other predictors of persistence were not examined as likely influencing students' persistence. One of my recommendations for future research is to incorporate other research designs at the SBCC. The results of this study created the impetus for a future qualitative design to include in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to hear the valuable voices of first-year students who are willing to share their perspectives on college readiness. Future studies can identify other predictors influencing students' academic success, and thus this policy paper can be modified to include new recommendations that are based on the new findings.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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For the last 10 years, a local problem existed at the SBCC, a public community college, where almost 40% of each first-year cohort did not return for the second semester. This worrisome high early drop-out rate among first-year students piqued my

interest in investigating this phenomenon closely. In addition, my educational journey at Walden University has given me the knowledge, skill, and confidence to conduct research to gain empirical evidence to inform better decision-making. This quantitative study determined that college readiness is a predictor of students' persistence. This finding is consistent with other studies from an extensive literature search (Barton et al., 2022; Motsabi et al., 2020). As a result, a policy white paper was justified as the most effective approach to reducing the phenomenon by creating a student-ready environment. This is to assist students who need academic and social skills support and invariably increase their persistence. I am eager to share this policy's evidence-based recommendations and strategies with the leadership team at the SBCC to better facilitate first-year students. A college-wide initiative is required along with a firm commitment to endorsing this social change initiative and improving the learning outcomes.

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Appendix A: The Project

Creating A Student-Ready Environment at the SBCC

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The SBCC is a public community college on a Caribbean island that offers academic, technical, and professional programs to meet the needs of the local society. At the SBCC, to qualify for various programs leading to an associate degree, students matriculate with minimum passes in five CSEC subjects including Mathematics and or English along with a satisfactory high school transcript. These requirements are intended to accurately reflect students' readiness and capability to handle college-level work and expectations. Although the CSEC subjects were deemed to be a reliable predictor of academic success in the past, college administrators hypothesized that this indicator may be inadequate and that first-year students' poor academic performance and high departure rates may be linked to students' inadequate college readiness preparation.

Defining the Problem

In 2019, despite first-year students meeting matriculation requirements, the college cohort data from the *Student Records* database showed that 35% were recommended for remediation for failed coursework by the middle of the first semester. In addition, 37% of the total first-year cohort did not return for the second semester and eventually dropped out of their programs. This worrisome high early drop-out rate has been the center of much faculty discussion. In addition, the faculty reported the observed academic and social adjustment challenges encountered by first-year students who are likely to exhibit low college readiness preparation. There is also a gap in educational practice in which the SBCC has not assessed first-year students' college readiness as a

predictor of their persistence. This local problem warranted further investigation to identify if college readiness predicts persistence. Finding appropriate solutions requires evidence-based data.

Data /Evidence

The results showed the two college readiness components' mean scores were low. Overall the respondents scored low on self-management skills at 28.83 and mindset skills at 22.95. The maximum total score allotted for each component was 60. The persistence rate for those who returned for the second semester was sixty-nine students (75.8%), while 22 respondents (24.2%) did not return. The Nagelkerke R ^{2} = .553 indicates that 55% of the variation in students' persistence could be explained by their college readiness scores. Also, for every point increase in students' college readiness scores, the odd ratio is 1.29 times more likely that students will persist in college. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: College Readiness and Persistence Data
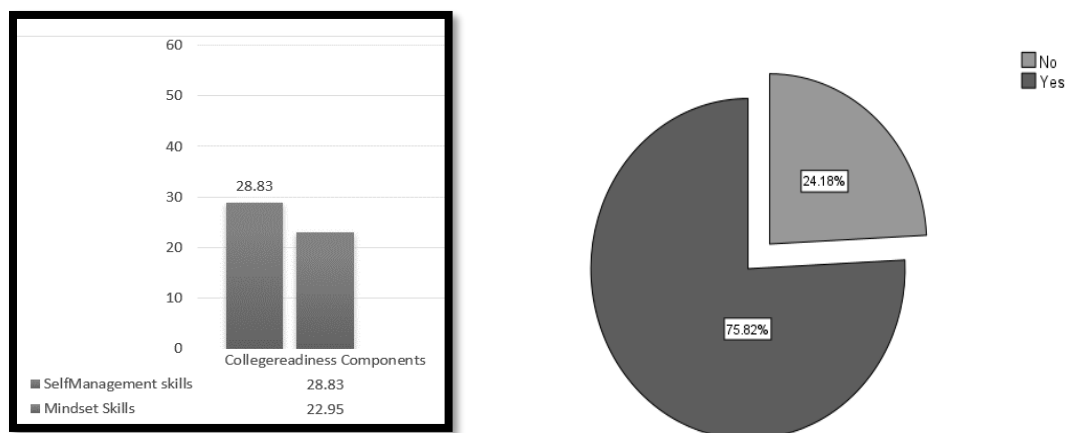
CR components: self-management and mindset skills   Return to College (Persistence)

The evidence led to a policy white paper that hinges on the theoretical foundations of *Tinto's (1993) Theory of Student Departure* to frame the strategies intended to create a student-ready environment. Tinto (1993) posited that students' academic and social integration is more likely to influence their persistence. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2: Link between Academic and Social Integration and Persistence
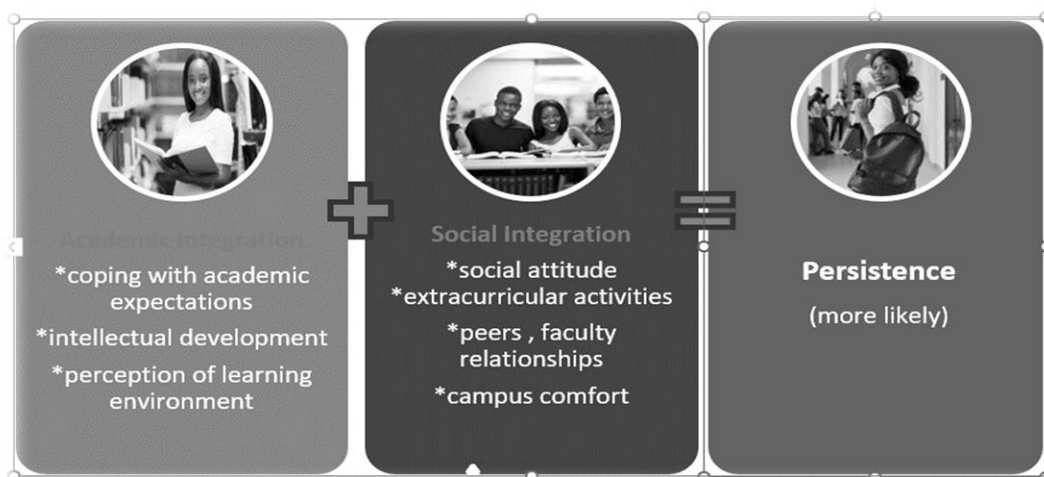
The results of this study are consistent with other studies that found a link between college readiness and low persistence (Daniel & McNeela, 2021; Ortagus et al., 2021). Since colleges are unable to influence students' college readiness preparation before they arrive, the focus should be to create a student-ready environment instead (Caldwell et al. 2022). This requires deliberately flipping the script and concentrating on making the institution student-ready. This strategy is crucial since college preparedness is really beyond the control and reach of higher learning institutions. Therefore, community

colleges should accept the responsibility and strengthen their efforts to support their new students and enhance their learning outcomes. However, such an effort would require college administrators and education leaders to rely on empirical evidence to become more responsive in redesigning standards and policies to better support incoming students.

The empirical evidence justified the development of the policy white paper with recommendations and strategies to create a student-ready environment. This is to ensure that first-year students receive the needed support and assistance as they traverse the campus experience toward graduation. This can be achieved through improving first-year orientation and academic support programs, improving faculty and student social integration, assessment of first-year college readiness for each cohort, and providing continuous professional development training for faculty and staff. A positive social change will be realized when more of the SBCC first-year students persist, complete their programs, become qualified, and contribute to the island's economy. The following five (5) recommendations each have specific strategies for the stakeholders to support and accomplish a student-ready environment at the SBCC.

Recommendation 1: *Improve first-year Orientation Programs*

Provide an improved orientation program that introduces new students to a unique college culture and gives students confidence by providing relevant information and resources.

Recommendation 2: *Improve Students' Academic Behavioural Support*

Support first-year students early in the first semester, identify academic gaps, and provide relevant support to decrease failing courses that could demotivate students.

Recommendation 3: *Improve Faculty and students' Social Integration*

Improve faculty and student interaction and institutional support. This makes students confident and comfortable in seeking out assistance enhancing persistence.

Recommendation 4: *Continuous Assessment of first-year students' college readiness.*

Assessing first-year students is critical as it provides empirical data to inform student-ready decisions.

Recommendation 5: *Facilitate Professional Development and Training*

Facilitate numerous professional development training opportunities to increase one's knowledge, skills, and competence for improved practice (Stanley, 2023). It requires effective leadership, trust, and support to motivate and inspire faculty and staff to perform at their best to improve student outcomes (Kalig & Sasan, 2023).

A Call to Action

These project's policy recommendations and strategies were based on empirical data that informed the decision-making process. Once the SBCC adopts the policy paper in its entirety, it can improve the learning environment resulting in higher student persistence. A student-ready culture and environment is achievable with the commitment, and dedication of the faculty and staff working towards quality improvement. This initiative requires leadership to motivate and guide every employee as they adopt the new initiatives. The institutional goals are achievable and sustainable since they require very few additional resources and thus prevent derailing the progress.

Introduction

Community colleges are strongly committed to their mission of providing many students with an opportunity to access postsecondary credentials. As part of their open-door policy, they enroll a large proportion of low-income students with limited financial affordability (Daugherty et al., 2019). However, many students are unable to accrue the benefits associated with this opportunity due to their low persistence in completing their degree (Ortagus et al., 2021). The study found that college readiness scores predict students' persistence rates. College administrators have shifted from a college-ready focus to a student-ready focus for better students' academic success (Caldwell et al., 2021). McNair et al. (2022) also supported that colleges need to strengthen their institutional building capacity to achieve student-ready initiatives. This study provided evidence-based best practices to support a student-ready environment.

The Problem

The local problem addressed through this project study is the low persistence rate among first-year full-time community college students on a Caribbean Island. Students attending this public two-year Suburban Boulevard Community College (SBCC), pseudonym, are eligible to matriculate once they pass the minimum of five (5) CSEC subjects including mathematics and English. However, in 2019, despite meeting matriculation criteria, 37% of the first-year student cohort did not return for their second semester. I intentionally excluded periods 2020 – 2022 during the COVID-19 outbreak for this study. The persistence trend has been in existence for the past ten years. A gap in

standard educational practice exists as college administration were not assessing first-year students' college readiness scores as a likely predictor of student persistence.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if college readiness, as measured by the Conley's Readiness mini quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset, predicts first-year community college students' persistence as measured by their registration for second-semester courses.

Methodology

Research Question

The project study will have one overarching research question (RQ1) that is

developed to determine if college readiness is a predictor of first-year community college

students' persistence as measured by their registration for second-semester courses.

RQ1. Is college readiness, as measured by the Conley's Readiness mini quizzes:

Self-Management and Mindset, predictive of first-year community college students'

persistence as measured by their registration for second-semester courses?

Study Design

The project study utilized a quantitative correlational design to examine whether

students' college readiness scores predicted their college persistence. The *independent*

variable or predictor is college readiness and the *dependent v*ariable is student

persistence. A Survey Monkey platform was utilized for data collection. College

readiness was assessed using twenty-four survey questions from Conley Readiness mini

quizzes: Self-Management and Mindset. A Likert-type scale ranging from 1 – 5 was

used to quantify students' responses. The dichotomous response variable, students'

persistence, was assessed based on whether the same students who participated in the

survey registered and returned to college for semester two and was measured using the

'*yes*' or '*no*' categories. The survey data was analyzed using the *Statistical Package* for

the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29.0. Descriptive statistics was applied to data using

frequency, means, and standard deviations. In addition, after meeting the required

assumptions binominal logistic regressions were used to predict the probability that an

observation falls within one of two categories of a dichotomous value (Laerd Statistics, 2020).

Evidenced-Informed Literature

Gregor et al. (2021) argued that community college students tend to face more barriers than their four-year college counterparts and are more likely to be academically unprepared for college. Researchers recommended the emphasis on the non-cognitive aspect of learning to include social skills, communication, group collaboration, critical thinking, and perseverance, which students must demonstrate to successfully traverse the postsecondary journey (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Conley, 2007). Numerous efforts were employed to measure college readiness by the student's ability to traverse the academic rigors of high school courses such as college admissions tests, placement test scores, grade point averages, and high school achievement exam scores. However, these college readiness indicators were not adequate in aligning well with the required college preparation and the necessary knowledge and skills pertinent to postsecondary success (Lombardi & Conley, 2011). Understanding how to assess first-year students' college readiness status is crucial since college-ready students are more likely to have higher persistence rates, grade point averages, and graduation rates (Lane et al., 2020).

College students' persistence has been among the most discussed and researched topics of higher education for the last four decades (Tight, 2019). Implementing strategies to retain students in college until they complete their degrees requires a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing persistence. Arguably, the first year seems to be the most daunting period for college students when critical persistence decisions are

made toward degree attainment (Tevis & Britton, 2020). However, students' early departure from college could affect their employability and influence their socioeconomic status. College administrators must therefore face the challenge of promoting successful learning and reducing early student departure from programs (Hoyert et al., 2019).

Analysis of Findings

The number of participants who responded to the survey was ninety-one (91) full-time first-year students who were not assigned to any remedial classes. This number included students from all departments of the SBCC and exceeded the minimum required sample size of 55. The sample size was calculated based on the 2023 academic year intake of 197 first-year full-time students. The research survey instrument consisted of twenty-five (25) items. Question 1 requested the student's email address. Questions 2 to 13 focused on Conley's mini-quiz for Self-management skills while questions 14 to 25 focused on Mindset skills. Each participant's self-reported responses to the quizzes which were used to gauge their Self-management and Mindset skills determined by the two validated mini quizzes designed by Dr. David Conley. Participants' responses were scored on a Likert scale rating from 1 – 5. Self-management and Mindset scores were then summed to determine the overall participants' total college readiness scores.

College Readiness Data Results

College readiness was based on two of Conley's mini quizzes: self-management and mindset skills. Each mini-test was scored out of a total of 60 points and the overall total score for both tests was 120 points. The results showed that the mean college

readiness score was 51.79. The lowest college readiness score was 25, the highest college

readiness score was 72 and the standard deviation was 9.78 (See Table 1).

Table 1

College Readiness Descriptive Statistics

College Readiness	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
SM+MS Scores	91	25.00	72.00	51.7912	9.78152

Note: Valid N (listwise) 91

Overall, the respondents' mean score was low for both the sum of self-

management and mindset skills. The respondents scored slightly higher on self-

management skills compared to mindset skills. The mean score for the sum of self-

management skills was 28.83 while the mean score for the sum of mindset skills was

22.95.

When analyzing further the two components of College readiness, it was found

that 45.1% (41) of the respondents reported a low level on the question related to

belongingness at college. This mindset question (Q1), "I feel like I belong to college"

was mostly rated as 'not at all like me' by the respondents. They selected options from

among the following: 1 Not at all like me, 2 A little like me, 3 Somewhat like me, 4 A lot

like me, and 5 Very much like me (See Table 2).   Feelings of belongingness are a key

component in students' persistence and academic outcomes (Tinto, 1993). Kahu (2021)

supported that a feeling of belongingness at college is critical to students' mindset. He

further found that students who are better prepared for college developed a greater

connection with faculty and peers and were more likely to have a successful learning

outcome.

Table 2

Results of Mindset Q1: I feel like I belong at College

	N 91	%
Not at all like me	41	45.1%
A little like me	28	30.8%
Somewhat like me	17	18.7%
A lot like me	2	2.2%
Very much like me	3	3.3%

Persistence Data Results

This study utilized an early definition of students' persistence, which was

measured by the respondents registering for classes at the start of the second semester

commencing 4th January 2024. Sixty-nine students (75.8%) who responded to the college

readiness survey in October 2023 registered for the new semester to continue classes,

while twenty-two respondents (24.2%) who also participated in the survey did not return

for the second semester (See Figure 1). When the data was compared with the overall

persistence of the total first-year cohort, 68% (134) returned while 32% (63) did not

(Personal Communication with IT Officer, 2024).

Figure 1: *Return to College in the Second Semester*
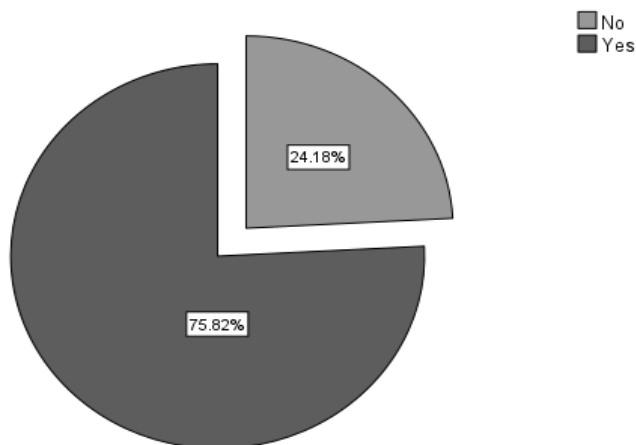
Binomial Logistic Regression Results

     I determined that binomial logistic regression would be most suited to answer the research question after all its seven assumptions were met. The binomial logistic regression test seeks to predict the probability that an observation would fall into one of two categories of a dichotomous dependent variable based on one or more continuous or categorical independent variables (Laerd Statistics, 2020). The results showed that the binomial logistic regression model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 42.02$, $p < .001$. To further assess the adequacy of the model in predicting either category outcome, the Hosmer and Lemeshow test, a chi-square goodness of fit test for logistic regression showed (p = .441), which is greater than .005, indicating that the selected model is a good fit (Leard Statistics, 2020).

According to the Nagelkerke R^2 result (.553), the model accurately explained that 55.0% of the variance in persistence was due to college readiness. The model also correctly classified 86.8 % of overall cases with a sensitivity of 92.8% and a specificity of 68.2 %. The Nagelkerke R^2 was used because the range of values was between 0 and 1. The model determined that college readiness based on self-management and mindset skills is a predictor of students' college persistence. In fact, for every point increase in students' college readiness scores, the odd ratio is 1.29 times more likely that students will persist at college (See Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3

Classification Table: Return to College

Return to College in Semester 2 Observed		Predicted		Percentage Correct
		No	Yes	
Return to College Semester 2	No	15	7	68.2
	Yes	5	64	92.8
Overall Percentage				86.8

Note: The cut value is .500.

Table 5

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp (B)	95% C.I. for Lower	EXP (B) Upper
College Readiness: SM+MS Scores	.257	.060	18.426	1	<.001	1.293	1.150	1.455
Constant	-11.134	2.75	16.354	1	<.001	.000		

Note: Variable(s) entered on step 1: College Readiness: SM+MS Scores.

Best Practices

The findings of this study suggested that college readiness, as measured by Conley's self-management and mindset skills predicts students' persistence. However, colleges have little influence on students' college readiness preparation before they enroll. Researchers, however, advocated that colleges should instead aim to become student-ready institutions and focus on meeting students' social, and emotional needs for better learning outcomes (McNair, 2022; Caldwell, 2021). The study's results lead to this policy paper's recommendations with strategies to create a student-ready learning environment and culture at the SBCC. This approach is critical to enhancing first-year students' feeling of belongingness to the college community. This best practice is likely to increase students' persistence in their programs at the SBCC. The overall goal of this policy paper for creating a student-ready institution is to increase the number of qualified individuals who can make a meaningful contribution to the country's economy.

Project Recommendations and Strategies

1. Improve the First-Year Orientation Program

2. Improve Students' Academic Behaviors Support

3. Improve Faculty and Students' Social Integration

4. Continuous Assessments of First-Year Students' College Readiness Status

5. Facilitate Professional Development and Training for Faculty and Staff on becoming 'student-ready.'

Recommendation 1: Improve the First-Year Orientation Program

The results showed that students reported low to moderate scores for the components of college readiness skills. The mean score for self-management skills is 28.83, while the mean score for mindset skills is 22.95. The maximum score for each of Conley's mini-quizzes is 60 points. This evidence suggested the need to target first-year students during the orientation period and support their self-management and mindset skills. First-year orientation programs are dubbed beneficial as they introduce new students to a unique college culture since they leave a familiar environment to embark on the next step in their educational journey. These programs give students confidence and provide the relevant information and resources they need to be successful. Studies have found that new students who complete the required orientation programs at the beginning of enrollment do better in class, integrate socially, and persist toward graduation (Sharp, 2021). It is recommended that the SBCC improve its current first-year orientation program placing more emphasis on 'student-readiness' by adequately informing students on available resources and strengthening their academic, self-management, and mindset skills to increase their success. The following strategies support improving first-year orientation programs.

Strategies

1.1 Provide orientation agenda to new students in advance so there is an awareness of the expectations and pending activities

1.2 Create a welcoming student-friendly atmosphere supported by faculty and staff so students feel a part of the community. Have welcome packages

available with promotional paraphernalia that would make students feel a part

of the institution such as tee shirts, water bottles, tote bags, folders, and other

stationaries

1.3 Provide adequate student-friendly information booths to introduce students to

available campus resources. For example, information on registering for

classes, navigating the campus, student groups, clubs, sports, and fun events.

1.4 Introduce a " buddy system" to bring support to new students who

require additional assistance

1.5 Encourage more student peer leaders to volunteer in planning and

executing areas of the orientation program for new students

Recommendation 2: Improve Students' Academic Behaviors Support

Self-management skills include students' ownership of their learning experience,

academic behavior, time management, study habits, and balancing extracurricular

activities (Conley & French, 2014). Students with low self-management skills are at a

higher risk of performing poorly academically and eventually tend to leave their

programs unsuccessful (Banks & Dohy, 2019). It is recommended that the SBCC support

first-year students early in the first semester. The identified academic gaps during the

assessment process could inform the relevant support needed to decrease failing courses,

remediation, and students' demotivation. The following strategies support improving

students' academic behaviors.

Strategies

    2.1 Provide frequent educational sessions for students on building self-

        management skills, improving study habits, critical thinking,

         time management and balancing extracurricular activities (Conley, 2008).

    2.2 Provide academic advisement, mentoring, and counseling services on how to

        deal with failures, and overcome procrastination and exam anxiety.

    2.3 Strengthen remedial support in challenging courses by providing

        opportunities to those needing assistance to enhance academic success.

    2.4 Give incentives such as non-academic credits and awards to student

        leaders who provide remedial tutoring to peers to maintain initiative

        sustainability.

Recommendation 3: Improve Faculty and Students' Social Integration

The study showed that 45.1% (41) reported a low feeling of belongingness to the campus. Tinto (1993) acknowledged that once students are given the appropriate level of faculty interaction and institutional support, students are capable of integrating into the social structure of their college which enhances persistence rates. Robinson et al. (2019) supported that college students with poor instructor-student relationships were more likely at risk for dropping out before completing their first year. The following strategies would assist in improving faculty and students' social integration.

Strategies

        3.1 Provide educational sessions to students on how social support can influence

            their academic success.

        3.2 Encourage frequent *meet-and-greet* sessions between faculty and students to

            enhance social interactions

        3.3 Introduce students to counselors, student advisors, mentors, peer facilitators,

            social groups, and clubs to assist students with social skills

        3.4 Share Faculty available office hours on the college website as this

            demonstrates faculty willingness to support social interaction

Recommendation 4: Continuous Assessments of First-Year Students' College

Readiness Status

        Assessing first-year students' college readiness is critical by providing

empirical data to inform more student-ready decisions. This recommendation should

become part of the standard practice at the SBCC. This intends to close the local

educational gap as first-year students' college readiness is assessed early upon

enrollment to determine likely persistence. The results of this study garnered data that

showed that college readiness, as measured by Conley's mini quizzes: self-management,

and mindset skills, predict college persistence. The results suggested that the higher the

level of college readiness scores, the greater the probability of a participant persisting at

college. Also, 44% of the variation in students' persistence can be explained by their

college readiness scores. The following strategies support the recommendation of

assessing first-year students' college readiness to determine the likelihood of persisting at college.

Strategies

4.1 Assess first-year students as early as possible at the start of the new semester to have an awareness of their college readiness, and academic and social needs to be addressed.

4.2 Ensure the use of validated instruments for assessment to ensure valid data collection as part of the SBCC educational standard practice

4.3 Incorporate various research designs such as interviews and focus group discussions to garner adequate data and support student voices

4.4 Conduct a comparative analysis of the persistence and graduation rates for each first-year cohort

4.5 Share data with other stakeholders such as Heads of Departments at the SBCC to support buy-ins to new program initiatives

Recommendation 5

Facilitate Professional Development and Training for Faculty and Staff on becoming 'student-ready.'

Professional development and training at higher learning institutions is the continuous process of reflection, learning, and growing to increase one's knowledge, skills, and competence, thus favoring improved practice (Stanley, 2023). It requires effective leadership, trust, and support to motivate and inspire faculty and staff to perform at their best, ultimately leading to better student outcomes (Kalig & Sasan,

2023). Collins and Smith (2021) argued that well-designed professional development programs could improve the quality of teaching and, ultimately, better student outcomes. They recommended frequent professional development and training sessions to allow faculty and staff to be better prepared to thrive in a student-ready environment. The program organizer should adopt the following strategies to enhance the professional development and training program.

Strategies:

5.1 Engage everyone on campus in the student-ready town hall discussions to garner their suggestions on areas where they may need training and development to support the new initiative.

5.2 Provide the opportunity for all staff members to receive the necessary training to better equip them based on expressed needs.

5.3 Partner with relevant stakeholders in providing the training and education support needed to enhance institutional goals. This collaboration is essential in propelling the campus forward.

5.4 Incorporate frequent seminars, workshops, conferences, and staff retreats which are ideal for communicating various aspects of educational training in preparation for a student-ready environment

5.5 Encourage staff attendance at these sessions to build their confidence and competence in student support and changes.

Policy Evaluation Plan

A policy evaluation is crucial to assess the effectiveness of the policy's recommendations and strategies designed to create a more student-ready environment at the SBCC. An effective policy is expected to improve student persistence rates which will positively influence graduation rates. The Vice Principal, the selected Heads of Departments, and the Director of Students Affairs are the stakeholders who will continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the policy recommendations and report to the Principal of the SBCC per semester. The following policy Evaluation Plan, as part of the policy white paper, is designed to guide all stakeholders at the SBCC by providing a simplified outline of the specific evaluation targets to be accomplished. The Evaluation Plan further highlights the evaluation indicators, target periods, and responsible persons who are expected to lead the initiatives (See Table 5).

Table 5: **The SBCC Policy Evaluation Plan for Creating a Student-Ready Environment**

Recommendations	Evidence of Effectiveness Indicators	Target Periods	Responsible Persons
1. Improve First-Year Orientation Program	-70 - 80% increase in students' attendance records -100% participation in orientation activities -80% increase in access to campus resources and services	During orientation week During the first semester	Director of Student Affairs works with IT Officer on promotion
2. Improve Students' Academic Behaviors Support	- 30-40 % increase in students' attendance records at workshops on time management, study habits, and exam preparation - 50% increase in attendance at tutoring and remedial classes - 50% decrease in the number of failed courses per semester	During each semester	Director of Student Affairs
3. Improve Faculty and Students' Social Integration	-30% increase in meetings and social activities between faculty and students - 40% increase in students' visits to faculty office hours	During each Semester	Director of Student Affairs
4. Provide continuous Assessments of first-year students	- College-ready assessment data on all first years as part of the standard education practice early in the semester - Comparative analysis between each first-year cohort's persistence and graduation rates	Store collected data immediately after collection for future evidence-based practice.	Selected Head of Department at SBCC
5. Professional Training and Development for faculty and staff, 1-2 times per semester	- Participants' registration numbers reflect 80% - 100% faculty and staff attendance - The issuing of Attendance and Participation certificates. - Completed evaluation forms at the end of each session by each participant - Participants' review of training sessions and suggestions made for future implementation	Each staff member should attend at least one professional training session per semester. An evaluation review is available at the end of each session.	Selected Head of Department at SBCC

Next Step Following Policy Acceptance

The SBCC college administration awaits the results of this study for empirical evidence to support the adoption of new initiatives to increase their persistence rate. Therefore, the researcher anticipates a seamless acceptance of the policy white paper after communicating with all stakeholders the results of the study and the recommendations. The Principal of the SBCC will delegate responsibilities to the Director of Student Affairs and selected Head of Departments who will lead in planning and implementing the recommendations and strategies to create a student-ready environment. The cooperation of partner organizations should also be sourced to support the initiatives and ensure program sustainability.

The responsible persons are to use the Policy Evaluation Plan to guide and monitor the progress and effectiveness of the recommendations. The Principal could inform the Ministry of Education officials to provide technical support such as professional development training specialists. In addition, there should be bi-monthly meetings with stakeholders to get an update on how the recommendations are progressing and offer feedback for any alternatives. The overall effectiveness of the student-ready environment will be realized after two years when graduation rates increase.

Conclusion

For the last ten years, a local problem existed at the SBCC, a public community college, where 37% of each first-year cohort did not return for the second semester. This worrisome high early drop-out rate among first-year students piqued my interest in investigating this phenomenon closely. In addition, my educational journey at Walden

University has given me the knowledge, skill, and confidence to conduct research to gain empirical evidence to inform better decision-making. This quantitative study determined that college readiness is a predictor of students' persistence. This finding is consistent with other studies based on an extensive literature search. As a result, a policy white paper was justified as the most effective approach to creating a student-ready environment to assist students with needed academic and social skills and invariably increase students' persistence. I am eager to share this policy's evidence-based recommendations and strategies with the leadership team at the SBCC to facilitate a better learning experience among first-year students. A college-wide initiative is required along with a firm commitment from leadership and staff in endorsing this social change learning outcome initiative.

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Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

College readiness: Refers to the level of preparation students need to acquire before enrolling at college and following through until completion without being assigned to remedial courses (Conley, 2008; Conley, 2010).

Student-ready institutions: Accept full responsibility for students' success and endorse a culture of access opportunities for all students using various integrative learning strategies and approaches (McNair et al., 2022).

Suburban Boulevard Community College **(**SBCC): An affordable public two-year community college that is heavily subsidized by government funding. The highest degree level offered is an associate degree (SBCC Prospectus, 2019).

Persistence: The intentional student-focused effort to remain at college. It is the rate at which first-year college students remain enrolled at the same institution from the start of the first semester through the start of the first semester of the second year (Patterson Silver Wolf et al., 2021). However, this study will be based on the early return of first-year students to campus. The study included those who remained enrolled at SBCC from the start of the first semester and returned at the beginning of the second semester.

Retention: The institutions' focus and intention to retain the number of students enrolled at their institution as they progress toward graduation (Tinto, 2010).

Mindset: Students' personal belief that their intelligence can be improved and could influence their thoughts, behaviors, and ultimately their academic success decisions (Limeri et al., 2020).

*Successful First-Year Student*s: Students who demonstrate adequate first-year academic performance and can interact with peers and faculty comfortably by the end of the first semester (Van Herpen et al., 2020).