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Higher Education Support Services and Graduation Rates of Structured Education Program Students

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Walden University

College of Education

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Seth Hepner

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Higher Education Support Services and Graduation Rates of Structured Education

Program Students

by

Seth Hepner

MFA, George Mason University, 2011

BA, Wright State University, 2008

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

July 2017

Abstract

The 1st-year retention rate of the Structured Education Program (SEP) is 90%, yet the 6-year graduation rate of SEP students is 29%. The gap between SEP 1st-year retention and graduation rates is the problem that this study addressed. The low graduation rate of SEP students is an important issue because graduation rates are used to measure the quality of higher education institutions. The purpose of this study was to understand the low graduation rates of SEP students. Tinto's retention theory, which seeks to explain dropouts from higher education institutions, was the main framework of the study. The study's research questions focused on former SEP students' experiences with required and optional support services that were first introduced to students while enrolled in the SEP. This study used a qualitative, intrinsic case study research design. Data were collected through 12 semistructured interviews with participants who met the criteria of former SEP students who have completed the program within the last 5 years. Interviews were transcribed, member checked by interviewees, and then coded to identify 6 themes that focus on participants' commitment to support services. The findings revealed that required exposure to support services in SEP students' 1st year had a meaningful influence on each student's journey toward graduation. An outcome of this study was a policy recommendation paper designed to increase the study site's graduation rates through increased support service requirements for 1st-year students. This study may provide positive local social change through more student commitments to support services and increased retention and graduation rates.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my wife Bethany and our soon to be born first child, Vivian or Porter. For the rest of my life, I promise to use my doctoral degree to help our family flourish.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Higher education institutions oftentimes create programs to fulfill needs of a particular audience. In order for these programs to be established and maintained, significant resources need to be allocated, and the program needs to be considered a part of the institution's future plans, budget, and obligations (Dickeson, 2010). A small, private, midwestern liberal arts institution offers a program to increase retention rates of new, traditional, underprepared students through substantial academic support. This institution enrolls approximately 2,300 undergraduate students, and more than 80% of them are enrolled full-time. Enrollment is more than 60% female, 75% white, and 80% traditionally aged: under 24 years old. Over 80% of applicants are admitted, and the student to teacher ratio is 13:1. The institution's overall retention rate of students who are seeking bachelor's degrees and return for fall semester of their second year is 76%, and their overall graduation rate is 60% ("The Integrated", n.d.).

The Structured Education Program (SEP) at this small, private, midwestern liberal arts institution is designed to retain incoming students whose math, reading, and English placement scores indicate a need for structured assistance. Sixty-four of the most underprepared students are placed into SEP annually (Sweet & Staudt, n.d.), which is approximately seven percent of the institution's average incoming class. The admission's department has restrictions on how many exceptions it can make to the institution's admission's requirements, and these underprepared students rarely meet all of the institution's admission standards. Most students enrolled in the SEP have scored 18 or

lower in math, reading, and English on the American College Testing college readiness assessment. Cohorts of 16 students are assigned to the same math, English, and first-year seminar course (GE 110), and these students may be residential or commuters. The math and English courses are considered stretch courses that are two semesters in length, but the GE 110 seminar only lasts one semester. In addition to the three courses, each cohort has an assigned reading, writing, and math tutor. Students must attend 25 total tutoring sessions per semester: 10 math, 10 writing, and five reading. The seminar instructors monitor student progress through tutoring attendance and grade updates at mandatory monthly one-on-one conferences. All SEP students are also required to attend five counseling sessions with the institution's professional counselors, meet with their academic advisor to complete a course sequence, as well as attend a research session with a librarian. Along with three assigned tutors, a math instructor, and seminar instructor, the English course is team taught by two English faculty members; therefore, with a professional counselor, academic advisor, and librarian included, SEP students are required to collaborate with 10 different supporters in their first semester at the institution.

Higher education institutions have begun including study abroad opportunities as major parts of retention strategies (Xu, de Silva, Neufeldt, & Dane, 2013), and recent higher education surveys found that interest in study abroad opportunities is highest in a student's first year and steadily declines (Richart, 2015). All students assigned to the SEP are eligible to be selected for a summer study abroad trip to Rome. The SEP Summer Rome Experience is an all-expenses paid, 2-week trip to Rome; in addition to

the study abroad opportunity, the eight selected students receive free tuition for two general education courses: history and English. These courses begin in May as soon as the spring semester of the students' first-year ends, and they conclude when students return from Rome in late June. Therefore, the SEP Summer Rome Experience is an 8-week program with 2 weeks spent abroad. Candidates for the Rome experience are selected based on their performance in all of the SEP requirements. The instructors within the SEP begin the selection process by nominating students in their classes for the Rome experience. The director of the SEP makes the final selections in March after midterm grades are released.

The Local Problem

Visser and van Zyl (2013) argued that it is obvious that lack of academic preparation for higher education studies creates risk factors for underprepared students. However, researchers have discovered that participation, such as exploring student service resources in first-year cohorts, can result in more academic success due to the supplemental support provided (Hixenbaugh, Dewart, & Towell, 2012). The annual institutional cost of SEP is \$51,000, and each SEP student costs the institution approximately \$800 for two semesters (Sweet & Staudt, n.d.). The first-year retention rate of SEP students is 90%, yet the 6-year graduation rate of SEP students is 29% (Sweet & Staudt, n.d.). Therefore, the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates is a gap in practice that needs further exploration. Once students are retained through the assistance of SEP's required support services, it is unclear as to whether participation in optional support services in subsequent academic years has an effect on graduation rates.

It is possible that failure to participate in optional, free support services after a student's first-year SEP requirements impedes graduation.

Despite aggressive efforts from many of the United States' most powerful stakeholders--such as President Obama during his two terms as president--higher education graduation rates are not increasing (Mangan, 2013). In fact, only 54% of students who enrolled in a higher education institution in 2007 completed a certificate or degree 6 years later in 2013, which is the same percentage of the 6-year graduation rate in 2012 (Mangan, 2013). With barely half of students graduating within 6 years, there is understandable displeasure from higher education stakeholders (Watson, 2013); therefore, SEP's 29% graduation rate when compared to the program's 90% first-year retention rate, and the nation's 54% six-year graduation rate is even more concerning. Lee, Sanford, and Jungmi (2014) argued that rate of graduation is the most important percentage when measuring the quality of an institution, and SEP's graduation rates could jeopardize the study site's future.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the low graduation rates of SEP students at the study site. While I explored former SEP students' support service experiences, many participants expressed a relationship between these services and their potential to graduate. Since most former SEP students who participated in the study suggested an optional commitment to support services in subsequent academic years, it is possible that more academically prepared, first-year students would commit to support services if they had required exposure to them in their first-year seminar. Therefore, the intent of the project is to increase all first-year students' exposure to support services

through a policy included in the institution's first-year seminar curriculum, which may lead to higher graduation rates.

Rationale

Stakeholders at the study site need to identify methods that will increase the institution's graduation rates. Higher education researchers suggested that academic preparation is a reliable component in predicting student retention and success (Visser & van Zyl, 2013) and all SEP students are identified as underprepared, every enrolled SEP student possesses risk factors that may deter graduation. A recent study reported that nearly 60% of students who enrolled in a higher education institution in 2013 were retained by the same institution in 2014 (Black, Terry, & Buhler, 2015). The program's 30% higher than the average retention rate is admirable, and many stakeholders such as the institution's retention committee, of which I am a member, are pleased with SEP's impact on retaining underprepared students.

Nonetheless, no one at the institution should be satisfied with retaining students for only 1 year even if it is more productive for an institution to retain students than to recruit new ones (Black et al., 2015). The institution's dean of academic services believes SEP's institutional value will increase significantly if the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates lessens. Considering that the annual cost of the SEP is \$51,000, institutional stakeholders may begin to question the program's value if the underprepared students continue to decrease the institution's graduation rates. Thus, the purpose of this study was to better understand the low graduation rates of SEP students.

Definition of Terms

At-risk student: At risk refers to students who possess certain characteristics that suggest they are less likely to be retained. These characteristics include, but are not limited to, academic preparedness, low placement test scores, first-generation student, African American and Hispanic student, and students who attended low socioeconomic high schools (Flynn, 2016).

Optional support services: Higher education optional support services are designed to increase retention and student success rates. These services include, but are not limited to, advising, tutoring, technical support, orientations, and student readiness assessments. They are provided at no additional cost to the student, and have no direct effect on student grades because they are not factored into final grade calculations (Britto & Rush, 2013).

Required support services: Higher education required support services are designed to increase retention and student success rates. These services include, but are not limited to, advising, tutoring, technical support, orientations, and student readiness assessments. They are provided at no additional cost to the student, and participation or lack of participation in these services has a direct effect on student grades because they are factored into final grade calculations (Britto & Rush, 2013).

Retention: Retention refers to students who are seeking a four-year undergraduate degree and return for fall semester of their sophomore year. It is common for today's institutions to view retention rates as evidence of stability (Olbrecht, Romano, & Teigen, 2016).

Stretch course: A stretch course is typically part of a program that eliminates remedial courses in order for students to receive college credit. The course is stretched over two semesters to provide students with supplemental time to complete curriculum that is normally completed in one semester (Glau, 1996).

Support services: Higher education support services are designed to increase retention and student success rates. These services include, but are not limited to, advising, tutoring, technical support, orientations, and student readiness assessments (Britto & Rush, 2013).

Underprepared student: Academic preparedness is determined through diagnostic assessments such as institutional placement tests and ACT/SAT scores; therefore, underprepared students are identified by institutionally determined poor performances on these assessment methods (Marbley et al., 2013).

Significance of the Study

This study addressed one of the most vital rates in higher education institutions, which Lee et al. (2014) argued is graduation rates. The results of this study provided multiple perspectives and detailed information that focused on why former SEP students did or did not commit to engage in optional support services after their required first-year SEP support service experiences, which could be directly connected to graduation rates. Insights from this study may aid stakeholders within SEP in increasing SEP graduation rates. This study may help determine why underprepared students do not graduate, even with structured assistance. Not only does this study present potential value to the site, but the data could be transferable to other higher education institutions that enroll

underprepared students. In addition to potential identifiers of why underprepared students do not graduate, this study presents an opportunity to increase the institution's graduation rates.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to improve the understanding of the significant gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates. With a focus on former SEP students' commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years, I determined whether the pursuit of optional support services increases likelihood of graduation. In this study, I addressed four guiding research questions, which are listed below:

1. For former SEP students who do not continue pursuing support services that are optionally provided after their first-year, what value do these students place on support services?
2. For former SEP students who do not continue pursuing optional support services in subsequent academic years, what influences their lack of commitment to continue?
3. For former SEP students who continue to pursue support services after the required first-year SEP experiences, what influences their commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years?
4. For former SEP students who have obtained senior status and are therefore near graduation, what optional support services were they committed to after their required first-year experiences?

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to examine current research on graduation rates in higher education institutions. Guided by Tinto's (1975) student departure theory, this study aimed to discover why such a gap exists between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates. Higher education graduation rates have been analyzed for decades; however, few scholars have examined the relationship between participation in optional support services and graduation rates (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). The content of this literature review includes research concentrated on support services, retention, graduation rates, first-year seminars, and underprepared students. Database research was conducted within Education Research Complete through usage of keywords such as *tutoring, counseling, advising, librarian, retention, graduation rates, first-year seminar, and underprepared*.

Conceptual Framework

Tinto's longitudinal theory of student departure was the conceptual framework utilized in this qualitative study. Tinto's (1975) theory was inspired by Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide, as well as educational economic models that focus on analyzing cost benefits of education activities. Durkheim (1951) discovered, through an in-depth case study, that social causes are linked to suicide. More specifically, he argued that lack of socialization with others increases the likelihood of suicide (Durkheim, 1951). Through an analysis of Durkheim's theory, Tinto argued that, due to the importance of socialization, a higher education institution's social system is a microcosm of society as a whole. Consequently, he suggested the social conditions affecting dropout rates are

analogous to social conditions that result in suicide (Tinto, 1975). As for educational economic models, Tinto concluded that dropouts occur when a student “perceives that an alternative form of investment of time, energies, and resources will yield greater benefits, relative to costs, over time than will staying in college” (Tinto, 1975, p. 97-98). These diverse frameworks are applied to Tinto’s dropout theory “that seeks to explain dropout from institutions of higher education, not one that seeks to explain dropout in the system of higher education institutions” (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). I used Tinto’s student departure theory to obtain a better understanding of SEP students’ experiences with required and optional support services.

Because Tinto’s theory emphasized the importance of student commitment to a social system within higher education institutions, and SEP’s support services encourage student commitment without a charge, there is a clear relationship between the research questions and Tinto’s theory. For example, Tinto argued that the higher education dropout process often consists of social interactions between students and academic social systems, such as support services, during which a student’s experiences within those social systems may influence his/her commitment to graduate (1975). Due to Tinto’s (1975) clear prioritization of the term *commitment* throughout his theoretical model, some research questions stressed the significance of determining former SEP students’ commitment to support services. Tinto (1975) argued that a union between academic and social systems in higher education institutions will result in more student commitment, which he believed led to higher graduation rates. Based on the SEP’s commitment to structured education within a cohort for underprepared students and

Tinto's belief in academic and social systems, Tinto's longitudinal theory of student departure was a productive conceptual framework for this study.

Broader Problem

Support Services

Higher education institutions often use various forms of optional and/or required support services to increase retention and graduation rates. Nitecki (2012) suggested that establishing a family culture within specific academic programs can result in higher rates of student success; this unique family culture partly consists of instructors bringing writing tutors into classrooms, as opposed to requesting students to find help on their own. Tutoring is not the only way to establish a family culture at higher education institutions. In fact, that same culture can be established through counseling, advising, library services, and tutoring.

O'Keeffe (2013) suggested that the cost of student attrition is one of a higher education institution's greatest expenses that can be reduced through a well-resourced counseling center. Moreover, it has been discovered that counseling students improves retention rates because it provides them with support that increases the likelihood of perseverance through an undergraduate program (O'Keeffe, 2013). Since SEP students have a counseling requirement, their chances of graduating should increase.

A meeting with an academic adviser is one of the many requirements for SEP students. Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby (2013) discovered that for every meeting with an adviser that a first-generation student attends, his chances of retention increase by 13%. Many SEP students are first-generation students (Sweet & Staudt, n.d.). Also, it has been

suggested that “advising appointments may be one of the few institutional mechanisms that consistently connect students to the academic institution in meaningful ways” (Swecker et al., 2013, p. 51). This is an example of academic advisers having the opportunity to enhance the family culture at an institution. However, the underprepared population that SEP consists of may need an extra incentive to attend any support service, especially academic advising. Schwebel, Walburn, Klyce, and Jerrolds (2012) suggested that students who are considered at risk, like SEP students, might need to be required to attend advising appointments because they are less likely to respond to optional outreaches from their adviser. However, even though significant adviser outreach to students increases the amount of advising sessions they attend, some research suggests there is minimal connection between advising sessions attended and student retention (Schwebel et al., 2012). Based on this discovery, it is possible that the SEP advising requirement has very little to do with the program’s high retention rate; on the other hand, Swecker et al. (2013) suggested otherwise.

Library support services are also an SEP requirement. Stemmer and Mahan (2016) discovered that students who pursue the library for academic needs such as a quiet place to study are more likely to be retained, yet students who pursue the library for personal reasons such as social networking are less likely to be retained. Since SEP students are required to complete a library assignment for course credit in their first-year seminar, their library experiences should be more productive. Furthermore, a first-year student’s library usage is positively related to second-year retention; however, library usage has no relationship to graduation rates (Stemmer & Mahan, 2016).

For many SEP students, tutoring is the most demanding required support service. Fortunately, Brown (2012) discovered a relationship between tutoring and higher retention rates through a freshman orientation survey. Chandler and Potter (2012) argued that tutors are an integral part of positive first-year experiences for students because supplemental support increases student motivation and confidence. However, Pruett and Absher (2015) found that tutoring services do not significantly impact retention rates of developmental students.

Retention Programs

Researchers suggested that first-generation students are a looming crisis in higher education (Swecker et al., 2013). Since many SEP students are first-generation, critical situations could be on their way to the study site because first-generation students typically arrive on campus with risk factors that decrease their likelihood of remaining through graduation. Since first-year retention refers to students who are seeking four-year undergraduate degrees, and who return for fall semester of their sophomore year, it is common for today's institutions to view retention rates as evidence of stability (Olbrecht et al., 2016). Retention programs, like SEP, are established by higher education institutions to increase stability (Johnson, 2013). However, even though it has been noted that it is more productive for an institution to retain students than to recruit new ones (Black et al., 2015), high retention rates do not necessarily coincide with higher graduation rates.

Johnson (2013) acknowledged that retention programs that involve tutoring are commonly used in order to increase retention rates of African American students. The

researcher suggested that predominately Caucasian institutions can be successful at retaining African American students and that retention programs are essential to retention efforts and student success. Since the study site consists of a 76% Caucasian student population, a retention program like SEP may be necessary to retain minority students. Talbert (2012) analyzed the state of Minnesota's model to increase retention and graduation rates and suggested a method to monitor retention rates of minority students. The researcher suggested that higher education institutions establish tracking systems to review high-risk student files in an attempt to increase graduation rates (Talbert, 2012). Establishing tracking systems could improve the effectiveness of SEP.

Graduation Rates

One of the most vital statistics in higher education institutions is graduation rates (Lee et al., 2014). For a program like SEP with a 6-year graduation rate of less than 30%, SEP stakeholders should be concerned, even though Pike and Graunke (2015) suggested that using retention and graduation rates to assess the quality and effectiveness of an institution is an unreliable method. Expensive retention programs, like SEP, need to be monitored. Lee et al. (2014) argued that rate of graduation is the most important percentage measured. If some believe that graduation rates are the most important percentage measured by higher education institutions, then SEP stakeholders must strive to improve rates.

SEP is not the only program struggling with graduation rates. Overall, higher education graduation rates are not increasing in the United States. Only 54% of students who enrolled in a higher education institution in 2007 completed a certificate or degree 6

years later in 2013, which is the same percentage as the 6-year graduation rate in 2012 (Mangan, 2013). The rate from 2012 to 2013 did not decline, but nearly half of enrolling students did not graduate. Navarro (2012) suggested that college is a person's best opportunity to establish a productive and meaningful life, and poor graduation rates affect students and society as a whole.

First-year Seminars

In an attempt to continue increasing enrollment without jeopardizing retention and graduation rates, many institutions have established support initiatives for underprepared students. A popular support initiative is first-year seminars. Hickinbottom-Brawn and Burns (2015) explained the purpose of some 1st-year seminars, "Devised to address the needs of what is frequently referred to as the 'unprepared learner,' FYS aim to increase recruitment and retention by providing the necessary foundations for student success" (p. 155). Clearly, the SEP decided to follow the trend of requiring its underprepared students to complete a first-year seminar with GE 110, which is a required three credit hour first-year seminar.

Klatt and Ray (2014) discovered that students who completed a first-year seminar had higher first-term GPAs, were more likely to be retained, were less likely to be on academic probation, and were likely to graduate sooner than students who did not complete a first-year seminar. Unfortunately, every student at the study site is required to complete a first-year seminar; therefore, data similar to Klatt and Ray's (2014) is not obtainable. Bettinger, Boatman, and Long (2013) found that learning communities offer students opportunities to strengthen relationships, which increases support networks and

institutional attachment. Also, while analyzing specific learning communities similar to SEP cohorts, researchers found that learning communities correlated with higher graduation rates (Bettinger et al., 2013). Additionally, other researchers have discovered that participation in first-year cohorts can result in more academic success due to the supplemental support provided (Hixenbaugh, Dewart, & Towell, 2012). SEP's cohort model with a required first-year seminar has many similarities with other retention programs.

Underprepared Students

Academic preparedness is determined through diagnostic assessments such as institutional placement tests and American College Test/Scholastic Assessment Test scores; therefore, underprepared students are identified by institutionally determined poor performances on these assessment methods (Marbley et al., 2013). As many institutions strive to increase enrollment, more and more underprepared students arrive on college campuses each year. Bachman (2013) discovered a noticeable gap between overall new student enrollment and the number of new students identified as college ready. It has been suggested that academic preparedness is a reliable component in predicting student retention and success (Visser & van Zyl, 2013), yet higher education institutions find themselves attempting to increase enrollment through accepting unprepared students while maintaining a focus on increased retention and graduation rates.

Enrolling underprepared students comes with many risk factors. Visser and van Zyl (2013) argued that it is obvious that lack of academic preparation for higher education studies endorses risk factors for underprepared students. Underprepared

students are more likely not to persist to graduation and cause a loss of the institution's tuition assets (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Retaining underprepared students is a critical issue for higher education institutions, especially small, private ones that depend on tuition for financial stability; the study site is an example of a tuition dependent, private institution. Due to the importance of tuition dollars, Kelly and Schneider (2012) found that many institutional stakeholders promote student retention and graduation more than ever before.

Thus, support services are a popular method used by higher education institutions to increase retention and graduation rates. Many retention programs, like SEP, involve multiple types of support services. Despite these support services, graduation rates remain frozen across the United States.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to investigate the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates, and the knowledge acquired from this study could enhance retention procedures, such as required support services, at higher education institutions. The findings from this study have the potential to benefit many higher education retention programs and therefore promote social change in relation to retention and student success rates (Britto & Rush, 2013). Policies to help increase retention and graduation rates could be established based on this study's findings.

The policy development was guided by the data collected during the semistructured interviews with former SEP students. Since these students who participated in the study suggested a commitment to support services, the policies

focused on increasing exposure to support services for all first-year students, not only the underprepared ones. Additionally, for the students who did not remain committed to support services, the interview data provided reasons why. Most importantly, the policies developed from this study have potential to improve the study site's retention and graduation rates.

Summary

As highlighted in Section 1's literature review, graduation rates at higher education institutions are a serious concern for the majority of stakeholders. More specifically, for the study site's SEP that costs the institution \$51,000 per year, the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates is a concern that can no longer be ignored. Since all SEP students are identified as underprepared and researchers suggested that academic preparation is a reliable component in predicting student retention and success (Visser & van Zyl, 2013), this study investigated if former SEP students' commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years affects graduation rates.

Tinto's (1975) longitudinal theory of student departure was the conceptual framework and foundation of this qualitative study. Because of the connection between Tinto's theory and SEP support services in regards to social systems, a clear relationship exists that helped obtain a better understanding of SEP students' experiences with required and optional support services. Through usage of four guiding research questions, the purpose of this study was to improve the understanding of the significant gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates.

Section 2 describes the study's methodology. A thorough explanation of how data will be generated, gathered, and recorded is provided. With specific focus on the local problem and research questions, patterns, relationships, and themes within the semistructured interviews are investigated. During this search, appropriate procedures to ensure accurate data are being used were completed. At the conclusion of Section 2, outcomes are summarized logically and systematically.

Section 3 describes the study's project that was established based on the research findings. A policy to improve the study site's graduation rates is developed. In addition to policy development, scholarly rationale of why the policy should be implemented is presented.

Section 3 also includes a literature review related to the policy development with an explanation of the genre's appropriateness, as well as an evaluation plan for the policy. The section concludes with possible social change implications.

Section 4 describes reflections and conclusions that focus on the strengths and limitations of this study. Alternative options to address the study's problem are provided, as well as alternative definitions and solutions to the local problem. A summary of the knowledge gained through project development is included. Following the summary of knowledge gained through project development, a reflection of personal growth throughout the writing process and a discussion of the study's importance are described. Also, social change possibilities as well as recommendations for future research are explained. Section 4 concludes with a message that emphasizes the focal point of the study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The problem that prompted this study is the gap between SEP's first-year retention and 6-year graduation rates. The methodology section includes an explanation of this study's qualitative, intrinsic case study. The explanations within this methodology section include research design and approach descriptions, participant procedure descriptions, as well as data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research's purpose is to help researchers better understand how participants explain their experiences (Merriam, 2009). More specifically, qualitative researchers are interested in three specifics: "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). A qualitative approach grants opportunities to discover and analyze reasons whether or not former SEP students are committed to optional support services. With qualitative research's emphasis on experiences, former SEP student experiences with required support services during their freshman year, as well as experiences with optional support services, were a common theme that I addressed in the study. Although a quantitative approach may seem justifiable because it could produce survey data focused on how many former SEP students participate in optional support services, only a qualitative approach presented the opportunity to better understand SEP student experiences in required and optional support services.

The methodology for this study was a qualitative, intrinsic case study. Intrinsic case studies are used in an attempt to better understand specific problems that are deemed important. Most case studies focus on individuals or small groups within a specific setting (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). The SEP served as this study's small group within the study site, and SEP graduation rates were the specific problem analyzed.

An established boundary is the defining characteristic of a case study. Topic boundaries are determined by analyzing how finite the data collection is; in other words, the researcher needs to determine if there are participant limitations (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), "If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case" (p. 41). Since 64 of the most underprepared students are placed into SEP annually, there is clearly an established boundary. This case study provided the opportunity to better understand and analyze participants' commitment to SEP support services, which was a focal point of the previously disclosed research questions.

Most case studies have special features that help define them. Qualitative case studies have three possible characterizations: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). I used a particularistic case study for this study. Particularistic case studies focus on specific situations, events, or programs (Merriam, 2009). The focus of this particularistic case study was the SEP retention program. Particularistic case studies are often used to analyze problems that are particularly puzzling, and SEP's low

graduation rates when compared to the program's high first-year retention rates are puzzling.

A case study is not the only possible design for a qualitative approach, but a case study was the most effective in better understanding former SEP student experiences with support services. Other possible designs include narrative, ethnographic, and phenomenological. Even though a narrative design encourages researchers to portray the experiences of their study's participants through story telling (Lodico et al., 2010), which could result in writing that is easier to comprehend, stories from former SEP students would likely involve too many specifics about SEP tutors. The purpose of this study was not to criticize tutors, and it was important to protect SEP students and tutors throughout the duration of this study. An ethnographic design gives qualitative researchers the ability to investigate participants within a culture (Lodico et al., 2010), and the SEP does have its own unique culture; however, the purpose of this study was not to analyze SEP's culture. Lastly, a phenomenological design urges qualitative researchers to describe personal life experiences of participants (Lodico et al., 2010). Despite the fact that support services are a part of every SEP student's life, deeply personal responses are much more challenging to code in the later stages of a study because identifying themes would be even more difficult.

Participants

Selection Criteria

The SEP represented this case study's bounded system, which was the limitation of available participants (Lodico et al., 2010). Only students who had completed the SEP

in the last 5 years were eligible to participate in the study. Since the purpose of this study was to investigate the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates, former SEP students were selected for the study through homogeneous sampling. According to Lodico et al. (2010), homogeneous sampling is a type of purposeful sampling that selects individuals with similar attributes or experiences. As noted by Lodico et al. (2010), “Purposeful sampling involves the selection of participants who have key knowledge or information related to the purpose of the study” (p. 34). All SEP students are similar because the retention program consists of the same support service requirements for all students.

In order to obtain saturation, 12 former SEP students were selected to participate in the study. Saturation refers to a point when the researcher subjectively determines original insights from participants are unlikely (Lodico et al., 2010). The goal of qualitative research is not to select a representative sample because generalization is rare in qualitative studies (Lodico et al., 2010). Since interviews are time consuming to administer, qualitative studies that use interviews as the primary data collecting method typically consist of small samples (Lodico et al., 2010). Selecting 12 former SEP students provided an in-depth investigation of the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates. Additionally, at least three of the 12 participants had senior status and were able to answer the study’s fourth research question.

Participant Access Procedures

In order to obtain access to conduct qualitative interviews, I gained approval from the Institutional Review Boards of both the study site and Walden University. It was also

necessary to identify a gatekeeper, or a person who manages access to people at the study site (Lodico et al., 2010). I developed a strong relationship with the study site's university registrar, who provided a list of former SEP students. Once a list of former SEP students was obtained, I selected students whom I had not encountered during their enrollment at the institution. For example, as director of professional advising and an instructor of English 111 and GE 110 within the SEP, I verified that none of the students selected for this study had been assigned to me as a student and/or advisee. Since I only instruct one SEP cohort per academic year, along with only advising business and undecided majors, identifying former SEP students whom I had never supported was manageable.

Once I established a list of former SEP students whom I have not worked with, an email requesting their participation in the study was sent to their university email addresses. The email included a description of the study, its purpose, and the interview protocol, as well as confidentiality and protection procedures. The email declared a deadline for responses. If at least 12 students did not reply to the email with consent to participate in the study, then letters with similar content to the email would have been sent to the selected former SEP students' home addresses. If these letters did not lead to identifying 12 participants, then I would have contacted students by phone to request their participation. I recruited all participants through email, and no recruitment phone calls were made nor were any letters mailed.

Establishing Researcher/Participant Relationships

Establishing researcher/participant relationships with interviewees is essential to any study that involves interviews. According to Lodico et al. (2010), “The researcher wants the participants to speak and behave naturally. In order for this to occur, the participants must feel comfortable with the researcher and develop a sense of trust and confidence” (p. 36). In order to develop trust and confidence with participants, I emphasized that the students were under no obligation to complete the interview if they were ever uncomfortable. Additionally, I explained to each of them that there was no possibility of negative consequences, such as an effect upon their academic standing, resulting from participation in the study because pseudonyms were used when quoting or paraphrasing participants in all sections of the final report, and participants were able to review transcripts prior to publication. One of the many benefits of using interviews as the primary data collecting method is that researchers have the opportunity to follow up with participants to clarify statements that may have been unclear during the interview. Following up with participants for clarifications is another way to establish a working relationship because it shows that the researcher values accuracy (Lodico et al., 2010).

Qualitative researchers must be aware of the importance of developing relationships with all participants. For the sake of relationship building, selecting private locations to conduct interviews, as well as actively listening and showing a genuine interest in what participants say will help develop a working relationship (Lodico et al., 2010). I administered this study’s semistructured interviews in a vacant classroom at the

study site. Open classrooms provided an atmosphere that was less confined than an office and/or coffee shop; therefore, comfortability was much easier to establish.

Protection of Participant's Rights

Prior to the administration of interviews, the researcher and participants must complete important documentation. As the researcher, I signed a confidentiality agreement and shared it with all of the study's stakeholders, including participants. The agreement described my acknowledgement that sensitive information may be obtained during the interviews and that I would ensure confidentiality throughout this study. A full version of the confidentiality agreement is available in Appendix B.

In addition to the confidentiality agreement, an informed consent form must be completed by participants and the researcher. The consent form provided the study's background information, voluntary nature, benefits, privacy, and signatures of the participant and researcher.

An extensive interview protocol was necessary to protect study participants. The protocol consisted of a brief script that explained the purpose of the study, a confidentiality statement, and the data's intended use at the conclusion of the interview (Lodico et al., 2010). Established interview protocol that is used prior to every session helps ensure consistency. Protecting the participants was an additional way to build a strong working relationship, and I used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of each interviewee. In addition to the protocol, proper interview questions were necessary to protect participants. "Interview questions should stimulate the interviewee's recall and thinking without suggesting that particular responses are desired" (Lodico et al., 2010, p.

125). Leading interview participants to particular answers could be harmful. A full version of the proposed interview questions and protocol is available in Appendix D.

Data Collection

Interviews

Qualitative research designs often include interviews (Merriam, 2009). Typically, interviews consist of one person trying to elicit specialized information from one other (Merriam, 2009). In order to better understand the low graduation rates of SEP students, I selected 12 students who have completed the SEP within the last 5 years to participate in semistructured interviews. “Semi-structured interviews are typically planned carefully before the interview is carried out. The researcher develops an interview protocol that includes a list of questions or topics to be addressed in the interviews with all participants” (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 124). Semistructured interviews provided the opportunity to gather multiple perspectives and detailed information through probative questioning of former SEP students’ experiences with required and optional support services.

One of the many challenges of interviewing is that researchers are often tasked with asking questions that they believe they already know answers to (Yin, 2004). In these scenarios it is vital that researchers have developed the necessary interviewing skills that prohibit leading the participant to an answer. In an attempt to avoid leading participants to answers, the interview questions had an open-ended design to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences with support services.

Tracking Data Systems

I asked participants in this study a series of questions that focused on their required SEP and optional support services experiences. The most popular method to ensure accurate transcriptions of interviews is audio recording (Merriam, 2009); therefore, with each participant's permission, interviews were audio recorded, and then I transcribed each one prior to administering the next interview. Also, I used an unobtrusive recording device to decrease participant nervousness because, according to Merriam (2009), one of the objectives of an interview is to get the interviewee to forget that he or she is being recorded in hopes to increase comfortability and honesty. Transcriptions of the audio recorded interviews were typed and then saved on a password protected hard drive.

In addition to saved transcriptions, I used a reflective journal and research log during the data collection process as well as took notes on the protocol during interviews. The reflective journal consisted of interview dates and times plus my immediate, informal thoughts about the interview as soon as the interviewee left the vacant classroom. As for the research log, it consisted of specific dates and times that I completed data collection activities, such as interviews, transcriptions, and member checks.

Role of the Researcher

Since I was the primary researcher for this proposed study, it is necessary here to explain my role as a full-time employee at the study site. I have been employed at the study site since August 2011, and I have held different positions: Adjunct Faculty,

Coordinator of Tutor Training, and Director of Professional Advising. In these positions I have taught, trained, and advised hundreds of students at the study site; however, through purposeful sampling I only selected and requested participation in this study from students who had never been assigned to my courses and/or been an advisee or trainee. Consequently, I had no authority, power, or supervision over any of the students who participated in this study. Based on this purposeful sampling method, I do not believe my positions at the study site had any effect on this study's data collection. As for my biases, my current SEP students' beliefs, actions, and words about the SEP had potential to influence my thoughts about the program as a whole; however, it was vital that I was able to separate my relationship with my students from participants in this study. In order to establish this separation, I mainly administered interviews on days that I was not teaching.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers "strongly believe that there are multiple perspectives to be uncovered in their research" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 142). Contrary to other research methods, case studies often require researchers to collect and analyze data simultaneously because it is common for interviews to produce conflicting data (Yin, 2004). For example, former SEP students may have had entirely different experiences working with their assigned tutors during required SEP tutoring, which could result in contradictory data. Interviewing former SEP students is considered data collection, but identifying the conflict is data analysis (Yin, 2004). Reviewing interview data, such as a transcription, prior to administering the next interview allows researchers to modify data collection

methods while still in the data collection field (Yin, 2004), which can be a significant advantage. For example, in my study if the first two interviewees responded to an interview question in ways that were not conducive to the purpose of this study, then that question was revised prior to the next interview.

Once I completed all of the interviews and transcriptions, coding procedures began. As defined by Lodico et al. (2010), “Coding is the process of identifying different segments of the data that describe related phenomena and labeling these parts using broad category names” (p. 183). Typically, 30 to 40 codes are initially established and then grouped into code categories (Lodico et al., 2010). An example of this coding technique would be these codes: writing tutoring, math tutoring, reading tutoring, counseling, and advising. These codes might all be assigned to a code category titled support services. Ideally, the 30 to 40 codes will be condensable to 15 to 20 codes that can be assigned to approximately five code categories. The purpose of this coding procedure is to identify themes, which are main ideas that the researcher uses to explain the study’s findings (Lodico et al., 2010). I used the themes found through this study’s data analysis to aid in answering the study’s research questions that focus on former SEP students’ experiences with required and optional support services.

Evidence of Quality

In order to verify that the study’s findings are accurate and credible, I conducted 12 interviews with former SEP students, and these interviews probed participants to substantially describe their experiences with optional and required support services. In addition to interviews of multiple participants, member checks were used. The member

checking consisted of sending a transcription of the interview for participants to review for accuracy and also offered them the opportunity to revise and/or request exclusion of certain statements made during the interview (Lodico et al., 2010). As for interviews that contained discrepancies, I reviewed characteristics of each discrepancy to determine if the discrepant case possessed a characteristic that the other participants did not. Since discrepant cases were identified, I included them in the study and provided possibilities of why the discrepancies exist.

Data Analysis Results

The findings from the data analysis are presented in a descriptive, narrative format to show former SEP students' experiences with required and optional support services with hope to better understand the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates. Prior to the qualitative interviews, I wondered whether or not failure to participate in optional, free support services after a student's first-year SEP requirements impeded graduation, which resulted in the questions that are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Research Questions

RQ 1	RQ 2
<hr/> For former SEP students who do not continue pursuing support services that are optionally provided after their first-year, what value do these students place on support services? RQ 3	<hr/> For former SEP students who do not continue pursuing optional support services in subsequent academic years, what influences their lack of commitment to continue? RQ 4
<hr/> For former SEP students who continue to pursue support services after the required first-year SEP experiences, what influences their commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years?	<hr/> For former SEP students who have obtained senior status and are therefore near graduation, what optional support services were they committed to after their required first-year experiences?

Ten of the 12 (83%) former SEP students who were interviewed for this study continued to pursue at least one optional support service in subsequent academic years. Even though two of the participants did not pursue any optional support services in ensuing years, all 12 (100%) former SEP students clearly expressed value in at least one required support service; therefore, none of the participants described the required support services to be insignificant. Previous studies have found, “Generally speaking, the higher the receptivity to institutional help, the greater the likelihood of successful student outcomes” (Noel-Levitz, 2012, p. 10). None of the former SEP students interviewed for this study showed a complete lack of receptivity toward support services.

However, the two students who did not continue pursuing support services shared that their lack of commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years was due to their belief that the services were unnecessary. In other words, these two students understood and experienced the value of at least one support service, but these required experiences were not enough to inspire these two interviewees to continue these services once they became optional. A recent study discovered that only 42% of students at 4-year private institutions desired tutoring in one or more subjects and only 17% expressed interest in personal counseling (Noel-Levitz, 2012). Fifty-eight percent of the students interviewed have continued to pursue tutoring and counseling voluntarily in subsequent academic years, and 83% continued at least one support service.

Lashawn Richburg-Hayes (2015) argued that overwhelmed first-year students could make choices that were detrimental to their academic success. Five of the 12 participants used the term “overwhelming” when asked to describe their initial reactions

to the amount of support services required by the SEP, yet 83% of the interviewees described positive adjustments when asked if their perceptions about support services changed toward the end of their first year. None of the interviewees described a declining support service perception, and two students explained how their perceptions remained the same. Seventy-five percent of the participants mentioned their comfort and/or confidence levels when discussing SEP's required support services. Unfortunately, "Not all students have the same support networks, access to resources, or confidence to seek out mentors for guidance" (Finley, 2016, p. 19). Nonetheless, the SEP provides all of its underprepared students enrolled in it the same amount of required support. There is belief that the self-confidence of first-year students is an essential part of predicting academic success, and recent student comments suggested that higher education provides them more confidence, self-esteem, and sense of purpose (Finley, 2016).

Researchers discovered that amount of hours spent in tutoring was related to higher GPAs (Grillo & Leist, 2013). Thirty-three percent of the participants suggested direct correlations between tutoring and higher grades. Seven of the 12 interviewees were seniors and therefore near graduation. The GPA range of these seniors was 2.65 to 3.47, with an average GPA of 3.18. Fifty-seven percent of these seniors answered yes when asked if they believe continuing to pursue support services voluntarily after their first-year SEP requirements improved their chances to graduate. Also, 57% of these seniors continued to pursue tutoring and counseling optionally in subsequent academic years. Only one of the seven seniors discontinued pursuing support services entirely after

her first year. Grillo and Leist (2013) found that the quantity of time spent using tutoring significantly contributes to higher graduation rates.

A careful analysis of the interview transcriptions provided the opportunity for me to identify themes, and these themes aided in answering the study's research questions. I discovered the themes through keywords that were common in interview transcriptions. I highlighted the keywords in the transcriptions and briefly annotated in the margins to remind me why certain words warranted a highlight. Once all of the transcriptions were read, highlighted, and annotated, I created a table in Microsoft Word. Separating each participant into his/her own box in the table permitted me to label each one with the participant's pseudonym. Lastly, I typed condensed, highlighted phrases from the participant's transcription into each box. A portion of this coding table is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Coding Table

Marie	Pam
Excited - 1	Overwhelmed - 1
Low ACT scores - 1	Student athlete - 1
Helpful - 1	Routine - 1
Group - 2	Group - 2
Math struggles - 1	Not personable tutor - 2
Advisor cared - 2	Perception change positive - 3
Major change / undecided - 3	Change of major / undecided - 3
Perception change for the better - 5	More invested tutors - 5
Bigger university - 6	Continued tutoring and counseling - 5
Wouldn't have made it without SEP support - 6	Correlation to higher grades - 6
Continued math & writing tutoring - 5	Confident - 2
Tutor relationship - 2	
Yes to graduation question - 6	

The codes in the table were labeled with a number between one and six that represent theme categories. The codes in the coding table became part of one of the six qualitative themes that are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Qualitative Themes

Initial reactions	Comfort and confidence
Change of major	Rome
Perception	Graduation

Initial Reactions' Theme

Coates (2014) discovered that students who determine that they have received significant support to be academically successful and to cope with non-academic issues are much less likely to dropout; therefore, the required support services of the SEP should increase retention and graduation rates. However, the initial reactions to the amount of support services required by the SEP from many of the former SEP students interviewed for this study were not positive. All interviewees were asked *What were your initial reactions to the amount of first-year support services required by the SEP?* Seventy-five percent of the participants replied with a concerning response such as “overwhelming”, “intimidated”, “angry”, or “nervous.” In fact, one student used an even harsher adjective when describing his initial reaction to the amount of required support services. Sam said,

Honestly, I thought it sucked because I came in as an athlete, so I had required practices and meetings, and lifting, and on top of that required counseling and tutoring – just extra stuff. So I was frustrated with it and not excited.

Jack also described his frustrations with the required support services. “Honestly, my first reaction to it was anger because new college students are always so busy, and I looked at the services as taking up my schedule and the extra-curricular activities that I wanted to be involved in.”

The most common initial reaction to the amount of support services required by the SEP was “overwhelming,” forty-two percent of participants used that term. Alice expressed,

I felt very overwhelmed because it was a lot of stuff to take in, especially during the first week of ever being in college. Obviously, everyone’s going to be overwhelmed when they first come to college, but it was a lot more because I talked to other students who weren’t in the program, and they said they didn’t have to do any of this, and I asked why don’t you have to do any of this and I do?

Pam also described a similar reaction. “At first, for me, knowing that I had to go to weekly tutoring was pretty overwhelming because I’m also a student athlete.”

Additionally, Lisa explained why the required support services were initially overwhelming to her.

It was definitely overwhelming, especially since I commute. It was difficult because I also had a job and doing the tutoring, counseling, and advising was a

little bit hectic, but I did enjoy the fact that it did kind of make me – kind of forced me to get on campus and see all of the opportunities.

For some of these participants, the overwhelmed reaction to the amount of required SEP support services is at least partially a result of additional student characteristics, such as student athlete and/or commuter.

In addition to anger and overwhelmed reactions to the amount of required SEP support services, two students described their reactions similarly as intimidated or nervous. Abby said,

I was very nervous at first because I thought it was a lot. When I was notified of the requirements, I didn't feel very confident. As a freshman coming from a bigger high school, I didn't really understand the tutoring system, and I was never tutored in high school. I was nervous, and then I was shocked later on to see how easy it was to get services. I liked it later on because I realized I really do need tutoring in certain areas and then other areas I felt that I didn't need it, and I felt my time was wasted.

Jackie described,

At first, all of the requirements intimidated me, but as time went by I felt more comfortable in terms of the support system. I didn't mind going to tutoring, and I thought it was mostly helpful, especially because I'm not that great of a writer.

Both of these female students admitted to needing tutoring in certain subjects, which was likely the cause for their initial nervousness. As Ciscell, Foley, Luther, Howe, and Gjosedal (2016) wrote, some students fear judgment by peer tutors who may see their

academic work as inferior. Even with SEP's support service requirements, the fear of judgment for some students remained.

Twenty-five percent of the interview participants did not have concerning initial reactions to the amount of required SEP support services. In fact, two of the interviewees expressed positive reactions. Marie said, "I was excited about it because when I was in high school I was in special classes, but I didn't learn anything, which is why I scored so low on my ACT. But, I like to learn." John also found the required support services to be acceptable,

As an International student, when I was told that I would be required to attend English tutoring I already knew that I needed support to improve my English, so every time I went I wanted to take an advantage of the opportunity. I think it was very helpful, and I found it very supportive.

Both of these students acknowledged their academic weaknesses and were receptive to the required academic support.

Only one participant described an initial reaction to the amount of required SEP support services unlike any of the other interviewees. Myra, who mentioned her Individualized Education Program (IEP), said,

I was used to it because I have an IEP program, so I'm used to having those services offered, and I'm used to taking advantage of them. So in my head I actually thought it was nice that it kind of forced me to do that because I was in a new school and I wasn't comfortable with the support center yet, at least with

the support center here. I was comfortable with the support center at my high school, so I found it to be nice actually.

Comfort and Confidence Theme

A first-year student's personal belief in his ability to learn and achieve at a higher education institution is critical when predicting student success (Putwain & Sander, 2016). A student's comfort and confidence levels are part of his personal belief that he can be successful in a higher education institution. Recent research discovered, "a few minutes with an effective tutor (as rated by the student) has an impressive impact on students' perceived confidence and ability" (Gillard, Robathan, & Wilson, 2012, p. 92). Eighty-three percent of the interviewees described their comforts and/or confidences established through SEP's required support services. Interview questions 2-7, which are located in Appendix D, all focus on the value of individual support services required within the SEP. Asking former SEP students these value based questions resulted in diverse data.

Individual tutoring. Nichols and Clinedinst (2013) discovered that more than two-thirds of higher education institutions who provisionally admit underprepared students require tutoring. If it is common for underprepared students to be required to attend a support service such as tutoring, it is vital that the student deems the support service effective. Two of the 12 former SEP participants were English Language Learners (ELL), and both of them declared that the required English tutoring boosted their confidence in English. John said, "When I feel more comfortable and confident, it helps me perform better in classes. If I didn't have tutoring it would've affected my

studies. For instance, if I didn't have a tutoring session it would affect my English grades." Additionally, when asked about the value of required writing tutoring, the other ELL student stated, "I actually thought it was really helpful because English isn't my first language, and usually I struggle the most in writing and grammar because that's something that just never clicked with me." Both of these ELL students gained confidence in their skills through required tutoring.

One issue with required tutoring in any subject is if a student has already developed confidence in that subject and is therefore convinced the required sessions are unnecessary. Three of the 12 interviewees felt confident enough in their math skills to deem the required math tutoring futile. When asked about the value of his required math tutoring, John replied, "I never went to math tutoring. If I had a problem, I asked my friends because I didn't have trouble understanding math as a freshman." Similarly, Myra said, "Math tutoring wasn't very helpful. It wasn't the tutor's fault; it's just I'm better in math than English. So I didn't really need the tutor. But, I still went to the sessions because it was required."

On the other hand, three of the participants specifically admitted to struggling with math throughout their academic lives. For example, Marie explained,

Math is probably my hardest subject, so I really valued the time I spent with my tutor. I even met with her a few extra times, and we all did study groups together that weren't required within the program. So I really really really valued the math tutoring. She taught me one on one the rights and the wrongs, like really walked me through the steps for it.

Similarly, Sam said,

I'm not really good with math, but I got by because I went to tutoring, and I did my homework with my tutor. I wasn't able to understand everything, but because of tutoring I was able to understand well enough to pass my math tests, and I think that if I hadn't went to tutoring I wouldn't have got those basic math concepts because with math just for getting the format right, students get a half point, so every little bit helps. So being able to go to tutoring I was able to at least learn how to format my math problems so I could get those half points instead of getting zeroes.

Even though Marie and Sam still do not have complete confidence in their math skills, the required math tutoring provided both of them with enough skills to pass their math courses.

Group tutoring. According to Knight, Johnson, and Stewart (2016), required group tutoring significantly improves participants' confidence and public speaking skills, and this finding supports the results of my study. Sixty-seven percent of the interview participants spoke admirably about their required group reading tutoring. When asked about the value of his required group reading tutoring, Michael replied, "It was actually really valuable because of getting different perspectives. If I didn't catch something in the reading, maybe someone else did." Furthermore, Abby stated,

I did enjoy it because I had one of my friends with me, so I felt more comfortable. I felt more comfortable admitting I don't get this, and that I was wrong about certain things. It was just an easier setting to work in.

When I asked Myra how she felt about group tutoring, she described how her comfort and confidence evolved throughout her group reading tutoring sessions:

Nerve-wracking because I'm not a strong reader. Nobody ever wants to be wrong when they answer a question, so I will admit at first that I wasn't very engaged in the group because I didn't want to be wrong. Because when I read things most of the time I don't understand it the same way that somebody else does. So I was hesitant at first, but my tutor was really good at working with me and saying it's okay if you're wrong because that happens. So she made it more comfortable for me to open up in a group.

Clearly, Michael, Abby, and Myra all experienced increased levels of comfort and confidence because of their group tutoring sessions.

Counseling. Nichols and Clinedinst (2013) discovered that more than one-third of higher education institutions who provisionally admit underprepared students require a form of mentoring like counseling. Thirty-three percent of the former SEP interview participants described being uncomfortable in their required counseling sessions. Sam compared advisors and counselors when describing his required counseling sessions:

It's easy when students meet with an advisor because they talk about classes, but when I think of the idea of a counselor I think they really want to dig deep and see how I am doing here, but as a freshman I didn't want to share any of my home situation with a counselor. So I kind of didn't care for the experience much.

Two students expressed concern with a counseling requirement due to an already established relationship with an external counselor. Myra said,

Well, I already had a therapist at the time that I had been seeing for seven or eight years for another condition, so therapists are kind of weird for me and I'm very particular. Just also the fact that my condition is a long term thing – it's like I really couldn't divulge all that much to the counselor because we only had five sessions.

Jack had a similar review of his required counseling sessions:

I had a counselor back home, so it was a little weird transitioning from one counselor to another. My counselor from back home I had a relationship with for two or three years, so to try and transport all of that experience into another was a little difficult and hard just because my counselor from back home was like me, African American, and we had a lot of the same experiences growing up. So coming into an environment like this it was a little difficult to feel like an understanding was completely there.

Evidently, required counseling for students who already have their own personal counselor or therapist can result in uncomfortable situations.

Feeling inadequate. Ciscell et al., (2016) found evidence that students who identified stigma as an obstacle to pursuing support services, such as tutoring, rarely had evidence of being stigmatized. Furthermore,

Several students acknowledged that the stigma they felt stemmed not from external sources, but from their own, internalized thoughts and feelings. Students felt that they would be perceived as 'dumb' even if there was no direct evidence to support that assumption. (Ciscell et al., 2016, p. 45)

Twenty-five percent of the interviewees expressed feeling stupid or dumb at some point while completing their required first-year SEP support services. After being notified of her required enrollment in the SEP during the summer preceding her first year, Abby felt discouraged:

When I got that letter before freshman year I was like testing's not my thing, obviously. And, I took the ACT and I'm like I'm done – I got an 18 and I was so done with it. I didn't want to take it again, and I didn't realize that would get me into the SEP program. When I got the letter I was like oh gosh this is horrible. Am I stupid? That's literally the first thought I had, am I that stupid? I just sat there and thought because I'm totally against standardized testing. I had like a 3.8 in high school.

Abby felt inadequate before she ever stepped on campus, but Myra's insufficient, personal feelings occurred during her writing tutoring.

We just had – I don't know if it was our personalities that clashed or it was that we just really didn't get along, but it was always like I was almost treated – I don't want to say the word stupid – but I felt stupid. Because he was breaking down like it's supposed to be this way, and not this way, and I felt like I was being kind of diminished against.

In addition to Abby and Myra expressing their feelings of inadequacy, Lisa described why she was uncomfortable entering the tutoring center for the first time:

Just the first time because I didn't know what to expect and I thought people would just kind of stare at me. I didn't want people to think I was dumb, and I didn't want any negative connotations against me.

All three of these females expressed a lack of confidence in themselves due to required SEP support services, which suggests support service stigmas exist at this study site too.

Change of Major Theme

Milsom and Coughlin (2015) addressed college students' tendencies to switch majors once or occasionally multiple times. Seventy-five percent of the participants in this study changed their major at least once after enrolling at the study site, and 33% of the participants entered the SEP in their first year with an undeclared major. "To promote the future career satisfaction and success of students, academic advisors play important roles in helping advisees make decisions related to their college majors" (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015, p. 5). Interview questions five and six, which are located in Appendix D, focus on the value of required SEP advising and counseling sessions. Participant answers to these two questions resulted in data that spotlights student majors. In addition to the required SEP advising sessions, some interviewees disclosed that the required counseling sessions also helped them make decisions about their major.

Undecided. Undecided undergraduate students are often considered retention risks (Tampke & Durodoye, 2013). However, all four of the former SEP students who enrolled at the study site as an undeclared major and participated in this study have obtained at least junior status and spoke specifically about their required counseling and/or advising experiences. Marie explained,

Counseling really helped me decide my major. That was the most valuable part for me because I was undecided and I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I took a series of tests that led me to my major today, which really helped me because I don't know if I would have found it without doing all of those.

Pam explained how her counselor assisted her in figuring out who she was:

I went to counseling trying to figure out who I was, and what my likes and dislikes were. We did a personality test and different things like that. Also, we discussed what I liked when I was younger and what I enjoy now just to try to help lead me to a major.

Three of the four undecided participants emphasized their advising experiences when discussing their undecided majors. Pam said:

My advising was kind of different I think from other people's just because I was an undecided major when I came in, so at first I was with one advisor and then they switched me over to a different advisor.

Jackie believed her undecided major diluted her required advising experiences:

I was an undecided major at first so that was the least effective advising just because I didn't really know what I wanted to go into and what classes I would have to take in order to plan out my following semesters. But, once I actually decided my major, I think it was a lot more effective and personal.

I followed up her response by asking her to clarify how her undecided advisor was less effective:

Probably because I didn't know which path I was going to take, and advising is more toward what classes students are to take in upcoming semesters. And with the SEP program we were required to take the classes for the following semester, and we were also only allowed to take 15 credit hours so that limited my ability for flexibility in terms of taking more classes.

Jack felt similarly to Jackie when describing his required advising experiences as an undecided major.

I honestly didn't really use my advisor freshman year. I might have used my advisor a little bit more sophomore year, but I didn't use him as much as I could have. Freshman year I was undecided and then my sophomore year I declared physical therapy, but then I realized physical therapy wasn't for me. So freshman year and then again my sophomore year I went undecided, and then at the end of my sophomore year I thought I wanted to be a computer science major, so I took a class with that and I realized it wasn't for me. So it was a little weird going into my current major sociology because I hadn't had any sociology courses up until this past fall, so when I did finally take it I felt a little bit more into it, and I realize it may not be right for me, but I think it's the best choice for now.

Based on Jack's continued indecisiveness, it is easy to conclude that his required advising experiences were not successful in helping him choose a major.

Major change. It is very common for higher education students to switch majors (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). Nine of the twelve interviewees changed their major at

least once, and many of them discussed their experiences with required counseling and/or advising. Myra said,

My advisor was really good at making sure that I understood what classes I needed to take and when. The problem my freshman year is I did switch majors, so then I ended up switching advisors. The second one was still great. She was really good at saying even though I switched, I'm really not behind and she was good at reframing it for me. Then I had to switch advisors again sophomore year. So switching advisors made it a bit chaotic.

Myra's chaotic experience is a result of the institution's method of assigning advisors. First-year students are assigned to a professional advisor based on major, and second year students are promoted to a faculty advisor. Because Myra changed majors during her first year, she had three different advisors during her first three semesters.

Lisa described how her required first-year SEP support services inspired her to change her major:

It's interesting because when I first started as a freshman I was a science major, and I went through all of the courses and it was hectic and nuts and that's what I talked to my counselor about. I did not want to go to counseling at first because I had to schedule even more time out of my day, and I'm pretty sure every college student goes through feeling like there's no time in the day. So that was one thing that did hinder me, but when talking to the counselor it helped me change my major because I realized that I wanted to be a helping professional rather than strictly laboratory science.

Sam also gave credit to his required advising experiences when selecting a new major.

My advisor was great. My experience was great because she helped me. I came in wanting to be a nursing major, but that was just because everyone in my family was. But, my heart was somewhere else. She told me that I have plenty of time and she didn't force anything. After meeting with her a couple of times, she started to suggest I might want to look into this or look into that to find what I have a passion for, which helped me decide. I thought she was quite helpful when it came to scheduling and not rushing me to pick a major because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had an idea but I wasn't totally 100% in what I thought I wanted to do. She kind of just guided me along the lines of that. I ended up picking a major in criminal justice sociology and a minor in business because those were the two I was most interested in. My advisor guided me along and showed me that there were other options instead of just I'm going to be a nurse because my family wants me to be.

Seventy-five percent of the students who participated in this study used required support services to help them solidify their major.

Rome Theme

In the last twenty years, there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of American higher education students who study abroad (Richart, 2015). Twenty-five percent of the interviewees were selected to participate in SEP's Summer Rome Experience. Recent research has discovered that "students' interest in study abroad is highest in their freshman year and steadily wanes, particularly after their junior year"

(Richart, 2015, p. 26). Based on this research, the SEP's design that pays for students to study abroad at the conclusion of their freshman year is advantageous. Furthermore,

The beneficial effect of study abroad on improving undergraduate retention and degree completion as suggested by our analysis indicates that universities should devote more attention to the expansion of study abroad opportunities. One way to expand study abroad programs is to design study abroad programs appropriate for sophomore and first-year students. Our results suggest that encouraging students to study abroad earlier in their college career, such as in the sophomore year, may help improve the four-year graduation rate. (Xu et al., 2013, p. 96-97)

Since 2004, the SEP has been committed to providing students with an opportunity to study abroad at the end of their first-year. The three females who participated in the SEP Summer Rome Experience, as well as this study, provided extremely positive reviews during their interviews. Alice explained:

When I found out I was a finalist for Rome, it really changed how I felt about the SEP program because I didn't know I was going to be able to do that. And I was like, oh my God, I love the SEP program because none of my other friends get to do this but me. This is so cool. So in that moment I was like I love this program; it's so great I got to go to Rome for free.

In addition to Alice's excitement about an opportunity for a free trip to Rome, Lisa and Abby found the opportunity to go to Rome motivation to work harder. Lisa said,

I did like the idea of the Rome experience because I think that's what pushed me even more to actually try to be noticeable and try to work harder than I usually

would. Not saying I don't work hard, but I just wanted it so bad because there was something to work towards, so I thought that helped me a lot. And, with taking all of these extra SEP classes, I was scared that I wasn't going to graduate on time, and that made me nervous because I don't want to spend an extra semester here if I don't have to, so going to Rome and taking classes there helped me a lot. That's why I'm able to graduate in four years now. So I liked that there was something at the end of the tunnel that I could reach toward.

Similarly, Abby said,

I was really determined to get that chance to go to Rome, and I didn't think I had a big chance. I was actually surprised that I got into it. That was probably the best experience of my life. Everything that happened my freshman year with the SEP program, it was all worth it because I got to go do that. It was a free trip to Rome, and that was insane for me. That was like, oh my goodness, this is probably the only time in my life that I will be able to do that kind of thing, so when I knew that I could do that I was more motivated. I was more determined because it came down to every little thing that I was doing – like participation, attendance, turning things in, my grade point average. Things like that motivated me and made me so much more determined to just not only be more successful in English and math, but to have certain experiences like that.

After I asked Abby why she found it important to compete to go to Rome, she continued:

It's just really nice to be able to work hard and then be rewarded. To me, that was a good reward. I was like wow I worked my butt off my whole freshman year. It

was just so nice. I did so many things. A good job doesn't do much until a certain point, and other people are doing nothing and it's like they still get through – they still get by. Certain things like that frustrate me, but going to Rome that was like, oh my gosh, yes. This is great. And mostly with people who can't really afford it and can't really pay for it. I thought that was the biggest thing. That was just incredible. It was shocking.

Hearing the excitement in Abby's voice nearly three years after her SEP Summer Rome Experience was likely the most memorable moment of my data collection process.

Undoubtedly, an all-expenses paid opportunity to study abroad drastically enhanced the odds to retain these three former SEP students. In fact, the first to second year retention rate of SEP students who have participated in the Rome experience is 100%. In other words, not one student who went to Rome in June chose not to return in August to begin their second year.

Perception Theme

Recent research showed that tutoring was often perceived by students to be helpful in better understanding course materials, as well as instrumental in raising grade point averages (Colver & Fry, 2016). Colver and Fry (2016) also discovered that access to a structured tutoring program, like SEP's, correlates positively with higher levels of academic achievement for students. All interviewees were asked: *Toward the end of your freshman year, did your feelings about support services change? If so, how?* Ten of the 12 interviewees reported improvements to their perception about support services, and the other two participants' perceptions remained the same. For many underprepared

students, like those assigned to the SEP, required extra assistance is unfamiliar, scary, demotivating, and embarrassing (Bachman, 2013). Two interviewees are convinced that they would no longer be enrolled at the university if it were not for SEP. Sam bluntly said, “I thought the SEP program was a positive because I know if it weren’t for it I probably wouldn’t be here.” More descriptively, Marie explained:

My perceptions about support services changed, but definitely for the better. I was way more – I love school now, but I was way more excited about it because of the support that I have here. I probably wouldn’t have made it anywhere else, like at a bigger university or anywhere without the amount of support that I had. It’s definitely changed my life.

Several of the participants described the results of the required exposure to support services. Pam explained, “Because of the required support services, I knew when I was struggling in a class that I could go to them for help. Whether that was just for a paper to look over or something more in detail like economics,” and Jackie said, “I know my perception changed because I used to be really hesitant to sign up for tutoring.” As opposed to only discussing tutoring, Jack also included counseling:

Like I said before about tutors, I saw that they helped me understand concepts a bit more. Where counseling, I think it was a helpful tool to teach me that not everything is going to be the same and sometimes I have to adapt. Overall, it was a good experience because it showed me that the same situation is not always going to apply, so I have to at least be open to other things and ideas.

Sam described the most valuable lesson that he learned from required SEP support services:

When I first started SEP, I was frustrated, but as the semester went on and I became more able to manage my time, which was the biggest lesson I got from the SEP program. As the semester went by and I picked up on time management and how valuable and important it is I was able to handle all of my responsibilities. For example, okay I've got practice in the morning, I have classes all day, I have tutoring at night, after tutoring I want to do homework, and I want to be in bed at this time. Once I got the time management and set what I would say are priorities I was good. I wasn't mad to go to tutoring, and I was more positive about everything.

Alice's perception about support services positively changed because of her Rome experience:

I looked back on the SEP support service requirements and I thought they really weren't as bad as I originally thought they were going to be in August. And the payoff was even better than I thought it was going to be. Instead of me just getting good grades in my classes or at least trying to get good grades in classes, I got to go to Rome.

Correlation to higher grades. Four of the 12 participants expressed belief that support services correlated directly to higher grades. John said,

The more tutoring sessions that a student goes to – I feel like – so say a student learned a lesson and he is going over a lesson in class and he kind of gets the

concept, but if he goes to a tutoring session he gets the hands on work and I feel like that helps students grasp that lesson a lot more. So students have a better understanding therefore when they take exams and quizzes those things are a lot easier.

Similarly, Sam described specifics about his essay grades:

After having SEP requirements, I found out the papers that I did take to tutoring that my grades were better than the papers that I didn't. Being able to know that these resources are there and seeing the positive feedback with my grades is the reason I keep going back.

Optional support services in subsequent academic years. Interview questions ten and eleven, which are located in Appendix D, were asked to obtain information on former SEP students' continued pursuit of optional support services in subsequent academic years. Eighty-three percent of the interviewees continued at least one support service in academic years after their first one, and 58% continued counseling and tutoring. Joe described why he chose to continue optional tutoring and counseling:

I continued tutoring because I want to become successful. I want to achieve good grades and that's why I do it. I want to become a better student. I want to understand what I'm learning in my classes, instead of just seeing it and reading it. I want to understand the main concepts, and be good at what I do. As for counseling, I just went because I was having a rough time and it was a good place to go and talk it out and to have someone listen to my issues.

Comparably, Lisa also continued counseling and tutoring:

I always went to tutoring because when students go to tutoring, they feel like they can't do it or they have a negative sense of going in there. Now I just walk in to the center loud and proud, and I don't even care because I know I need help and I need to pass my classes. And, I continued counseling because my life is so stressful because of everything that I have to do.

Despite discontinuing her pursuit of tutoring, Jackie continued to pursue tutoring in multiple subjects:

I went to tutoring a number of times for math after my first year. I think I went once or twice for writing as well for major papers. Because I didn't know exactly how to use APA format, and I wanted to make sure that all of those requirements were done correctly. I knew that I was kind of behind in math. I've never really been the greatest at it, so I knew I would need help, and I knew my tutor really well – she's actually a really good friend. And then for the writing, like I said, I knew I needed to know APA format for the communications field, so I knew I needed to seek out someone to help me and make sure that I was doing it correctly.

SEP's required support services exposed the participants in this study to services that are oftentimes perceived poorly by higher education students; however, many of these former SEP students have continued to use these services in subsequent academic years.

Graduation Theme

Some higher education stakeholders argue that not enough research has been conducted in regards to the correlation between student pursuit of support services and

graduations rates: “Despite the plausibility of an association between academic support and retention to graduation, previous research in retention has given minimal attention to this variable while past research on academic support has focused primarily on the short-term benefits for students” (Grillo & Leist, 2013, p. 388). Seven seniors participated in this study, and four of these seniors answered affirmatively when asked if they believe continuing to pursue support services after their first-year SEP requirements improved their chances to graduate. Eighty-six percent of these seniors continued at least one support service after their first year, and four of them continued counseling and tutoring. These percentages provide a specific answer to this study’s fourth research question: *For former SEP students who have obtained senior status and are therefore near graduation, what required SEP support services were they committed to after their required first-year experiences?*

As for trying to determine a relationship between pursuit of support services and graduation, the seniors were asked: *Do you believe that continuing to pursue support services after your first-year have improved your chances to graduate?* Abby answered, “Yes, I needed the services and they really helped me. They made me more successful. I’ve been on Dean’s list ever since freshman year, and that’s one of the goals I have until I graduate.” Similarly, Sam replied, “Yeah, I think so. If it wasn’t for improving my writings and readings and the math tutoring, I would’ve been failed out. I’m not really good with math, but I got by because I went to math tutoring.” Jackie agreed with Sam that tutoring helped her writing skills, as well as increased her chances to graduate:

I think it was just because it helped me become aware of exactly what I needed to focus on in terms of writing and being able to actually have that format down to a tee. Because going into the working field, I know I'm going to be using that day to day, and in all of my classes I've used it too. So I think that definitely helped me in the long run.

Unlike the other seniors, Lisa discussed her disadvantage as an incoming international student and how the SEP provided her with the support to succeed:

Just because coming from one culture to another I already was at a disadvantage because I didn't understand things. I was nervous and I'm a first generation college student in my family on both sides, so I had a lot of pressure on me. I was nervous that I was not going to be able to finish because I didn't know what to expect or have any help along the way, especially right now that I'm applying to grad schools. I would never have thought that I would apply to a grad school because when I applied to undergrad, no one helped me and I didn't know how the process even started. So having the SEP program did help me a lot because I kind of just fixated and set stepping stones for me, and I just walked on the stones myself because I was able to have that structure, so I think it helped a lot.

Based on the 86% of senior participants who optionally continued using support services throughout their college experience, I have concluded that support services have been at least part of these students' path to graduation.

Discrepant Data

Creswell (2012) described discrepant cases as ways to explain contradictory data, acknowledging that these cases add credibility to research studies. During the coding process, which resulted in the six themes of this research study, three outliers were discovered in the interview transcriptions. Due to the number of participants in this study to ensure saturation, discrepant cases were anticipated. The first discrepant case came from Alice when she was addressing the ninth interview question: *What suggestions do you have to improve SEP's required support services?* She replied,

I felt like the independence factor that students are supposed to get in college was gone because people are babying you, which I liked and I didn't like. Because I was like I'm 18 and I want to be an adult and do all of these things, and then I was like but I don't want to have all of the responsibility of doing all of them so I'm happy that they are there. It was like it was an in between ground that I couldn't find a good medium for.

Alice was the only student who used the term “babying” when describing the required SEP support services. Since she was my second interview, I anticipated similar descriptions in upcoming interviews, but none of the other interviewees described anything similar. Regardless of Alice's use of the term “babying,” she continued using support services and is currently completing her senior year.

Myra produced the second discrepancy during her interview when she stated that she believes her placement in the SEP was a result of her IEP: “I had a feeling that I was in the program because I wasn't testing well. I don't test well so I was in those certain

classes because of that and because I do have a learning disability and IEP.” Myra was the only participant who discussed her IEP, but it is very possible that other students involved in this study had one too. Regardless of Myra’s concern with an unfair placement, she is currently completing her senior year and has a cumulative GPA of 3.3.

Lastly, Jack disclosed the third outlier. When asked about his experiences with the required SEP group reading tutoring, Jack replied: “For the reading tutoring my second semester, I was actually the only one in my group, so there wasn’t anybody to bounce ideas off of but the tutor.” Jack was the only participant who did not get to experience group reading tutoring for his entire first year, likely due to scheduling conflicts, which resulted in him not having an equal opportunity to rate the value of group reading tutoring.

Credibility and Dependability

In this qualitative research, credibility implies that the former SEP students’ support service experiences described in the interviews were accurately transcribed (Lodico et al., 2010). To ensure this credibility, I used a member checking process that is explained in Appendix C. I sent an email to all participants with a copy of their interview transcription attached within one week of their scheduled interview. The emails requested that participants review the entire transcription and confirm its accuracy, and participants were encouraged to make revisions and/or request certain sections be excluded from the study. Eleven of the 12 participants approved their transcriptions as written through email reply, and the other participant expressed her desire to “clean up” some of her responses. Since her transcription was 4100 words, I explained to her that

revising the entire document was an unnecessary task because I would only be using some of her responses. The participant and I agreed that I would send her the specific sections from her transcription that I intended to use to obtain her approval prior to publication. The multiple perspectives gained from the twelve participants in this study supported triangulation (Lodico et al., 2010). In addition to credibility, accuracy, and triangulation, I demonstrated dependability through the utilization of an audio recorder during the semistructured interviews (Lodico et al., 2010).

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this intrinsic case study revealed data related to the research problem and the research questions. My decision to utilize qualitative, semistructured interviews provided me the opportunity to better understand former SEP students' experiences with required and optional support services. The participants shared specific details about their experiences with required and optional support services, as well as reasons why they did or did not remain committed to them in subsequent academic years. Throughout the data collection process, many participants explained how required exposure to support services in their first year resulted in positive effects that greatly influenced each one's journey toward graduation. Even though only 83% of the participants remained committed to at least one support service, 100% of the participants clearly found value in at least one support service; therefore, none of the participants described the support services to be completely insignificant.

The commitment to support services that 83% of this study's participants maintained may be a reason why each one is progressing toward graduation. Tinto's

(1975) argument that a union between academic and social systems in higher education will result in more student commitment and lead to higher graduation rates directly connects to these former SEP students' commitment to support services, as well as their progress toward graduation. Based on Tinto's (1975) student departure theory and its influence from Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide, which argued that lack of socialization with others increases the likelihood of suicide, it is reasonable to conclude that one of the reasons these former SEP students are still progressing toward graduation is their commitment to support services and the social aspects within them. However, even though this study suggests relationships, scholar practitioners should continue to explore the relationships between student commitment to support services, socialization, and graduation rates.

My data analysis produced six themes that primarily focused on participants' experiences with support services and reasons to remain committed to them. The findings refuted my initial assumption that most former SEP students would not remain committed to optional support services in subsequent academic years. This initial assumption resulted in the first two research questions emphasizing students who do not remain committed to support services; therefore, the majority of the findings do not offer insight as to why former SEP students discontinue pursuing support services in subsequent academic years. On the other hand, the findings did provide clear connections to the other two research questions that focus on what influences student commitment to support services and former SEP students who obtained senior status. Many of the participants disclosed that their commitment to support services was

influenced by the comfort and/or confidence established through the services, and 57% of the senior participants believe their commitment to support services improved their chances to graduate.

Outcome of the Findings

An outcome of this case study research is a policy recommendation designed to increase the study site's graduation rates through increased support service requirements for first-year students. The policy will be presented as a position paper that includes background of existing first-year student policies at the study site, relevant literature, policy description, goals, implications, and an evaluation plan. Currently, the study site only requires its underprepared first-year SEP students to participate in support services such as tutoring and counseling; however, all first-year students are required to enroll in a first-year seminar course that could add support service participation to its curriculum. Required exposure to support services for all students, not just the underprepared ones, may result in more student commitment to support services, as well as more students progressing toward graduation.

Summary

This qualitative research study utilized an intrinsic case study design to explore the experiences of former SEP students with required and optional support services. A purposeful sampling method was used to select a population of former SEP students. Qualitative semistructured interviews provided data that resulted in a better understanding of why students remain committed to support services in subsequent academic years. Prior to conducting these interviews, thorough participant protection

procedures were established through the approval processes of Walden University and the study's sites institutional review boards.

Once the semistructured interviews were completed and transcribed, I established methods to ensure credibility, accuracy, triangulation, and dependability. Thorough analysis of the interview transcriptions identified six themes, and direct quotes from the interviews were used to support the need for each one. Direct quotes from the interviews were also used to show examples of discrepant data.

This qualitative study was established to address the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates through obtaining a better understanding of former SEP students' experiences with required and optional support services. Since the findings of the semistructured interviews suggest that SEP's required exposure to support services in students' first years result in more commitments to support services in subsequent academic years, I am proposing a policy designed to increase the study site's overall graduation rates through increased support service requirements for all first-year students, not just the underprepared ones. Section 3 will provide in-depth details on this policy.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Section 3 includes detailed descriptions of the project that originated from the findings of this study on former SEP students' experiences with required and optional support services. This section includes the project description and goals, the rationale, literature review, evaluation plans, as well as social and community implications. A position paper, which is the selected genre of this study's project, is displayed in Appendix A. The purpose of the position paper is to provide the study site with an implementable policy that may increase the institution's overall retention and graduation rates.

Project Description and Goals

I selected a position paper as the project for this study because, according to Gotschall (2016), position papers are used to support an identified position and/or recommend solutions to a problem. Researchers have argued that graduation rates are the most important percentage when measuring the quality of an institution (Lee et al., 2014). This study's identified problem of the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates is not an unfamiliar problem to any higher education institution that enrolls underprepared students, because it is commonly suggested that academic preparation is a reliable component in predicting student retention and success (Visser & van Zyl, 2013). Therefore, it is safe to assume that all institutions that enroll underprepared students like the ones in the SEP are concerned about these students' potential to graduate. On the other hand, what is not familiar at most higher education

institutions is required first-year student exposure to support services. Based upon the findings of this study, and the research site's overall graduation rate of 60% ("The Integrated", n.d.), my project's position is all first-year students should have required exposure to support services, not just the underprepared ones. Since all first-year students are required to enroll in a first-year seminar, the proposed solution is to increase all first-year students' exposure to support services through a policy included in the institution's first-year seminar curriculum.

My primary goal for the policy recommendation (Appendix A) is to increase the overall graduation rates at the study site. Since the majority (83%) of this study's participants described a commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years, which may be one reason why all of them are progressing toward graduation, there is support to the belief that required first-year exposure to support services increases the likelihood that a student will remain committed to support services when they become optional. Furthermore, there is also support to the belief that commitment to support services increases the likelihood of graduation. Consequently, my secondary goal for this policy recommendation is for more students to remain committed to optional support services. Requiring all first-year students, not just the underprepared ones, to participate in support services during their first semester could increase student commitments to support services in subsequent academic years, as well as increase the study site's graduation rates.

Project Rationale for Genre and Content

Position papers often support specific issues or problems (Gotschall, 2016), and these papers are also known as argumentative or white papers (Sakamuro, Stolley, & Hyde, 2015).

Originally, the term white paper was used as shorthand to refer to an official government report, indicating that the document is authoritative and informative in nature. Writers typically use this genre when they argue a specific position or propose a solution to a problem . . . (Sakamuro et al., 2015, para. 1)

Since my primary goal for this study's project (Appendix A) is to increase the overall graduation rates at the study site through increased first-year student exposure to support services, a position paper or white paper is a genre that provides the opportunity to advocate for this policy.

A position paper can be used as an advocacy device to present the reasons why increased first-year exposure to support services may increase graduation rates (Gotschall, 2016). The data collected during this study provide former SEP students' perceptions on why optional commitment to support services increases their chances to graduate; therefore, using a position paper to advocate or promote more exposure to support services is a rational approach to reaching the primary goal of this project. The white paper prepared for this project contains information about the problem of the gap between retention and graduation rates for the stakeholders at the study site, offers a solution to address the problem, evaluation process, and supports the solution offered with research and current literature.

Review of the Literature

The search for literature related to the specific genre of this project included keywords such as *policies, position, proposals, and white paper*. Search engines used to locate literature focusing on the genre included Google Scholar and ProQuest. As for the content of the project, the search for literature included keywords such as *higher education, first-year, seminars, requirements, exposure, honors, and athletes*. The search engines and databases used to locate content literature included ERIC, Education Research Complete, SAGE Journals, Psyc ARTICLES, and Google Scholar. My primary goals for this literature review are to provide further rationale through literature of why a position paper is a worthy approach for this study's project and the second goal is to affirm the findings of the study that are presented in the final study.

White Paper Genre

Position or white papers are recognized as “a persuasive essay that uses facts and logic to promote a certain product, service or viewpoint” (Graham, 2015, para. 9). Throughout this literature review, the terms white paper and position paper will be used interchangeably. “White papers are used by education associations, education policy organizations, and universities to provide higher education leaders with research-based practice and policy recommendations” (Crews, 2016, p. 86). Similarly, White-McNeil (2016) discovered a growing trend in white papers being used to distribute research in higher education institutions, and Parker-Young (2017) declared that white papers are a rational method to share information with a higher education community because data can be formatted in a way that all institutional stakeholders can easily understand. White

papers typically include the following: introduction to the problem, a background of scholarship that addresses the problem, solution and benefits, proposed costs, and evaluation of new strategy (White-McNeil, 2016; Sakamuro et al., 2015; Gotschall, 2016). Additionally, position papers can be used to introduce and receive support for recommended solutions as well as assist decision makers and encourage change (White-McNeil, 2016).

In order for a white paper to be deemed effective, “The audience must understand the problem, the study results, and areas needing improvement for real change to result from the project” (Parker-Young, 2017, p. 80). Furthermore, Neuwirth (2013) declared that white papers should educate, provoke innovative thinking, and clearly communicate a point of view using well-researched findings. Fortunately, White-McNeil (2016) argued “The white paper is a medium through which decision makers will absorb the essence of the research in a shorter period of time, while still having access to the detailed research if needed” (p. 53), and “Since the white paper now has a broader appeal and is considered an educational essay based in facts, it is an effective format through which to inform this administration” (p. 53). Based on Neuwirth (2013), Parker-Young (2017), and White-McNeil’s (2016) statements, in order for this study’s project to be effective, it must show an awareness of audience, be clear and concise, and based in facts. The intended audience of this white paper will be the institution’s provost, dean of academic services, director of first-year experience, as well as other retention stakeholders. A white paper is the appropriate genre to present the reasons why increased first-year exposure to support services may increase graduation rates because the data

collected during this study can be displayed in ways that all institutional stakeholders can easily understand (Parker-Young, 2017).

Support Service Exposure

My second objective for this literature review was to present evidence from recent literature that supports the current study's findings that are presented in the position paper (Appendix A). Based on the results of this research study, many former SEP students acknowledged their optional pursuit of at least one support service in subsequent academic years while progressing on the path toward graduation. All SEP students are initially exposed to these support services in their first-year seminar; in fact, not only are SEP students exposed to support services such as counseling and tutoring, these students are required to participate in these services and their final grades in math, English, and first-year seminar are partially dependent upon participation in these required support services. Due to the positive support service perceptions of the former SEP students who participated in this study, I recommend required exposure to support services for all first-year students.

For more than three decades, first-year seminars have provided students experiencing similar transitions with an assigned space to interact with each other through the guidance of a caring faculty member (Latino & Unite, 2012), and these seminars have provided students with opportunities to grow satisfied or dissatisfied with their major and career paths (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). Typically, first-year seminars inform new students about the support services available on campus (Latino & Unite, 2012). Unfortunately, Yan and Sendall (2016) identified students who confirmed that

information regarding support services was mentioned to them, but that information was not enough to educate students regarding how to use the available resources. Similarly, Ciscell et al. (2016) discovered that thorough advertising of support services at a liberal arts university--comparable to this project's study site--was not enough because students at the institution still described a lack of knowledge about the services offered. Talbert (2012) argued, "Frequently minority students are unaware of such programs available to increase their skills and lack knowledge of qualifications" (p. 27). It has also been suggested that predominately white institutions can be more successful retaining African Americans through specific retention efforts (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

Furthermore, honors students who tend to be "perfectionists and overachievers" can benefit from happiness oriented activities such as counseling (Rockey, 2015, p. 210), and Martin (2015) discovered that outstanding undergraduates, such as honors students, are already extremely active in curricular and extracurricular activities. On the other hand, it has been argued that many gifted students are not motivated to be high achieving academically, but a supportive academic environment helps increase student motivation (Siegle, DaVia, & Mitchell, 2014). Supplementing first-year seminars through required support service experiences would alleviate students' lack of knowledge of available services, increase motivation, and may increase retention and graduation rates.

Some higher education institutions have already established enhancements for their first-years seminars. For example, Latino and Unite (2012) explained the benefits of assigning peer educators to first-year seminars. Also, Summerskill and Jones (2013) advocated for supplemental staff members titled case managers to provide additional

mentorship to students and to assist faculty. The benefits include supplemental support through academic mentoring and advising from a student or staff member who may seem more approachable, from a new student's perspective, than a faculty member. Since the study site's tutoring center employs mainly peer tutors, assigning specific peer tutors to specific first-year seminars based on major or other characteristics and requiring all 1st-year students to use the service creates even more opportunities for new students to interact with similar peers.

An institution in Minnesota determined that segregating student athletes into their own first-year seminar was advantageous (Higbee & Schultz, 2013), and the study site employs many student athletes as peer tutors. Rettig and Hu (2016) discovered that student athletes are more challenged to obtain educational outcomes and that "high-profile student-athletes may benefit from additional assistance in first-year transition (i.e., adjustment seminars, summer preparation course), academic support (i.e., required tutors for all courses) and mentoring (i.e., faculty-student, student-student)" (p. 444). As for student athletes without a major, recent research found that combining a first-year seminar with a general education course to form a learning community resulted in higher GPAs (Tampke & Durodoye, 2013). Requiring cohorts of undecided students to meet with an assigned tutor is similar to assigning cohorts of undecided students to the same first-year seminar and general education course.

On the contrary, requiring students to attend various support services has its deficiencies. Researchers explained,

Perhaps the most often cited personal obstacle was time. Many students simply felt that they did not have the time to come in for tutoring, or that their schedules conflicted with the timing of study sessions and tutoring hours. Some students cited poor time management, and a few cited living off campus as a hindrance to coming in for tutoring, but most cited work as the primary obstacle . . . (Ciscell et al., 2016, p. 46-47)

Even though these student reasons have merit, implementing required support services into first-year seminars makes attendance non-negotiable. Furthermore,

Student ratings of their relationships with fellow students, teachers, administrative staff and support services are all linked with student intentions to depart, as are student perceptions of the level of support provided by their institution. This is a clear indication that support and departure intentions are interrelated . . . (Coates, 2014, p. 28)

These findings are in alignment with the study's conceptual framework in which Tinto (1975) argued that due to the importance of socialization, a higher education institution's social system is, on a smaller scale, similar to society as a whole. Tinto's desire to compare higher education institutions to society as a whole was inspired by Durkheim's (1951) theory that lack of socialization with others increases the likelihood of suicide. For the purpose of this study, departing an institution is similar to suicide on a smaller scale.

If attending support services is required for all first-year students, then student perceptions of available support services should not be poor and intentions to depart

should decrease. “Students often have the ability to succeed in school but may need to be convinced that they can be successful” (Gentry, 2014, p. 10). Support services such as tutoring and counseling can help convince students of their ability to be successful. It has already been discovered that “Students' confidence in grades, studying and attendance shows a small increase over the first year of undergraduate study . . .” (Putwain & Sander, 2016, p. 395), and student happiness is a factor in success potential (Rockey, 2015). The likelihood is promising that support service requirements will raise first-year students' confidence levels even more.

Utilizing required support services at higher education institutions is not unusual. In fact, many institutions that admit students provisionally require support services such as academic advising, tutoring, and peer mentoring (Nichols & Clinedinst, 2013). Recent research has discovered that mandatory tutoring reduces student apprehensions. “Mandatory tutoring sessions were not viewed as punitive, and students clearly admitted that they gained much from the experience. If we want students to experience success, we have to provide a clear structure . . .” (Knight et al., 2016, p. 44). This study's project (Appendix A) implements a tutoring requirement into the first-year seminar curriculum. Students will be assigned to a first-year seminar and required to participate in various support services such as counseling and tutoring. Comparably, Colver and Fry (2016) recommended using contracts to encourage students to use tutoring services more frequently. Contractual requirements for students decrease their opportunities to oppose participation in support services. Richburg-Hayes (2015) argued that presenting already overwhelmed first-year students with unnecessary choices is not wise. “Basically, people

who are uninformed or overwhelmed with too much complicated information may make decisions that are not in their best interests. A promising approach is to provide more structure and guidance and a limited selection of pathways . . .” (Richburg-Hayes, 2015, p. 8). Adding support service requirements to the previously established first-year seminar curriculum provides even more structure and guidance to a student’s first semester.

Of course, the goal of adding support service requirements to the previously established first-year seminar curriculum is to bolster retention and graduation rates. Unfortunately, it has been discovered that the long term effects of academic support on student success is a subject with limited research (Grillo & Leist, 2013). “Despite the plausibility of an association between academic support and retention to graduation, previous research in retention has given minimal attention to this variable while past research on academic support has focused primarily on the short-term benefits for students” (Grillo & Leist, 2013, p. 388). Once this project is fully implemented and all first-year students are required to use support services such as tutoring and counseling, the long term effects of this requirement will be analyzable. However, it has been proven that “quantity of time spent using academic support contributed proportionately to the likelihood of graduation” (Grillo & Leist, 2013, p. 402). Noel-Levitz (2012) discovered that 40% of males and 47% of females desired tutoring in one or more courses, and Gillard, Robathan, and Wilson (2016) found attending an institution’s math support center significantly improved student confidence. Also, Rockey (2015) argued, “little

research has focused on promoting and encouraging happiness in the classroom as students progress through college or how to encourage happiness as a lifestyle” (p. 204). This study’s project will result in further research on methods to increase the likelihood of graduation in higher education institutions, as well increase students’ confidence levels through required exposure to support services.

Project Description

Resources & Existing Supports

Additional resources within pre-existing institutional offices will be needed to initiate this policy. Fortunately, no additional support service offices will be needed because the study site already has an Academic Support Center, Counseling Center, Career Service Center, Library, and Professional Advising Office. The current first-year seminar curriculum requires all first-year students to attend appointments in Career Services, Professional Advising, and the Library; however, only the underprepared SEP students are required to attend counseling and tutoring sessions.

Potential Barriers & Solutions

A potential barrier to this project is staffing within the Academic Support Center and Counseling Center. Since the SEP only represents approximately 20% of the study site’s typical incoming class, more counselors and tutors may need to be hired to accommodate a significant increase in demand. Fortunately, the Professional Advising Office has the template for the amount of hours needed to meet with all first-year students for three 30-minute sessions in the first semester. Because counseling sessions are also 30 minutes, and the new policy only requires all new students to attend two

counseling sessions as opposed to three advising sessions, a plan should be manageable. As for increased tutoring demand, group tutoring sessions will help decrease the amount of new tutors needed.

Implementation

In order to implement this policy as soon as possible, multiple stakeholders will need to be involved. The study site's strict calendar hinders the amount of possible initiation dates, and the earliest term this policy could be implemented is fall 2018. First-year seminars are only offered in fall semesters, departmental budget proposals are always due on February 1, and new budget cycles begin on July 1. Thus, the Academic Support Center and Counseling Center will need to complete budget proposals that include additional staffing to accommodate more first-year student sessions by February 1, 2018. If new tutors and/or counselors are needed, then they will need to be hired and trained before August 27th, 2018. I will need to work with the Director of First-Year Experience to complete the revision of the first-year seminar syllabus before August 1, 2018 because first-year seminar training sessions are held for new instructors in early August.

Project Evaluation Plan

My primary goal for this white paper is to increase graduation rates, and the secondary goal is to increase student commitments to optional support services. A formative evaluation of the project will begin the evaluation process. Specific members of the study site's community will be asked to review and evaluate the white paper: director of the academic support center, director of the counseling center, director of first-

year experience, and dean of academic services. These four stakeholders will be distributed evaluation sheets that ask open-ended questions about the policy's clarity and logic, and the evaluations will be completed anonymously. This type of formative evaluation should provide honest and expeditious feedback that will be considered prior to implementing the project. After feedback from these four stakeholders is applied to the policy recommendation, it will be shared with other members within the institution's community.

Once changes to the study site's first-seminar are implemented, summative evaluations will be used to determine if increases are occurring. If the changes are implemented in fall 2018, the first evaluation period will be the summer of 2019. At this time, the academic support center and counseling center will be able to compare their first-year student spring 2019 appointments to spring 2018 appointments. If more first-year students participated in counseling and/or tutoring sessions in spring 2019 than spring 2018, then it is possible that optional student commitments have been established. The number of appointments in fall 2018 will obviously be significantly more than fall 2017 because first-year student appointments will be required in fall 2018. Appointments in both centers can be analyzed at the conclusion of every semester beginning in May 2019. The four-year graduation rate can be evaluated in May 2022 and the six-year graduation rate in May 2024.

Ultimately, the success of this policy resides in the administration's willingness to fund the institution's support services if student commitments to them continue to increase. Without the funds to compensate counselors and tutors, support service

commitments will not be able to continuously grow. The project will be considered a success if in May 2024 the institution's six-year graduation rate is more than the current one of 60%, and/or the four-year graduation rate is more than the current 37% in May 2022 ("The Integrated", n.d.).

Project Implications

Local Implications

Local social change resulting from this study could include more student commitments to optional support services, which may result in increased retention and graduation rates. More commitments to support services and increased graduation rates would strengthen student satisfaction levels and likely lead to more referrals to potential students. Since higher education stakeholders commonly argue that rate of graduation is the most important percentage when measuring the quality of an institution (Lee et al., 2014), increasing graduation rates would enhance the perceived quality of the study site. Also, increased student commitments to support services such as counseling and tutoring would provide more job opportunities within those departments. Fortunately, these jobs would be available to students as peer tutors and local professionals as counselors.

Far-reaching Implications

Far-reaching social change resulting from this study could include a transferable retention strategy. Since first-year seminars are one of the most familiar retention strategies in today's higher education institutions, modifying these common courses through increased student requirements to available support services is a possibility for

many. Furthermore, an increase in satisfied, higher education graduates may further encourage high school students to continue their education.

Summary

Section 3 of this project study described the goals and rationale for using a position paper as the project genre. Additionally, a literature review related to the position paper genre as well as support service exposure was developed. Lastly, descriptions of the project's implementation, evaluation, and implication plans were explained.

The final section of the study will present my reflections and conclusions. Section 4 will focus on project strengths and limitations, alternative research approaches, future research recommendations, and personal reflections related to my growth as a scholar practitioner.

Section 4: Reflections

Introduction

Section 4 includes descriptions of the policy recommendation's strengths and possible recommendations for addressing the limitations of the study. Also, this section includes alternative approaches to address the gap between SEP's retention and graduation rates, as well as alternative definitions of the problem and solutions, and my personal reflections as a scholar and project developer. Lastly, I provide reflections of the importance of the work, implications, and directions for future research.

Project Strengths

The deliverable project designed from this research study is a policy recommendation (Appendix A). The project contains multiple strengths, including its digestible format, specific evidence, and clear recommendation. This policy recommendation aligns with Crews' (2016) belief that white papers can be used by higher education institutions to provide data driven policy recommendations and with Parker-Young's (2017) argument that white papers are a rational method to share information with a higher education community because data can be formatted in a way that all institutional stakeholders will understand. Due to the format of the project, the director of the academic support center, director of the counseling center, director of first-year experience, and dean of academic services will have the opportunity to analyze it in a hard copy format similar to a magazine article. The format of the policy recommendation was determined based on its ability to be understood by anyone.

In addition to the project's accessible format, the data provided is a strength. For example, the policy recommendation provides specific data, such as the first-year retention and graduation rates of SEP students, and percentages such as 75% of participants replied to an interview question with a concerning response such as "overwhelming," "intimidated," "angry," or "nervous." Furthermore, each participant's pseudonym, GPA, status, and major are displayed, and the project includes direct quotes from participants who support the project's recommendation. Percentages and direct quotes related to the recommendation of increasing support service exposure for all first-year students should help persuade stakeholders.

Lastly, the project's clear, single recommendation is a strength. White papers with multiple recommendations may result in audience confusion due to not knowing if one recommendation has precedence over others. This project's clear recommendation to revise the first-year seminar to include required counseling and tutoring sessions decreases the potential for the project's audience to be confused. Also, the two goals of this recommendation: increasing graduation rates and increasing student commitments to support services, are easy to comprehend.

Project Limitations

Similar to most policy recommendations, this deliverable does have limitations. One of the many commonalities of the participants in this study is they are all currently enrolled at the study site; therefore, one concept that is missing from this study's data is any perspective from former SEP students who are no longer enrolled at the institution

and reasons for their departure. In other words, it is possible that required support services are at least part of the reason why these students chose to leave the institution.

Another project limitation is how I recruited participants. The voluntary reply to email solicitation results in only receiving interest from students who check their email. If participant recruitment would have required me to contact potential participants by phone, I may have been able to increase the level of diversity amongst my participants because most students are more likely to answer their phone than check their email.

As for limitations related specifically to the policy recommendation, stakeholders who are unfamiliar with the SEP may have more questions about SEP than the actual recommended policy. If stakeholders become too concerned with knowing everything there is to know about SEP, then the project will need to be much longer and will become less digestible. Also, the handout format of the policy recommendation requires the audience to comprehend the content without a facilitator. If the policy recommendation were delivered in an oral presentation format, the audience would have opportunities to ask questions before, during, and after the presentation. The immediate questioning that oral presentations permit can be beneficial; however, too many questions from an audience could result in presentations becoming sidetracked (Schaefer, 2007).

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

I designed the policy recommendation to increase the research site's graduation rates, as well as increase student commitments to support services through a new policy included in the institution's first-year seminar curriculum. The format of the project was determined with the intent to be disseminated easily as a handout to its initial, intended

audience that includes the director of the academic support center, director of counseling center, director of first-year experience, and dean of academic services.

A different approach to sharing my research would be to develop an oral presentation that could be presented to a much larger audience that includes administration, faculty, staff, and students.

According to the results of the study, many of the participants remained committed to tutoring in subsequent academic years. As opposed to proposing a policy that requires more first-year student exposure to support services such as tutoring, an alternative approach to increasing student commitments to support services and overall graduation rates would be to establish professional development sessions for the institution's peer tutors. The purpose of these professional development sessions for tutors would be to enhance their skills with the intent to decrease the amount of unproductive, future tutoring sessions. If the amount of productive tutoring sessions continues to rise, fewer students would leave the academic support center dissatisfied and hopefully share their positive experiences with other students. Even though professional development sessions for peer tutors could be productive, the sessions still do not incorporate required exposure to tutoring for all first-year students.

Scholarship

Throughout the 17-month writing process of this research study, I have found myself continuously surprised. Once I identified the gap in practice that I investigated in this study, I was convinced that the former SEP students who participated in my study would repetitively describe reasons why they discontinued pursuing support services

when they became optional in subsequent academic years. My hypothesis remained consistent throughout the 11 months it took me to earn the right to interview former SEP students. The 11-month journey from gap identification to the interviews was without a doubt the most daunting surprise of my doctoral study process. However, during those 11 months, I developed an appreciation for scholars and what it takes to become one.

As I immersed myself in the literature, I quickly discovered topic experts with multiple publications and now I appreciate those people even more because I realize how many lengthy processes he or she had to complete to complete those publications and to be considered a scholar. In other words, I learned that in order to be considered a scholar, one must be very familiar with other scholars in his field. Of course, once I conquered the 11 months from gap identification to interviews, the data collected in the interviews was a surprise, because my hypothesis was not the least bit accurate. The fact that 83% of my participants described a commitment to optional support services was a remarkably humbling experience for me because I realized that for years I have been focusing on the negatives of the SEP and ignoring all of the positives.

Project Reflection and Development

Because I was convinced that former SEP students did not remain committed to support services in subsequent academic years, I assumed that my project would need to be a professional development opportunity for tutors to improve their skills. As an English and first-year seminar instructor within the SEP, I hear frequent student complaints about their tutors, but naively I have rarely considered the positive feedback the students who are not complaining may have. Thus, my project that recommends all

first-year students should be exposed to required support services because the former SEP students shared such positive experiences with their required experiences was another humbling surprise. As for my policy recommendation, I am very pleased with how easily disseminated it will be. I am excited to make copies of the document and provide it to different stakeholders on campus, and hopefully the project will be transferable to other higher education institutions in the future.

In regards to developing the policy recommendation, my main goal was to create a document that is easily disseminated and digestible, and I believe I succeeded. The reasoning behind my emphasis on digestible content is because I have attended too many oral presentations that were not beneficial because I was unable to retain the content being presented. The policy recommendation that I created permits my audience to review the project anywhere and anytime, and I think this freedom is very important.

Personal Reflections

When I began this doctoral journey, I was a part-time English professor teaching composition at three different institutions. Admittedly, fighting to retain students in my courses was not a priority because each one who left resulted in one less research paper to grade at the end of the term. I know that statement sounds harsh, but in my defense, I was teaching up to 10 composition courses per semester and many of those courses had 24 students. Because each course paid so little, I felt obligated to accept as many courses as I could to make a living. Fortunately, I realized that the life of an adjunct teaching that many courses was not one that I could maintain for very long, and I began pursuing my doctorate after 3 long years of grading composition essays. I chose to share the story of

who and where I was before entering a doctoral program because acknowledging where I was is the only way to show the change that has occurred in me.

As a part-time English instructor, I did not have the opportunities or time to be a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. One year after beginning a doctoral program, I was offered a position as director of professional advising and given the primary responsibility of retaining students. Fortunately, my institution also permitted me to continue teaching English in addition to my directorship duties. These positions gave me the opportunity to teach with the intent to retain students and feel partially responsible if one departs. This doctoral program has taught me what it takes to be a scholar, my institution has allowed me to practice what I have learned as a doctoral student, and I have developed my first project (Appendix A), which I hope to implement soon. The policy recommendation is a way for me to positively impact retention and graduation rates at my institution when, not long ago, retention was not a priority of mine.

Leadership and Change

As one of the youngest administrators at my institution, I feel a great responsibility to lead change on campus; however, I recognize that significant changes need to be inspired by data. Since the budget at my institution continues to dwindle, and student expectations and higher education's competitive environment continue to grow, I know that any future change proposal that I submit needs to be thoroughly researched prior to submission. Similar to many other institutions, my institution is not in a position to make detrimental financial decisions and most institutional changes come with a price.

Fortunately, I believe that this doctoral study has provided me with the knowledge to inspire change at my institution and hopefully others in the future.

Importance of the Work

Support services, first-year seminars, graduation rates, retention rates, and Tinto's (1975) theory do not represent subjects of original research. Undeniably, all of these subjects have been researched for many years, and I expect this popularity to continue. On the other hand, qualitative data that supports the belief that required support services in a student's first year result in more commitments to these services, as well as affect students' perceived potential to graduate, does represent a subject that lacks significant research. Thus, this body of work may begin to inspire institutions to consider more support service requirements for first-year students. As mentioned previously, the opportunity for me to learn that SEP's support service requirements frequently result in student commitments to optional support services in subsequent academic years was a pleasant surprise.

Implications, Applications, and Future Research

Because higher education graduation rates are not increasing (Mangan, 2013), and researchers have argued that rate of graduation is the most important percentage when measuring the quality of an institution (Lee et al., 2014), this doctoral study may increase the perceived quality of the study site. Considering the primary goal of the policy recommendation (Appendix A) is to increase overall graduation rates at the study site, if the recommendation is implemented and eventually deemed a success, then the institution's perceived quality should improve. Additionally, the policy

recommendation's secondary goal of increasing student commitments to support services could result in more support service positions for students and professionals at the study site.

Tinto's (1975) theory was evident throughout this doctoral study. Since Tinto (1975) argued that socialization is one of the most important factors in retaining higher education students, and the former SEP participants consistently shared their positive experiences in the social settings of tutoring, counseling, advising, and other support services, and many of these participants are near graduation, this doctoral study provides more support for Tinto's (1975) theory.

Future research on methods to increase higher education graduation rates, as well as the effects of required support services for first-year students is imperative. If more researchers discover that required support services positively impact graduation rates and more institutions decide to implement similar requirements for first-year students, many institutions without retention programs like SEP that already include required support services will have to establish support service offices that can handle increased traffic. Unfortunately, adding enough support service staff members to accommodate student requirements will be an intimidating task for many.

Conclusion

The final section of this doctoral study provided a reflection of the study's findings and descriptions of my personal growth as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. The findings of this study suggested that many former SEP students believe their commitment to optional support services has enhanced their potential to graduate.

Through analysis of interview transcriptions, themes were identified that inspired a project that recommended a policy to increase student exposure to support services through a revision to the study site's first-year seminar curriculum. This policy recommendation presents an opportunity to increase graduation rates through increased student commitments to support services at the research site.

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Appendix A: The Project

**Required Support Service Exposure for All First-Year Students**

A Policy Recommendation
By Seth R Hepner

Abstract

The first-year retention rate of the Structured Education Program (SEP) is 90%, yet the six-year graduation rate of SEP students is 29%.

Therefore, the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates was the problem addressed in the study that inspired this policy recommendation. The purpose of the inspiring study was to better understand the low graduation rates of SEP students. Based on the study results, this project's recommendation was to increase support service requirements for all first-year students with goals of increasing student commitments to support services and increasing graduation rates. The intended audience of this policy recommendation was the Director of the Academic Support Center, Director of Counseling Center, Director of First-Year Experience, and Dean of Academic Services.

Executive Summary

Higher education graduation rates in the United States are not increasing (Mangan, 2013), and there is an argument that rate of graduation is the most important percentage when measuring the quality of an institution (Lee, Sanford, & Jungmi, 2014). The institution that houses the audience of this policy recommendation has an overall graduation rate of 60% (“The Integrated”, n.d.).

The primary goal of this policy recommendation is to increase graduation rates, and the secondary goal is for more students to remain committed to optional support services. Requiring all first-year students, not just the underprepared ones, to participate in support services during their first semester could increase student commitments to support services, as well as increase graduation rates. This project’s recommendation is to increase all first-year students’ exposure to support services through requirements within the first-year seminar curriculum.

This recommendation and its goals were inspired by a doctoral research study of support service perceptions of former SEP students. The first-year retention rate of SEP students is 90%, yet the six-year graduation rate of SEP students is 29%. Therefore, the gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates was the problem addressed in the study. The purpose of this study was to improve the understanding of the significant gap between SEP first-year retention and graduation rates. With a focus on former SEP students’ commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years, this qualitative case study helped determine if pursuit of optional support services increases likelihood of graduation.

Note: This policy recommendation was formatted with the intent to be disseminated easily as a handout to its initial, intended audience that includes the Director of the Academic Support Center, Director of Counseling Center, Director of First-Year Experience, and Dean of Academic Services.

Structured Education Program

The Structured Education Program (SEP) is designed to retain incoming students whose math, reading, and English placement scores indicate a need for structured assistance. Sixty-four of the most underprepared students are placed into SEP annually, which is approximately seven percent of the institution’s average incoming class. Most students enrolled in the SEP have scored 18 or lower in math, reading, and English on the ACT. Cohorts of 16 students are assigned to the same math, English, and first-year seminar course (GE 110), and these students may be residential or commuters. The math and English courses are considered stretch courses that are two semesters in length, but the GE 110 seminar only lasts one semester. In addition to the three courses, each cohort has an assigned reading, writing, and math tutor. Students must attend 25 total tutoring sessions per semester: ten math, ten writing, and five reading.

All SEP students are also required to attend five counseling sessions with the institution’s professional counselors, meet with their academic advisor to complete a course sequence, as well as attend a research session with a librarian. Along with three assigned tutors, a math instructor, and seminar instructor, the English course is team taught by two English faculty members; therefore, with a professional counselor, academic advisor and librarian included, SEP students are required to collaborate with ten different supporters in their first semester at the institution.

All students assigned to the SEP are eligible to be selected for a summer study abroad trip to Rome. The SEP Summer Rome Experience is an all-expenses paid, two-week trip to Rome; in addition to the study abroad opportunity, the eight selected students receive free tuition for two general education courses. These courses begin in May, and they conclude when students return from Rome in late June. Therefore, the SEP Summer Rome Experience is an eight-week program with two weeks spent abroad. Candidates for the Rome experience are selected based on their performance in all of the SEP requirements. The instructors within the SEP begin the selection process by nominating students in their classes. The Director of the SEP makes the final selections.

The Problem & Purpose

Despite aggressive efforts from many of the United States' most powerful stakeholders, such as President Obama during his two terms as president, higher education graduation rates are not increasing (Mangan, 2013). In fact, only 54% of students who enrolled in a higher education institution in 2007 completed a certificate or degree six years later in 2013, which is the same percentage of the six-year graduation rate in 2012 (Mangan, 2013). With barely half of students graduating within six-years, there is understandable displeasure from higher education stakeholders (Watson, 2013); therefore, SEP's 29% graduation rate when compared to the program's 90% first-year retention rate and the nation's 54% six-year graduation rate is even more concerning. Lee, Sanford, and Jungmi (2014) argued that rate of graduation is the most important percentage when measuring the quality of an institution, and SEP's graduation rates could jeopardize the study site's future.

Prior to the doctoral research study that inspired this policy recommendation, it was unclear as to whether participation in optional support services in subsequent academic years had an effect on graduation rates of SEP students. Now that the study is complete, it is clear that failure to participate in optional, free support services after a student's first-year SEP requirements may decrease the likelihood of graduating.

The purpose of this doctoral research study was to better understand the low graduation rates of SEP students at the study site. While I explored former SEP students' support service experiences, many participants expressed a relationship between these services and their potential to graduate. Since most former SEP students who participated in the study suggested an optional commitment to support services in subsequent academic years, it is possible that more academically prepared, first-year students would commit to support services if they had required exposure to them in their first-year seminar, which could lead to increased overall graduation rates.

The Theory

Tinto's longitudinal theory of student departure was the conceptual framework utilized for the doctoral study as well as this policy recommendation. Tinto's (1975) theory was inspired by Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide, as well as educational economic models that focus on analyzing cost benefits of education activities. Durkheim (1951), considered a groundbreaking sociologist, discovered through an in-depth case study that social causes are linked to suicide. More specifically, he argued that lack of socialization with others increases the likelihood of suicide (Durkheim, 1951).

Based on analysis of Durkheim's theory, Tinto argued that due to the importance of socialization, a higher education institution's social system is, on a smaller scale, similar to society as a whole. Consequently, he suggested the social conditions affecting dropout rates are analogous to social conditions that result in suicide (Tinto, 1975). As for educational economic models, Tinto concluded that dropouts occur when a student "perceives that an alternative form of investment of time, energies, and resources will yield greater benefits, relative to costs, over time than will staying in college" (Tinto, 1975, p. 97-98). Tinto's student departure theory assisted in obtaining a better understanding of SEP students' experiences with required and optional support services, which resulted in this paper's recommendation.

Research Design

With a focus on former SEP students' commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years, the doctoral study used a qualitative case study to help determine if pursuit of optional support services increased likelihood of graduation. The study addressed four guiding research questions, which are listed below:

1. For former SEP students who do not continue pursuing support services that are optionally provided after their first-year, what value do these students place on support services?
2. For former SEP students who do not continue pursuing optional support services in subsequent academic years, what influences their lack of commitment to continue?
3. For former SEP students who continue to pursue support services after the required first-year SEP experiences, what influences their commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years?
4. For former SEP students who have obtained senior status and are therefore near graduation, what optional support services were they committed to after their required first-year experiences?

Only students who had completed the SEP in the previous five years were eligible to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Students were selected through homogeneous sampling, which is a type of purposeful sampling that selects individuals with similar attributes or experiences (Lodico et al., 2010). As noted by Lodico et al. (2010), "Purposeful sampling involves the selection of participants who have key knowledge or information related to the purpose of the study" (p. 34). All SEP students are similar because the retention program consists of the same support service requirements for all students.

Interviewee Background

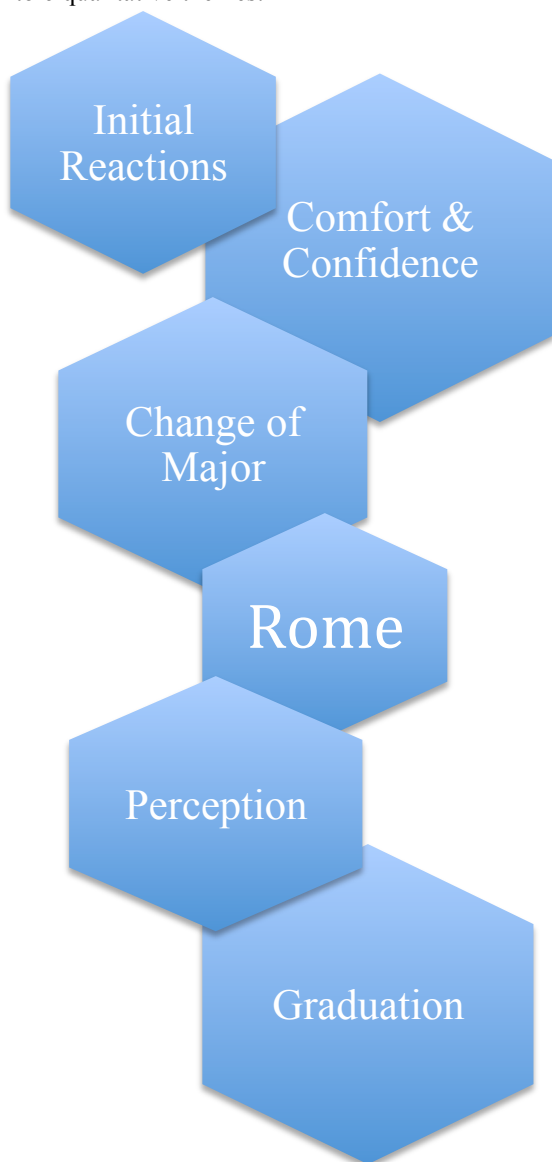
Once a list of former SEP students was obtained, I selected students whom I had not encountered during their enrollment at the institution. For example, as Director of Professional Advising and an instructor of English 111 and GE 110 within the SEP, I verified that none of the students selected for this study had been assigned to me as a student and/or advisee.

To obtain saturation, 12 former SEP students were selected to participate in the study, and at least 3 of the 12 participants had to have senior status in order to answer the study's fourth research question. All participants in this study were recruited through email, and no recruitment phone calls were made nor were any letters mailed. Each participant selected his or her own pseudonym which are displayed below along with GPA, status, and major.

~ John, 3.38, Senior, International Relations
 ~ Alice, 2.68, Senior, Early Childhood Education
 ~ Marie, 2.89, Junior, Corporate Communication
 ~ Pam, 3.44, Senior, Corporate Communication
 ~ Lisa, 3.47, Senior, Psychology
 ~ Michael, 2.84, Junior, Sociology
 ~ Jeff, 3.17, Sophomore, Pre-nursing
 ~ Sam, 2.72, Senior, Sociology
 ~ Myra, 3.31, Senior, Psychology
 ~ Jackie, 3.3, Senior, Corporate Communication
 ~ Abby, 3.58, Junior, Early Childhood Education
 ~ Jack, 2.26, Junior, Sociology

Results

Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed and manually coded. The codes were then collapsed into 6 qualitative themes.



Initial Reactions

The initial reactions to the amount of support services required by the SEP from many of the former SEP students interviewed for this study were not positive. All interviewees were asked: *What were your initial reactions to the amount of first-year support services required by the SEP?* 75% of the participants replied with a concerning response such as “overwhelming”, “intimidated”, “angry”, or “nervous.” In fact, one student used an even harsher adjective when describing his initial reaction to the amount of required support services.

Honestly, I thought it sucked because I came in as an athlete, so I had required practices and meetings, and lifting, and on top of that required counseling and tutoring – just extra stuff. So I was frustrated with it and not excited.
~ Sam

The most common initial reaction to the amount of support services required by the SEP was “overwhelming;” 42% of participants used that term.

I felt very overwhelmed because it was a lot of stuff to take in, especially during the first week of ever being in college. Obviously, everyone’s going to be overwhelmed when they first come to college, but it was a lot more because I talked to other students who weren’t in the program, and they said they didn’t have to do any of this, and I asked why don’t you have to do any of this and I do? ~ Alice

Comfort & Confidence

A student's comfort and confidence levels are part of his personal belief that he can be successful in a higher education institution. Unexpectedly, 83% of the interviewees described their comforts and/or confidences established through SEP's required support services.

I did enjoy group tutoring because I had one of my friends with me, so I felt more comfortable. I felt more comfortable admitting I don't get this, and that I was wrong about certain things. It was just an easier setting to work in. ~ Abby

I'm not really good with math, but I got by because I went to tutoring, and I did my homework with my tutor. I wasn't able to understand everything, but because of tutoring I was able to understand well enough to pass my math tests, and I think that if I hadn't went to tutoring I wouldn't have got those basic math concepts because with math just for getting the format right students get a half point, so every little bit helps. So being able to go to tutoring I was able to at least learn how to format my math problems so I could get those half points instead of getting zeroes.
~ Sam

Just the first time because I didn't know what to expect and I thought people would just kind of stare at me. I didn't want tutors to think I was dumb, and I didn't want any negative connotations against me.
~ Sam

Change of Major

Surprisingly, 75% percent of the participants in this study changed their major, and 33% of the participants entered the SEP in their first year with an undeclared major. Required counseling helped these students make decisions about their major.

Counseling really helped me decide my major. That was the most valuable part for me because I was undecided and I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I took a series of tests that led me to my major today, which really helped me because I don't know if I would have found it without doing all of those. ~ Marie

I went to counseling trying to figure out who I was, and what my likes and dislikes were. We did a personality test and different things like that. Also, we discussed what I liked when I was younger and what I enjoy now just to try to help lead me to a major. ~ Pam

It's interesting because when I first started as a freshman I was a science major, and I went through all of the courses and it was hectic and nuts and that's what I talked to my counselor about. I did not want to go to counseling at first because I had to schedule even more time out of my day, and I'm pretty sure every college students goes through feeling like there's no time in the day. So that was one thing that did hinder me, but when talking to the counselor it helped me change my major because I realized that I wanted to be a helping professional rather than strictly laboratory science.
~ Lisa

Rome

In the last twenty years, there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of American higher education students who study abroad (Richart, 2015). Consequently, 25% of the interviewees were selected to participate in SEP's Summer Rome Experience. Recent research has discovered that "students' interest in study abroad is highest in their freshman year and steadily wanes, particularly after their junior year" (Richart, 2015, p. 26).

When I found out I was a finalist for Rome it really changed how I felt about the SEP program because I didn't know I was going to be able to do that. And I was like, oh my God, I love the SEP program because none of my other friends get to do this but me. This is so cool. So in that moment I was like I love this program; it's so great I got to go to Rome for free. ~ Alice

I was really determined to get that chance to go to Rome, and I didn't think I had a big chance. I was actually surprised that I got into it. That was probably the best experience of my life. ~ Abby

I did like the idea of the Rome experience because I think that's what pushed me even more to actually try to be noticeable and try to work harder than I usually would. Not saying I don't work hard, but I just wanted it so bad because there was something to work towards, so I thought that helped me a lot. And, with taking all of these extra SEP classes, I was scared that I wasn't going to graduate on time, and that made me nervous because I don't want to spend an extra semester here if I don't have to, so going to Rome and taking classes there helped me a lot. That's why I'm able to graduate in four years now. So I liked that there was something at the end of the tunnel that I could reach toward. ~ Lisa

Perception

Colver and Fry (2016) discovered that access to a structured tutoring program, like SEP's, correlates positively with higher levels of academic achievement for students. All interviewees were asked: *Toward the end of your freshman year, did your feelings about support services change? If so, how?* 83% interviewees reported improvements to their perception about support services.

I thought the SEP program was a positive because I know if it weren't for it I probably wouldn't be here. ~ Sam

I know my perception changed because I used to be really hesitant to sign up for tutoring. ~ Jackie

Now I just walk in to the tutoring center loud and proud, and I don't even care because I know I need help and I need to pass my classes. And, I continued counseling because my life is so stressful because of everything that I have to do. ~ Lisa

My perceptions about support services changed, but definitely for the better. I was way more – I love school now, but I was way more excited about it because of the support that I have here. I probably wouldn't have made it anywhere else, like at a bigger university or anywhere without the amount of support that I had. It's definitely changed my life. ~ Marie

Like I said before about tutors, I saw that they helped me understand concepts a bit more. Where counseling, I think it was a helpful tool to teach me that not everything is going to be the same and sometimes I have to adapt. Overall, it was a good experience because it showed me that the same situation is not always going to apply, so I have to at least be open to other things and ideas. ~ Jack

Graduation

Seven seniors participated in this study, and four of them answered affirmatively when asked if they believe continuing to pursue support services after their first-year SEP requirements improved their chances to graduate. Admirably, 86% percent of these seniors continued at least one support service after their first year, and four of them continued counseling and tutoring. The seniors were asked: *Do you believe that continuing to pursue support services after your first-year have improved your chances to graduate?*

Yes, I needed the services and they really helped me. They made me more successful. I've been on Dean's list ever since freshman year, and that's one of the goals I have until I graduate.
~ Abby

Yeah, I think so. If it wasn't for improving my writings and readings and the math tutoring, I would've been failed out. I'm not really good with math, but I got by because I went to math tutoring.
~ Sam

Just because coming from one culture to another I already was at a disadvantage because I didn't understand things. I was nervous and I'm a first generation college student in my family on both sides, so I had a lot of pressure on me. I was nervous that I was not going to be able to finish because I didn't know what to expect or have any help along the way, especially right now that I'm applying to grad schools. I would never have thought that I would apply to a grad school because when I applied to undergrad, no one helped me and I didn't know how the process even started. So having the SEP program did help me a lot because I kind of just fixated and set stepping stones for me, and I just walked on the stones myself because I was able to have that structure, so I think it helped a lot. ~ Lisa

Interpretation of the Findings

The interview data were clearly related to the research problem and the research questions. Throughout the data collection process, many participants explained how required exposure to support services in their first year resulted in positive effects that greatly influenced each one's journey toward graduation. Even though only 83% of the participants remained committed to at least one support service, 100% of the participants clearly found value in at least one support service; therefore, none of the participants described the support services to be completely insignificant.

The commitment to support services that 83% of the study's participants maintained may be a reason why each one is progressing toward graduation. Tinto's (1975) argument that a union between academic and social systems in higher education will result in more student commitment and lead to higher graduation rates directly connects to these former SEP students' commitment to support services, as well as their progress toward graduation. Based on Tinto's (1975) student departure theory and its influence from Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide, which argued that lack of socialization with others increases the likelihood of suicide, it is reasonable to conclude that one of the reasons these former SEP students are still progressing toward graduation is their commitment to support services and the social aspects within them.

The findings refuted my initial assumption that most former SEP students would not remain committed to optional support services in subsequent academic years. This initial assumption resulted in the first two research questions emphasizing students who do not remain committed to support services; therefore, the majority of the findings do not offer insight as to why former SEP students discontinue pursuing support services in subsequent academic years. On the other hand, the findings did provide clear connections to the other two research questions. Many of the participants disclosed that their commitment to support services was influenced by the comfort and/or confidence established through the services, and 57% of the senior participants believe their commitment to support services improved their chances to graduate.

Description

Based upon the findings of the doctoral study and the institution's six-year graduation rate of 60% and four-year graduation rate of 37% ("The Integrated", n.d.), I am proposing that all first-year students should have required exposure to support services, not just the underprepared ones. Since all first-year students are required to enroll in a first-year seminar, my recommendation is to increase all first-year students' exposure to support services through a policy included in the institution's first-year seminar curriculum.

The primary goal of this recommendation is to increase graduation rates. Since the majority (83%) of this study's participants described a commitment to optional support services in subsequent academic years, which may be one reason why all of them are progressing toward graduation, there is support to the beliefs that required first-year exposure to support services increases the likelihood that a student will remain committed to support services when they become optional and commitment to support services increases the likelihood of graduation. Consequently, the secondary goal of this recommendation is for more students to remain committed to optional support services. Requiring all first-year students, not just the underprepared ones, to participate in support services during their first semester could increase student commitments to support services in subsequent academic years, as well as increase graduation rates.

Recommendation

Current GE 100 Syllabus:

COURSE GRADES AND GRADING

You will receive a letter grade for this course along with one credit toward graduation with a successful passing grade. While you may always check with the instructor, you are strongly encouraged to monitor your own progress in this course. The following assignments are to be turned in according to the course schedule at the end of the syllabus. Each assignment will be discussed as the class progresses.

Attendance

Class Attendance = **20 points**

Develop Strategies for College Success

Campus Clarity = **5 points**

C.S.I. Conference & Action Plan = **10 points**

Library Orientation Activity = **10 points**

Course Sequence = **10 points**

Career Center "My Plan" = **10 points**

Diversity Activity Reflection = **10 points**

Freshman Common Reader

Reading Series = **5 points**

Class Lead Discussion = **10 points**

First Year Institute Convocation = **10 points**

Total Course Points = 100 points

Recommended Revision to GE 100 Syllabus

- Eliminate attendance section and add 20 points to the second section.

Develop Strategies for College Success

Campus Clarity = **5 points**

C.S.I. Conference & Action Plan = **10 points**

Library Orientation Activity = **10 points**

Course Sequence = **10 points**

Career Center "My Plan" = **10 points**

Diversity Activity Reflection = **10 points**

Two Counseling Sessions = **10 points (5 each)**

Two Tutoring Sessions = **10 points (5 each)**

- Students will be required to submit one tutoring and one counseling receipt prior to midterms, and the others before final examinations.

Review of Literature Related to Content

For more than three decades first-year seminars have provided students experiencing similar transitions with an assigned space to interact with each other through the guidance of a caring faculty member (Latino & Unite, 2012), and these seminars have provided students with opportunities to grow satisfied or dissatisfied with their major and career paths (Milsom & Coughlin, 2015). Typically, first-year seminars inform new students about the support services available on campus (Latino & Unite, 2012). Unfortunately, Yan and Sendall (2016) identified students who confirmed that information regarding support services was mentioned to them, but that information was not enough to educate students how to use the available resources. Similarly, Ciscell et al. (2016) discovered that thorough advertising of support services at a liberal arts university, comparable to this project's study site, was not enough because students at the institution still described a lack of knowledge about the services offered. Talbert (2012) argued, "Frequently minority students are unaware of such programs available to increase their skills and lack knowledge of qualifications" (p. 27). It has also been suggested that predominately white institutions can be more successful retaining African Americans through specific retention efforts (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

Furthermore, honors students who tend to be "perfectionists and overachievers" can benefit from happiness oriented activities such as counseling (Rockey, 2015, p. 210), and Martin (2015) discovered that outstanding undergraduates, such as honors students, are already extremely active in curricular and extracurricular activities. On the other hand, it has been argued that many gifted students are not motivated to be high achieving academically, but a supportive academic environment helps increase student motivation (Siegle, DaVia, & Mitchell, 2014). Supplementing first-year seminars through required support service experiences would alleviate students' lack of knowledge of available services, increase motivation, and may increase retention and graduation rates.

Existing Resources

Additional resources within pre-existing institutional offices will be needed to initiate this recommendation. Fortunately, no additional support service offices will be needed because the institution already has an Academic Support Center, Counseling Center, Career Service Center, Library, and Professional Advising Office. The current first-year seminar curriculum requires all first-year students to attend appointments in Career Services, Professional Advising, and the Library; however, only the underprepared SEP students are required to attend counseling and tutoring sessions.

Potential Barriers

A potential barrier to this recommendation is staffing within the Academic Support Center and Counseling Center. Since the SEP only represents approximately 20% of the study site's typical incoming class, more counselors and tutors may need to be hired to accommodate a significant increase in demand. Fortunately, the Professional Advising Office has the template for the amount of hours needed to meet with all first-year students for three 30-minute sessions in the first semester. Because counseling sessions are also 30 minutes, and the new policy only requires all new students to attend two counseling sessions as opposed to three advising sessions, a plan should be manageable. As for increased tutoring demand, group tutoring sessions will help decrease the amount of new tutors needed.

Implementation

In order to implement this policy as soon as possible, multiple stakeholders will need to be involved. The institution's strict calendar hinders the amount of possible initiation dates, and the earliest term this policy could be implemented is fall 2018. First-year seminars are only offered in fall semesters, departmental budget proposals are always due on February 1, and new budget cycles begin on July 1. Thus, the Academic Support Center and Counseling Center will need to complete budget proposals that include additional staffing to accommodate more first-year student sessions by February 1, 2018. If new tutors and/or counselors are needed, then they will need to be hired and trained before August 27th, 2018. I will need to work with the Director of First-Year Experience to complete the revision of the first-year seminar syllabus before August 1, 2018 because first-year seminar training sessions are held for new instructors in early August.

Local Implications

Local social change resulting from this study could include more student commitments to optional support services, which may result in increased retention and graduation rates. More commitments to support services and increased graduation rates would strengthen student satisfaction levels and likely lead to more referrals to potential students. Since higher education stakeholders commonly argue that rate of graduation is the most important percentage when measuring the quality of an institution (Lee et al., 2014), increasing graduation rates would enhance the perceived quality of this institution. Also, increased student commitments to support services such as counseling and tutoring would provide more job opportunities within those departments. Fortunately, these jobs would be available to students as peer tutors and local professionals as counselors.

Far-reaching Implications

Far-reaching social change resulting from this study could include a generalizable retention strategy. If this study's project evaluation procedures discover increased student commitments to optional support services, as well as increased four-year and/or six-year graduation rates, then student satisfaction levels will rise; therefore, other higher education institutions may be inspired to implement required support service exposure into their first-year seminars. Since first-year seminars are one of the most commonly used retention strategies in today's higher education institutions, modifying these common courses is a possibility for many. An increase in satisfied, higher education graduates may further encourage high school students to continue their education.

Evaluation

Specific stakeholders will be asked to review and evaluate the policy recommendation: Director of the Academic Support Center, Director of the Counseling Center, Director of First-Year Experience, and Dean of Academic Services. These four stakeholders will be distributed evaluation sheets and the evaluations will be completed anonymously. This type of formative evaluation should provide honest and expeditious feedback that will be considered prior to sharing it with other stakeholders within the institution's community.

Formative Evaluation

1. Does the policy recommendation provide enough logical information to deem implementation of this project justifiable? Why or why not.
2. Does the policy recommendation provide a clear recommendation that is realistically implementable? Why or why not?
3. What recommendations do you have to improve this policy recommendation?

Once changes to the first-seminar are implemented, summative evaluations will be used to determine if increases are occurring. If the changes are implemented in fall 2018, the first evaluation period will be the summer of 2019. At this time, the Academic Support Center and Counseling Center will be able to compare their first-year student spring 2019 appointments to spring 2018 appointments. If more first-year students participated in counseling and/or tutoring sessions in spring 2019 than spring 2018, then it is possible that optional student commitments have been established. The amount of appointments in fall 2018 will obviously be significantly more than fall 2017 because first-year student appointments will be required in fall 2018. Appointments in both centers can be analyzed at the conclusion of every semester beginning in May 2019. The four-year graduation rate can be evaluated in May 2022 and the six-year graduation rate in May 2024. The project will be considered a success if in May 2024 the institution's six-year graduation rate is more than the current one of 60%, and/or the four-year graduation rate is more than the current 37% in May 2022 ("The Integrated", n.d.).

Conclusion

In order to increase the institution's graduation rates, I am recommending an increase in all first-year students' exposure to support services through requirements within the first-year seminar curriculum. Based on data accumulated from a doctoral research study of support service perceptions of former SEP students, there is reason to believe that increased student commitments to support services will increase graduation rates. These commitments can begin to be established while fulfilling requirements during students' first semester.

Local social change resulting from this policy recommendation could include more student commitments to optional support services, which may result in increased retention and graduation rates. More commitments to support services and increased graduation rates would strengthen student satisfaction levels and likely lead to more referrals to potential students. Increased graduation rates may enhance the perceived quality of this institution.

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Appendix B: Confidentiality Agreement

Name of Signer: Seth R. Hepner

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: “Optional Support Services and Graduation Rates of Structured Education Program Students” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I’m officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Title of Study: *Higher Education Support Services and Graduation Rates of Structured Education Program Students*

Date:

Time of Interview:

Start time:

End time:

Interviewer: Seth Hepner

Interviewee: (actual name and pseudonym for the study)

Undergraduate Status:

Location of Interview:

Interview Script and Notes:

“Hello and Welcome: Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview about the Structured Education Program’s support services. I appreciate and respect the time that you have donated to this research study, and I will ensure that this interview lasts no longer than 45 minutes. I hope that you find this voluntary experience valuable.”

Informed Consent Check:

“Did you bring the Informed Consent Form I sent you?”

If so, make sure it is signed.

If not, be sure to have extra copies available for the participant to read and sign.

Make a photocopy of the signed Informed Consent Form to give to the participant.

“I want you to be aware that this study will not reveal your identity. Details that might identify you, such as the location of the study, also will not be shared. I will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Data will be kept secure by a password protected hard drive and a pseudonym will be used when referring to you. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.”

“Do you have any questions for me about the study, or information contained on the Informed Consent Form?”

Ground Rules:

“Okay, thank you for consenting to participate in this study. Please speak for yourself and your own perspectives, in other words please avoid speaking for other SEP students. I know it has been a while since you were enrolled in the SEP; therefore, it is fine to declare that you are unable to answer any of my questions because you can’t remember. We have a need to respect the privacy of others, so there’s no need to disclose specific names of any individual, including other SEP students or support service employees. Do you have any questions?”

Purpose / Tone Set:

The purpose of this study is to better understand the low graduation rates of SEP students. The interview is designed to help you describe and share your SEP experiences and perspectives with me. I invite you to feel free to relate your experiences in a conversational tone because the more details that you can provide the richer the interview will be. Since the interview is audio recorded and you will have the opportunity to review the transcription prior to publication, you don’t need to worry that I will miss anything you have said or inaccurately report any of your answers. During the interview, I may ask questions that seek clarification of something that you previously said.

“Do you have any questions before we begin?”

Interview Questions:

1. *What were your initial reactions to the amount of first-year support services required by the SEP?*
2. *What were your most valuable and least valuable required first-year SEP writing tutor experiences?*
3. *What were your most valuable and least valuable required first-year SEP reading tutor experiences?*

4. *What were your most valuable and least valuable required first-year SEP math tutor experiences?*
5. *What were your most valuable and least valuable required first-year SEP advising experiences?*
6. *What were your most valuable and least valuable required first-year SEP counseling experiences?*
7. *What were your most valuable and least valuable required first-year SEP library experiences?*
8. *Toward the end of your freshman year, did your feelings about support services change? If so, how?*
9. *What suggestions do you have to improve SEP's required support services?*
10. *After completing the required first-year SEP support service experiences, what support services did you continue using in subsequent academic years?*
11. *If student continued to optionally pursue any support services in subsequent academic years, What are some reasons why you continued using support services? If student discontinued to optionally pursue any support services in subsequent academic years, What are some reasons why you discontinued using support services?*
12. *For students who are near graduation and continued to pursue support services optionally, Do you believe that continuing to pursue support services after your first-year have improved your chances to graduate? If so, Please explain. If not, Please explain.*

Notes:

"In conclusion, I would like to thank you again for participating in this study and sharing your experiences with me. Without student participation, I would not be able to fulfill my dream of completing my doctoral degree. I want to assure you again that your responses will be kept confidential. If needed, I would like to request your permission to contact you for follow up information. Also, I will email you a typed transcription of this interview within a week. I would like to ask you to read the transcript to see that I have correctly recorded our conversation. Thank you again for your participation. I will contact you by email soon.