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Personal Connections of First-Year College Students

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Personal Connections of First-Year College Students

by

Jaclyn Kopel

MSEd, Walden University, 2012

BA, Pace University, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

April 2018

Abstract

A private, not-for-profit, 4-year urban university had been struggling to improve its 1st-year retention rate despite conducting previous studies and implementing various initiatives. This study explored the influence that students' personal connections to the study site had on their experience in their 1st year in college. Tinto's student integration models of attrition, Astin's theory on student involvement, and Berger and Milem's model of persistence served as the conceptual framework. A case study design was employed to examine faculty and staff members' beliefs on how the university established and maintained connections with its students and how faculty, staff, and students viewed 1st-year initiatives and retention in relation to personal connection. Individual interviews were conducted with 3 faculty members, 3 staff members, and 15 2nd-year students. The resulting data were coded both manually and using Microsoft OneNote and were analyzed for emerging themes. Some of the results that emerged from the study included that the study site had a difficult time establishing a connection with its students, 1st-year initiatives had mixed results, students stayed at the study site because of a personal connection, and urban institutions have a difficult time establishing a connection with students. These results shed light on a new area on which the university can focus its retention and 1st-year experience efforts. A white paper was written to offer possible solutions to administrators, including changes to the dormitories and a redesign of the 1st-year seminar course. Improvements to 1st-year retention will help promote positive social change by enabling more students to stay in college and graduate on time, which in turn enhances job opportunities and the potential for higher wages.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this to my Mom who has been there for me every step of this journey from the first day of kindergarten to the late nights trying to complete this study. She has supported me through every academic crisis and moment of overwhelming stress. She taught me to take schoolwork one step at a time. She has been my biggest cheerleader and has made sure the moments of uncertainty and feeling like I was going to quit were short lived. Since I started school she has challenged me to constantly excel and always set the bar higher and higher, so I could work harder to reach it. While I hated that mentality while growing up, I have since learned to appreciate what she did for me. I never would have considered pursuing a doctorate without the constant push she gave me to excel. Words cannot adequately describe how much she has done for me and how much she means to me.

I would also like to dedicate this to every teacher who believed in me and shaped me into who I am today both as a student and an educator. In particular, Abby, Grady, Liz S., Joel, Elisabeth, Bill, Gayla, Dr. Brock, and Prof. Medow. It was those personal connections that made me want to enter the field of education and inspire others. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this to my students. They have been my constant source of motivation and inspiration. Their messages of encouragement throughout this process have been crucial for me. Their support has meant the world to me and I hope that the results of this study will help to improve their educational experience.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my committee members for their patience and guidance on this study. Their advice has been invaluable. I am extremely appreciative of Dr. Underwood's rigorous edits as it has made me a better writer and scholar. The skills I have learned from her will have a lasting impact on the work I do as a student and an educator. Also, a huge thanks to her for being my IRB champion. Dr. Parent's coaching during our weekly phone calls helped to make sure this study started smoothly and was well thought out. I could not have completed this study without the two of them and for that I am eternally thankful. Dr. Fowler's outside perspective helped to make sure I was keeping all my readers in mind.

I want to thank my family, my real one and my work one. I could not have survived this without their constant support. They listened to me complain, propped me up when I was discouraged, constantly helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel, made me laugh, and covered for me when I needed time off to do school work. The constant stream of advice about life from Bill and about research from Pam was just what I needed, regardless of whether or not I actually took said advice. So thank you to my Mom, Dad, grandparents, my "daughter" Chloe, Bill, Jess, Pam, Devina, Maddie, Mohini, Carolyn, Rachel, Kyla, Nelli, Holly, Lindita, Jen, Wanda, Sean, Luis, Danielo, Roberto, and Nickie. Thank you to Remzi for your unwavering support of my education and achievements. I cannot wait for you to start calling me Dr. Kiddo. Thank you to Jonathan for reminding me not to let anyone or anything get me down and to Olga for helping me learn how to think outside the box.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

In 2015, 17.3 million students enrolled in undergraduate programs in the United

States, a 31% increase in just 5 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014,

2015). While the number of students enrolling in college in the nation was on the rise, so

was the rate of students transferring from one institution to another, which was estimated

at between 30%–50% (O'Keeffe, 2013; Staklis, Bersudskaya, & Horn, 2011). More than

half of these students transferred prior to their second year (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012).

The increase in the number of students transferring or dropping out (Barefoot, 2004) and

the less than satisfactory national first-year retention rate of 64%, which is the lowest in

the industrialized world (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; O'Keeffe, 2013),

is partly due to the fact that some students are unable to form a personal connection to

their institution (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Personal connection

to an institution is defined "as college students' subjective sense of 'fit' within the

university and the perception they are personally accepted, respected, included, and

supported by others" (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 2). This can be seen through a connection

between students at the same institution; between students and employees (i.e., staff,

faculty, administrators) of the institution; or between students and an aspect of the

institution such as a club, class, or organization.

At the local level, a private, not-for-profit, 4-year urban university that served as

the study site has been struggling to improve its first-year retention rate, which has a 19-

year average of 75%, lower than the recent average for its peer group of institutions

(determined by SAT range and geographic location) of 86% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2015). While the study site's first-year retention rate is above the national average of 64%, since 1997 it has shown little improvement with this rate despite numerous first-year initiatives. During the last 3 years (2014–2016), the local site has consistently maintained a first-year retention rate above 76%, which is the first instance of 3 consecutive years above 76% since 2003. While this is a small improvement, it is not enough for the institution to reach its 2020 goal of 79%. Nor is it enough to catch up with their peer group, most of whom have made double digit improvements in the last two decades (DePaul University, 2015). Additionally, according to the faculty advisor of the Honors College and vice president of enrollment management, early projections of the most recent retention rate are showing a slight decline. Therefore, the gap in practice that I addressed in this study was the lack of improvement in the retention rate.

A study conducted by the local site in 2014 included retention and graduation data from over two decades for the institution and its peer institutions, an analysis as to why students leave the institution, and retention initiatives. The results of this study indicated that there were several possible reasons for the lower than desired first-year retention rate, including academic, social, and financial problems. I studied one of these issues that permeates the academic and social problems associated with retention, the lack of personal connection between first-year students and the institution. The lack of personal connection can be found across the study site as advisors are overworked and cannot give personal attention to all of their advisees; the student-to-advisor ratio is 123:1. A thesis completed in 2010 at the study site found advising issues such as students not knowing

who their advisors were and a limited scope in the advising process. Some students have reported feeling disconnected from their advisor and the institution. The prevalent use of adjuncts over full-time faculty has led to an adjunct/full-time faculty ratio of 820:471, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics, meaning students are about twice as likely to be taught by an adjunct having limited affiliation with the institution as by a full-time faculty member. According to several adjuncts, this limited affiliation is due more to the adjuncts' lack of office hours and space, inability to serve as advisors for research and other activities that occur outside of the classroom because of their contracts, than due to their commitment to the institution or the students.

Students in the Honors College and another special program, known as the Potential Program (PP), within the university are less likely to experience the previously mentioned issues because they have their own advisors and faculty who work closely with their program and provide individualized attention, as is true at many other institutions as well (Alger, 2015; Nichols & Chang, 2013). Forming a relationship with an advisor and/or professor is important because having a bond with one or more individuals who represent the institution is more likely to encourage students to feel connected to their institution (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Tinto, 2015; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Given the relationship between retention and connection (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomane, 2002; Tinto, 1998), as well as numerous factors that could result in a lack of personal connection between students and their institution, I decided to further explore students' connections to the institution,

especially during their first year, in an attempt to shed light on possible means to improve the first-year retention rate.

Rationale

Inasmuch as the first-year retention rate is stagnant, it is consistently one of the areas of the university that administrators, faculty, and staff work to improve. Offices such as the Center for Academic Excellence and the Office of Student Success spearhead these efforts with their implementation of various first-year initiatives, committees, trainings, and a newsletter. The first-year initiatives that have been implemented or revised since 2010 mainly focus on financial literacy, creation of student 4-year plans, tutoring, early alert systems, and first-generation student support. These initiatives were created to address some of the factors that the university has found to influence retention, such as financial concerns (i.e., unmet financial need and poor financial literacy), low grade point averages (GPAs), low SAT scores, and special needs of first-generation and minority students. Another area that the committee on retention found leads to poor persistence can be classified as social issues, which include the inability to form a connection at the university or the struggle of an individual to find their fit in the university's community.

The study site's Carnegie Classification is that of a large university. However, the staff and faculty of the site tell prospective families and students that it has all the benefits of a large university but provides a small college feel. Parts of a small college experience usually include a small student-to-faculty ratio, a small student-to-advisor ratio, a small student population, and a sense of community because the small class size

allows for relationships to occur and grow (O'Shaughnessy, 2010). As someone who has

been familiar with this university for over a decade, I have not found that all students get

to experience this sense of a small college community. Students who are not in one of the

university's two special programs often do not receive the benefits of the small college

feel because they are one of several thousand as opposed to one of a few hundred. These

students are usually referred to as the "general students" or "mainstream students" at the

university. The university's two special programs are the Honors College and the PP.

These programs are for students on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of admissions

criteria, so the very top students in terms of GPAs and SAT scores are admitted into the

Honors College and the students with GPAs and SAT scores slightly below the general

admissions criteria are admitted into the PP.

While the students may not share similar academic characteristics, the programs

share similar structures with special advisors, exclusive classes, a small community,

special events, and separate orientations. According to the former associate provost for

Academic Affairs, director of PP, the faculty advisor of the Honors College, and the vice

president of Enrollment Management, staff and faculty consistently comment that the

students who are in the Honors College or PP receive personalized attention and are more

able to form connections than the students in the middle, which is also why the building

of community is featured heavily in the 2015–2020 strategic plan. Stakeholders of the

university know there is a problem in significantly raising the first-year retention rate and

know there is an issue in recreating the Honors and PP community for the general

students and yet there have been few attempts to see if the matters are related and to

merge efforts to address both. It is because of this issue that I wanted to examine personal connection in relation to the university's stagnant retention rate. The purpose of this study was to explore the influence that students' personal connections to the study site had on their first-year experience.

Definition of Terms

First-year experience: The combination of institution-specific programs and initiatives targeted towards first-year students to assist them with their academic and/or social transition from high school to college (Barefoot, 2000; Jamelske, 2009).

First-year initiatives: Programs and activities created and implemented by an institution to help students adjust to the academic and/or social demands of college (Ishitani, 2016; Jackson, Stableton, & Laanan, 2013). These initiatives may include, but are not limited to, mentoring, tutoring, orientation, a first-year seminar course, learning communities, and common readers (Hunter, 2006; Ishitani, 2016).

First-year retention rate: The percentage of full-time undergraduate students who persist from the first to the second year of college (Fike & Fike, 2008).

Personal connection: In terms of higher education, it is the students' feeling that they have a positive and genuine relationship with either other students at the same institution; employees (i.e., staff, faculty, administrators) at the institution; and/or aspects of the institution such as a club, class, organization, department, or college (Wilson et al., 2016).

Sense of belonging: A personal involvement in the institutional community so that the students feel like they fit in and are a part of the community (Hoffman et al., 2002; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013)

Student engagement: The level of involvement that a student demonstrates towards something, which in higher education is usually a class, assignment, and/or activity (Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Kahu, 2013).

Significance of the Study

In this study, I addressed the problem at the local site of the difficulty in raising the retention rate, which was possibly characterized by the lack of personal connection between the students and the institution. Degree completion has been shown to lower an individual's risk of unemployment by 15%−25% depending on age, and increases a person's potential wages by an average of 62% (Kena et al., 2015, pp. 42, 47). In this study, I focused on the personal connections formed within the first year of study and the role first-year initiatives played in forming that connection. Personal connection was explored in regards to first-year retention, which is an underresearched aspect of first-year retention (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012) when compared to topics such as financial aid (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Ross et al., 2012; Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2015); race (Thomas, Wolters, Horn, & Kennedy, 2014; Wells, 2008); and ethnicity (Wells, 2008), and their influence on retention (Letkiewicz et al., 2014; Morrison, 2012).

Another reason personal connection is underresearched is that it is often used interchangeably with student engagement, but they are not the same (Kahu, 2013). As Kahu (2013) indicated, there is a problem defining student engagement because the term

often overlaps with other concepts; thus, researchers define it differently. In this study, I used the more traditional and narrow definition of student engagement, which is the level of involvement that a student demonstrates towards something (Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Kahu, 2013). This is opposed to the definition of personal connection, which is about the relationship with someone or something (see University of Minnesota, 2016).

The results of the study shed light on a new area on which administrators at the local site can focus their retention and first-year experience efforts. This may include revisiting current first-year initiatives that could be made more effective in terms of improving personal connection and/or retention. The results also indicated possible ways to reach the students at the study site who do not belong to either of the two special programs on campus so that they feel that they have a personalized experience. Therefore, a project in the form of a white paper with policy recommendations focusing on these areas that needed to be addressed within the study site was most appropriate. The project might help to address the gap in practice by leading to an improvement in retention (see Barefoot, 2004; Tinto, 2006), which creates a positive social change in that students will be more likely to stay at the study site and graduate within a typical period of time (i.e., 4 or 5 years). Additional benefits for the study site could be an improvement in reputation (see Barefoot, 2004; Jobe & Lenio, 2014), a decrease in the financial losses that occur when students leave the institution (see O'Keefe, 2013), and result in more alumni donations as personal connections are strengthened (see Schreiner & Nelson, 2013).

Research Questions

The study site's lack of improvement in its retention rate has been attributed to many causes including academic, financial, and social factors. The academic and financial causes have been addressed numerous times by the institution through various first-year initiatives, and yet the retention rate remains unchanged. The social causes have not been thoroughly explored, one of which is a lack of personal connection between students and the institution. As the purpose of the study was to explore students' personal connections to the local site during their first year, the research questions I developed focused on how the institution, through its employees, establishes and maintains a connection with its students, whether that is accomplished through first-year initiatives, and the potential influence of that connection.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. According to faculty and staff, how does the study site initially establish and maintain personal connections with its students during their first-year experience?

2. According to faculty, staff, and students, what influences do the current first-year initiatives have on students' personal connection to their institution?

3. According to faculty, staff, and students, what influences do students' personal connections to their institution have on their first-year experience and subsequent retention?

Review of the Literature

I conducted the search for literature using two primary libraries, Walden University's online library and both the in-person and online library of the study site. The databases used at these libraries included SAGE Journals, Education Source, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Education Research Complete through EBSCO. In addition to using databases, I used Google Scholar extensively and Google Scholar alerts were set up so new articles that would potentially be of interest would be e-mailed to me. The Google Scholar alerts were set up for the following queries: *retention and higher education and belonging*, *retention and higher education*, and *retention, higher education,* and *connection*. Other e-mail alerts were set up for the *Journal of College Student Retention*, which is the only journal dedicated to student retention (Aljohani, 2016), and SAGE publications for the search term *retention*. Additionally, when I noticed that certain journals (i.e., the *College Student Journal*, *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, and the *Journal of College Student Retention*) kept recurring in my search results, I would visit the website of that particular journal and search directly. The search terms used in my searches of the databases, on Google Scholar, and on the journals' websites included: *attrition, fit, first-year experience, mentoring, persistence, personal connection, retention, sense of belonging, student engagement, student faculty relationships, student satisfaction,* and *transfer,* all with the Boolean operator of AND *higher education*.

Early retention research focused on undergraduate student characteristics and their effect on student persistence (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). However, more

recently, researchers are moving away from student characteristics; instead, they are focusing on the experience(s) the students have once they officially become a student at their institution. This is because institutions cannot change or significantly influence the characteristics of their incoming students without changing their admissions policies, but they can easily focus their efforts on changing their students' experiences upon tuition deposit, which is more practical and was addressed by me in this study. In the conceptual framework subsection I will focus on the foundation of retention research, especially in connection to student experience and connection, while in the Review of the Broader Problem subsection I will focus on the students' financial situation, emotional state, sense of belonging, institutional experience, and experience with technology at the institution, within the context of first-year retention.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was composed of Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory on retention, Astin's (1975, 1984) theory on student involvement, and Berger and Milem's (1999) model of persistence. Tinto's (1975) theory on retention has served as the baseline for numerous retention studies (e.g., Aljohani, 2016; Ishitani, 2016; Jobe & Lenio, 2014). The work was significant (Aljohani, 2016) as it was the first to examine long-term student interactions and was the first to differentiate between "academic failure" or being dismissed from an institution and "voluntary withdrawal" (Tinto, 1975, p. 89). Tinto's (1975) study focused on the latter issue, students who elect to leave their institution of their own volition, and on the influence of student interactions in connection with retention. Tinto's (1975) retention theory was based on Durkheim's (1961) theory of

suicide concerning how less-integrated individuals in society are more likely to commit suicide. Tinto (1975) applied this idea to retention by examining student integration in higher education.

Tinto (1975, 1993) found that the student's background characteristics and goals along with the characteristics of the institution help determine how well the student will integrate into the institution both academically and socially. The level of integration will then determine the likelihood of the student persisting; the higher the level of integration, the more likely the student will persist and vice versa (Tinto, 1975). Integration occurs through positive interactions and experiences in the academic and social realms and through the congruency of students' beliefs, values, and expectations of their academic and social experience and the reality of their experience at the institution (Tinto, 1975). While Tinto (1975) realized that the relationship between the students and their institution influences retention through how well each student fits the institution, the theory of retention focused mainly on students' perceptions of fit and integration.

Astin (1975, 1984), on the other hand, focused on student involvement and retention and examined student behaviors as opposed to perceptions. Astin (1984) defined student involvement "as the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518), and this involvement could be in the academic and/or social realms. Astin (1975) noticed that all the factors that led to student persistence were connected to student involvement, which included: living on campus; participating in extracurricular activities; being part of an honors program, athletics, Greek life, and student government; having a job on campus; and conducting

research with faculty. While all of these factors have student involvement in common, they also all resulted in increased student connection to the faculty or their peers. Lastly, Astin (1975) found that it was easier for students to be involved on campus when they felt like there was a *fit* between them and the institution.

Berger and Milem (1999) combined certain aspects of Tinto's (1975, 1993) and Astin's (1975, 1984) theories by including both perceptions and behaviors of student integration and involvement and their influence on student persistence. Unlike both Tinto and Astin, they focused on first-year retention. Berger and Milem found that early student involvement in the fall led to spring involvement, which positively affected academic and social integration; this led to positive perceptions of institutional support and commitment, and in turn, improved persistence. They found that the opposite was true for those students who were not involved in the fall; these students tended to stay uninvolved and thus felt less integrated with the institution and less supported, which increased the chances that they would not persist. Overall, the authors found both student involvement and student perceptions of integration to be important to persistence and that these characteristics were linked together. They realized first-year retention is a yearlong process and cycle where "behaviors and perceptions modify each other" and that Astin's theory helps add on to that of Tinto's (Berger & Milem, 1999, p. 660). Additionally, they found that the students who are most likely to be retained by the institution are those who have the most in common with the prominent values and beliefs of those who make up the institution.

All three of these models have been used to examine the affiliation between the student and the institution either through involvement, relationship(s) with others on campus, interactive experiences, or the idea of fit. The authors have all found that the stronger the students' ties to their institution, the more likely they are to persist. However, all the authors' models allude to the idea of students' personal connection to their institution, but they never explicitly state it. Thus, these models contain the necessary elements in which to ground my study on personal connection and first-year retention.

Review of the Broader Problem

The term *personal connection* was not explicitly used in the literature in regards to a lack of personal connection being a problem that contributes to first-year attrition. However, as with the conceptual framework, personal connection, or in this case, a lack of personal connection, was alluded to throughout the various retention studies. Financial concerns, emotional issues, social issues, not fitting in, lack of faculty interaction, inadequate advising, were just some of the problems that appeared in the retention literature. What almost all of these concerns have in common is a lack of personal attention or connection, some of which are caused by institutional factors, the institution's employees, and others are due to factors related to the students themselves.

Financial issues. The students' experiences with their institution start from the moment they submit their tuition deposit and last until the moment they leave. Upon submitting their deposit to the institution, they are agreeing to pay the tuition, fees, and, if applicable, dormitory expenses laid out for them in their bill, which often also means they are accepting most, if not all, the financial aid offered to them through the government

and the institution via merit or other scholarships. This is one of the first points in the students' experiences at the institution that can affect persistence (Witkow et al., 2015). Many first generation, low income, and immigrant families are not financially literate when it comes to paying for college due to their lack of previous experience with the financial aid process and can find the process confusing and overwhelming (Witkow et al., 2015).

The lack of financial literacy in terms of college aid has the potential to affect the amount of money students will receive in their first and subsequent years and the amount of loans they will accrue (Witkow et al., 2015). The amount of debt accumulated from college loans and/or credit cards used to pay for college expenses becomes a financial stress on the family and the student, which has been shown to cause students to either transfer to a less expensive school or drop out completely (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Letkiewicz et al., 2014). Some families expect the student to help cover the cost of tuition by working either part time or full time. While this may ease the financial burden of the student and family, it can help contribute to the chance that the student will not persist (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Morrison, 2012; Wilson et al., 2016; Witkow et al., 2015). Working off-campus often detaches the student from the campus, lowering the chances of integration (O'Keeffe, 2013), and the time commitment can detract from students' studies and extracurricular activities. Lastly, Bonet and Walters (2016) discovered, through a quantitative survey of 267 urban community college students, that these financial concerns and stresses often were not addressed by the institution through any type of counseling service.

Emotional issues.

Homesickness and ecological tethering. In addition to financial stress, which

many new college students are having to deal with for the first time, they are also moving

away from home for what is usually the first time. This could lead to homesickness,

which Thurber and Walton (2012) defined as, "the distress or impairment caused by an

actual or anticipated separation from home" (p. 1). Homesickness can wear on students

and cause them not to completely integrate into their new environment (English, Davis,

Wei, & Gross, 2016; O'Keeffe, 2013) or make them want to go to an institution closer to

their home (Mattern, Wyatt, & Shaw, 2013). Homesickness has been shown to increase

the chance that a student will not persist (Delgado-Guerrero, Cherniack, & Gloria, 2014;

Gallop & Bastien, 2016; O'Keeffe, 2013; Thurber & Walton, 2012).

Ecological tethering is similar to homesickness in that the student wants to be

back at a certain place (Wilson et al., 2016), but unlike homesickness, this does not

specifically have to be the student's home. It could be a student's city, former school, or

another place that holds importance to the student. The desire to be back at this place can

cause students to leave campus frequently to visit said place, which removes them from

the campus experience and increases the likelihood they will not persist, or, like

homesickness, can cause them to want to transfer to another institution to be closer to this

place (Wilson et al., 2016). Wilson et al. (2016) conducted a study of 367 Appalachian

undergraduates from two universities in Kentucky. One of the results they found was that

students, by removing themselves from campus multiple times each semester, either due

to homesickness or ecological tethering, negatively affected their GPAs. Some studies of

both community college and 4-year institutions have shown that college academic performance, as measured by a student's GPA, predicted whether or not a student was retained; a lower GPA meant that students were more likely to leave their institution (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2007; Hoyt, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pruett & Absher, 2015). Wilson et al.'s studies on homesickness and ecological tethering found that leaving campus had numerous negative effects on the students in relation to retention; students reported feeling less connected to the university, felt more isolated, and their GPAs decreased.

 Stress and burnout. Suddenly being away from home and thrown into adulthood can be tumultuous for students. They have to think about money; school; extracurricular activities; roommates; a job; making friends; how to take care of themselves (i.e., cook, clean, and handle laundry); and how to advocate for themselves. They experience numerous changes at once, which can be overwhelming. It is no wonder that college freshmen reported feeling stressed (Kelly, LaVergne, Boone Jr., & Boone, 2012; Letkiewicz et al., 2014; O'Keeffe, 2013; Pruett & Absher, 2015) and overwhelmed (Pruett & Absher, 2015). Additionally, in an effort to start preparing their students for the real world, many institutions start discussing selecting a major, choosing a career, and internships in the first year, which adds to students' stress as they start to feel pressured to make decisions about their future (Mullen, 2016). All of these various factors can cause the students to become stressed. Through a survey of 280 undergraduate students, Kelly et al. (2012) found that over half of the students indicated they were stressed, which the researchers believed was one of the factors that affected retention. Morrow and

Ackermann (2012) conducted a survey of 156 first-year students and found those who chose not to set goals, especially for their career, had less intention of staying at their institution. According to a survey of 280 undergraduate students, Kelly et al. found that over half of the participants believed that the inability to handle stress and school-related burnout would cause students to leave their institution.

  Mental health. The increased levels of stress and anxiety can be debilitating for a student. This, coupled with feelings of homesickness, could lead to depression, which the National Institute of Mental Health (2015) defined as a medical condition that can have both physical and emotional symptoms such as hopelessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, headaches, and more. It is no wonder that the number of undergraduate students suffering from depression is on the rise (Young, 2016), and according to the 2013 National College Health Assessment, about a third of American students have "had difficulty functioning…due to depression and almost half said they felt overwhelming anxiety in the last year" (Novotney, 2014, p. 36). Additionally, many students arrive on campus with preexisting mental health issues (Field, 2016) such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, depression, and bipolar disorder. College stress, the opportunity to not be monitored by parents in terms of the intake of medication, and being in close quarters with others suffering from mental health disorders can negatively affect students including their mental health (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993; Joiner & Katz, 1999; Rosenquist, Fowler, & Christakis, 2011). Students facing various forms of discrimination on campus either for their gender, race (Jackson, Yoo, Guevarra, & Harrington, 2012; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013; Witkow et al., 2015),

ethnicity (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013; Villegas-Gold & Yoo, 2014; Witkow et al., 2015), or sexual preferences (Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim, & Matney, 2014; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012; Woodford, Krentzman, & Grattis, 2012) also reported decreased mental and, at times, physical health.

Being stressed, having a mental health disorder, not taking medication, being around others with mental health disorders, and facing discrimination could be some of the reasons why college students have reported feeling helpless (Gallop & Bastien, 2016) and are struggling with low self-esteem (Cortes, Mostert, & Els, 2014) and their identities (Kahu, 2013). Thus, it is not surprising that college counseling centers are being stretched too thin and many cannot handle the demand (Field, 2016; Novotney, 2014). Without emotional support and counseling (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014), mental health problems can lead students to transfer or drop out of school (Novotney, 2014; O'Keeffe, 2013) either to seek help, be closer to home, or to see if another school will have a different effect on their health.

Social issues and the sense of belonging. The hurdles students face in their social lives and how they navigate them will help determine how well they adjust to the college (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005), sense of fit (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014), personal connection to the institution (O'Keefe, 2013), and their sense of belonging (O'Keefe, 2013). A sense of belonging is defined as personal involvement in the institutional community so that the students feel like they fit in and are a part of the community (Hoffman et al., 2002; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013). Retention research is often divided into two realms, academic and social. The social

realm often receives less attention despite the attrition risks that occur. Too much attention is spent on academic preparedness and not enough time is spent on noncognitive factors like support and sense of belonging (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012), which are tied to personal connection. As 65% of students left their institution for nonacademic reasons (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012), it is important to look at the social realm, especially when students left their institution even though they had high GPAs (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

College could be a completely new social environment for students. They are suddenly thrown together with hundreds, if not thousands, of students from all around the world whom they have never met before. They go from a familiar environment of their high school community to an unfamiliar environment of college. They could be with students who do not share their views on the world and they could be with others from cultures and backgrounds they have not interacted with before. They could face discrimination for who they are or what they believe. They could also feel that they are not represented on campus in terms of there being other students or employees who share their culture, views, ethnicity, race, religion, etc. Additionally, many students face the reality of the analogy of going from being a big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a large pond or, in some cases, an ocean.

Peers. Like most adolescents and young adults, college students worry about fitting into their new social environment (Gallop & Bastien, 2016) and desire close relationships with their peers (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014). However, several studies both at the community college and 4-year college level reported that students often

complained that they felt they did not belong (O'Keeffe, 2013), did not fit in (O'Keeffe, 2013), were unhappy with their social life (Kelly et al., 2012), or had no connection to their peers (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Kelly et al., 2012). Many went as far as to say they felt like an outsider (Kahu, 2013) or were in isolation (Kelly et al., 2012). Additionally, students not in learning communities, which are paired classes around a certain theme, indicated that they had very little connection with their peers and often did not attend campus social events (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016). Without a feeling of connection or a sense of belonging these students either indicated that they were more likely to leave their institution or they actually transferred to another one (Aljohani, 2016; Bers & Schuetz, 2014, Kahu, 2013; Kelly et al., 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013).

Racial and ethnic minority students. The feelings of not fitting in or being an outsider seem to be intensified for racial and ethnic minority students. Numerous studies labeled racial and ethnic minority students as at risk of transferring during the first year (Ishitani, 2016; Thomas et al., 2014; Witkow et al., 2015). While some may argue that this is due to the circumstances they experience before entering college that set them up for struggling academically (Schreiner & Nelson, 2013) or not adjusting to college life (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Witkow et al., 2015), many studies reported it is their social experiences at their institution that contributed to the students leaving (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2014; Witkow et al., 2015). This is due to the fact that many college campus climates are not considered diverse (O'Keeffe, 2013).

The typical college campus and climate have remained traditional (Jobe & Lenio, 2014) in the types of students catered to and the events and experiences that occur. So,

while the students are changing, the climate is not (Jobe & Lenio, 2014). Delgado-Guerrero et al. (2014) conducted an online survey of 159 women of color enrolled in primarily White institutions across six states and found that these students reported they struggled to fit in, there was a lack of a support network for them, and a lack of minority role models. Schreiner and Nelson (2013) surveyed 30,000 students from 61 different 4-year schools using a student satisfaction inventory and found that minority students did not feel welcomed by their peers. Thus, it is not surprising that in Thomas et al.'s (2014) study of 139 participants at a large urban institution, African American students stated they had only neutral feelings in terms of their sense of belonging and relationships at their institution.

      Commuter students. Students who do not live on campus are consistently shown to have issues when it comes to their sense of belonging on campus. This is due to the fact that commuting limits their time on campus, the social events they can attend, especially on nights and weekends, and limits the opportunity to bond with their peers (Bonet & Walters, 2016) because much of that happens in the residential halls. Additionally, students who commute have a more difficult time making connections with faculty (Bonet & Walters, 2016), seeking out faculty for help and completing work (Ishitani, 2016). As Cotton and Wilson (2006) stated, this is often due to the time constraints of commuting. The nontraditional commuter students who are adult students or veterans indicated that they had a more difficult time fitting in and felt like they did not belong (Kahu, 2013). Commuter students reported lower levels of integration with the campus community (Ishitani, 2016) and have been shown to have lower engagement

levels (Letkiewicz et al., 2014). Berger and Milem (1999) found, through a longitudinal study of 661 students who persisted, that students who were not integrated into campus perceived the institution to be less supportive, which had a statistically significant negative effect on their persistence. Additionally, they found that some students who did not fit in with their peers turned to faculty for help in order to find a connection to their institution.

Institutional experience.

Faculty relationships. A student's relationship with a faculty member is consistently listed as one of the most important relationships a student can have on campus, especially in terms of retention (Kahu, 2013; Kelly et al., 2012; Micari & Pazos, 2012). However, there is a gap in what the researchers espoused and what is actually happening (Nalbone et al., 2015). Numerous studies found that the students believed significant relationships between faculty and students were lacking (Micari & Pazos, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013; Turner & Thompson, 2014). This could be due to many of the problems plaguing institutions such as large class sizes (O'Keeffe, 2013), poor student to faculty ratios (O'Keeffe, 2013), lack of a diverse faculty that is reflective of the changing student demographic (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2014), or expecting student and campus engagement from faculty who are not, themselves, engaged (Jackson et al., 2013), which is often due to being burdened with tenure requirements or already having tenure. Research, teaching, and publication are usually emphasized in the tenure process, which leaves little room for faculty to bond with students or even see the importance of doing so (Micari & Pazos, 2012).

There are also several roadblocks that help inhibit relationships from forming between faculty and students. International students, depending on the country and culture they come from, may find it rude to approach a faculty member (O'Keeffe, 2013). Asian students, in particular, are raised to respect teachers, and to speak with them would be to challenge their authority (Chen, 2006; Liu, 2001). Racial and ethnic minority students have reported having difficulty connecting with Caucasian faculty members (Thomas et al., 2014). Relationships take time to build (Jackson et al., 2013), but for today's students who are used to instant gratification, this is too slow for them (Turner & Thompson, 2014), especially when they need to decide whether or not to start applying to other institutions before either their second semester or sophomore year.

Additionally, the generation gap between faculty and students has made it difficult for faculty to understand what students want (Jackson et al., 2013; Nalbone et al., 2015; Turner & Thompson, 2014) and has caused students to set unrealistic expectations of faculty (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Millennial students, defined as those born between 1982 and 2002, are used to "helicopter parents" who are constantly there for them and high school teachers who care for them during homeroom, advisory sessions, or after school, which is not how typical faculty act or what they do (Turner & Thompson, 2014, p. 94). Millennials are also used to constant feedback and frequent praise due to their "helicopter parents" (Turner & Thompson, 2014, p. 94) and the instant gratification from comments and likes on social media. The experience with feedback in college is different from what they are used to, as feedback is not instantaneous, and

some students have reported being upset over negative feedback (Gallop & Bastien, 2016).

      Technology in the classroom. Millennials are the technology generation; they have grown up with computers, social media, and numerous portable electronic devices (Nalbone et al., 2015; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Despite the fact that the students constantly use technology, professors often fail to use it in their classrooms (Lin, Hoffman, & Borengasser, 2013; Nalbone et al., 2015). Faculty can consider technology an interference with learning and students paying attention (Cao, Ajjan, & Hong, 2013; Lin et al., 2013; Powers, Alhussain, Averbeck, & Warner, 2012). However, they need to realize the traditional college classroom experience of professors lecturing to their classes no longer works for a generation who have short attention spans (Greenwood, 2012) and prefer to work collaboratively (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Nalbone et al. (2015) conducted a longitudinal study in which they found technology affected students' engagement, and Pruett and Absher (2015), who used national engagement survey data for community colleges, found the level of in-class engagement had the biggest influence on retention.

      Distance learning students. While faculty may not be encouraging technology use within their classrooms (Lin, Hoffman, & Borengasser, 2013; Nalbone et al., 2015), many schools are promoting online classes and degrees. Online courses help ease the burden for non-traditional or working students who may not have a lot of time to devote to being on campus. However, there is a downside to not being on campus. The less time students spend on campus, the more likely they are to feel disconnected from the

institution (O'Keeffe, 2013). Suddenly, e-mails and other electronic forms of

communication replace face-to-face contact with peers and faculty, which again limits the

personal connection students feel with their institution (O'Keeffe, 2013). As with in-

person classes, students crave personalized and individual interactions with their peers

and faculty (Hoskins, 2012), in particular faculty feedback (Noble & Russell, 2013), but

often do not receive them (Hoskins, 2012). Additionally, like in-person classes, the

quality of the interactions the students have with faculty helps predict their success or

lack of success when it comes to their online class (Hoskins, 2012). Lastly, instructors in

online classes have a more difficult time creating the social networking among peers that

is needed for learning to take place (Cadima, Ojeda, & Monguet, 2012). Based on a

survey of 294 university students, student interaction and engagement in an online course

were both shown to influence student success and satisfaction (Hoskins, 2012).

Additionally, student satisfaction in the online course was found to be a contributing

factor in whether or not a student was retained (Hoskins, 2012). This is just one example

of how personal connection and engagement has a ripple effect that leads to influencing

retention.

  Inadequate advising. Advising is a key component of a student's educational

experience. Advising is supposed to consist of advice on which classes to take, discussion

of the students' academic goals, the best route to graduation, life after graduation, and

more (National Academic Advising Association, 2003). However, that does not seem to

be happening at many institutions (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Turner & Thompson, 2014;

Williamson, Goosen, & Gonzalez Jr., 2014). Students have indicated dissatisfaction with

their advisors and the advising they receive. They have cited problems such as long waits and confusing policies (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). Additionally, generic and brief advising (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Williamson et al., 2014) inhibits students from forming a connection to their advisor. Many of these problems are due to too many students being assigned to each advisor (Williamson et al., 2014), which makes personal and individualized advising almost impossible. Students want to be clearly told what they need to do (Gallop & Bastien, 2016) because, as Bers and Schuetz (2014) pointed out, one mistake has the potential to affect graduation. If students fall behind or perceive they are falling behind, they may transfer to another institution where it might be easier to graduate or they may leave altogether (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

Millennials are considered achievers (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Many of them want to immediately think about their future. They see themselves as adults and want to know about possible careers and want guidance in this area (Williamson et al., 2014). However, they are often not receiving career advice or guidance from their advisors (Cortes et al., 2014). Additionally, students felt that they should be given advising about their financial situation, and first generation students wanted advising that was targeted more to their specific needs (Williamson et al., 2014). Instead, the advising the students often receive is just limited to classes and scheduling (Williamson et al., 2014). "Academic advising is the only structured activity on the campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-to-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution" (Habley, 2010, slide 2), thus it is important how this time is spent, as the

quality of the advising has the potential to influence student success and retention (Shelton, 2003; Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013).

Conclusion

There are numerous reasons why students may leave their institution either by transferring or dropping out. While early retention literature focused on student characteristics and their relationship to persistence, just as important is the experience students have once they submit a tuition deposit to their institution. They may experience financial hardships, which could stem from a lack of financial literacy and counseling. They might also struggle with emotional issues from stress, burnout, or mental health conditions. A new social situation might have them interacting with peers that are very different from them, or due to commuting, they might find themselves disengaged with the campus, all of which could influence their sense of belonging. Lastly, their institutional experiences with faculty in and out of the classroom and with their advisors may not be personal and/or engaging, and may not be what today's millennial students want or expect from their college experience. Any one of these factors can cause students to leave their institution; combined they indicate a lack of personal connection, and explain the current first-year retention problem facing institutions of higher education.

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Implications

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I anticipate that the faculty, staff, and students will indicate that there are few opportunities for personal connection to be established and maintained between the institution and the students. They will probably indicate that one of the few first-year initiatives that allows for a personal connection to occur and helps improve retention is

the first-year seminar course. Additionally, there has recently been more discussion of the need for professional development in regard to the first-year experience. Various concerns may emerge from the interviews that might indicate that the university needs to change some of their first-year policies and a white paper might be written to address those needs. The data from the interviews may indicate that both an extended first-year seminar and professional development are needed and these initiatives can be outlined in a white paper.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

First-year retention has become a problem in the United States as the number of students transferring after their first year continues to increase. The study site, a large urban private university, is reflective of this issue as it struggles to increase the first-year retention rate. There are numerous potential problems that could influence first-year persistence such as financial, emotional, social, and academic reasons, as well as student characteristics. However, students' connections in both the social and academic realms are not given much attention, in particular how these connections influence students' relationship with their institution. More time needs to be spent studying how the institution creates and maintains a connection with its students and what role, if any, first-year initiatives have in that process.

In Section 1, the problem of the study, which was the study site's struggle to increase its first-year retention rate, was reviewed. The rationale and significance were explained, which included evidence from the study site as to why the problem needs to be addressed and why college completion is important. Terms relating to first-year retention

and personal connection were defined. Research questions revolving around personal connection and first-year initiatives were proposed. A literature review was conducted on the problem and some early implications for a potential project were outlined.

Section 2 focuses on the methodology for the study. This includes the use of a qualitative case study research design. Participant selection and protection will be outlined. The data collection process and the subsequent analysis will be thoroughly addressed.

Section 3 addresses the project. The project will be based on the data collected in Section 2 and the literature reviewed in Section 3. A rationale will be provided for the project. Also included will be the description of the project and its evaluation plan. Lastly, the implications of the project will be explored.

In Section 4, the strengths and limitations of the project from Section 3 will be examined. Possible alternative approaches will be discussed. How the study influenced me as a leader, scholar, practitioner, and project developer will be addressed. Reflections on the importance of the study will be included. Lastly, implications and areas for possible future study will also be explored.

Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

I chose the qualitative research approach because it aligned with my study as it was conducted in a natural setting; the researcher collected the data; and it involved the participants' perspectives (see Creswell, 2014). The research for my study was conducted at the local site, which was the natural setting for the situation. I collected the data through interviews with faculty, staff, and students involved in the first-year experience at the local site, which provided me with their perspectives on the problem and the information rich data I needed to address the research questions. These data and their subsequent analysis helped shed light on the current retention situation.

I chose a case study as the qualitative research design because it is used when a researcher "endeavors to discover meaning, to investigate processes, and to gain insight into and in-depth understanding of an individual, group, or situation" (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010, p. 156). I wanted to gain understanding of why the study site was having a difficult time improving its first-year retention rate. A case study allowed me to focus on the specific problem and view it from multiple perspectives such as those of faculty, staff, and students. Use of case studies also helps to focus on a specific instance of a broader issue (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). In this case, the broader issue was retention, but only the study site's first-year retention was examined. A case study is employed in a bounded situation (Merriam, 2009); in this study the boundaries were the first-year experiences and retention of full-time traditional students (i.e., not transfer students, international students, adult students, or veterans) on the primary campus.

I determined a case study to be the best fit, in terms of qualitative designs, for the purpose and research questions of this study. Some other qualitative designs include narrative research, grounded theory, and ethnography (Creswell, 2007). Narrative research was ruled out because it focuses on exploring the lives of people and sharing their stories (see Creswell, 2007). I was not concerned with the lives of the participants in this study and instead only focused on 1 year of their life (for the student participants) or their specific work with the first-year student population (for faculty and staff). The purpose of grounded theory research is to develop a theory (Creswell, 2007). I was not creating a theory in this study because I wanted to learn about the perceptions of the participants on retention, personal connection, and the first-year experience; therefore, grounded theory was not an appropriate design. Lastly, in ethnographic studies a shared culture among a group is examined and the researcher primarily uses observations and fieldwork (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). In this study, I did not focus on a shared culture of all the participants. Thus, a case study, which focuses on one particular situation at one particular place and time, was the most fitting for this study.

Participants

Selection Criteria

The research questions for this study addressed the perspectives of faculty, staff, and students in regard to first-year retention, personal connection, and first-year initiatives. Thus, the three primary groups of participants for the study were faculty, staff, and students. In terms of the faculty and staff, I used homogenous purposeful sampling. Creswell (2012) stated, "In homogenous sampling the researcher purposefully samples

individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics"

(p. 208). In this case, the faculty and staff needed to either have worked, or were

currently working, with the first-year student population so their responses could help

inform the study. The faculty and staff participants needed to have worked for the study

site for a minimum of 3 years, so they could discuss their thoughts on why the first-year

retention rate has remained stagnant over the last decade. The subgroup for homogeneous

sampling was comprised of faculty and staff who had worked for the study site for a

minimum of 3 years and had worked with the first-year student population.

The research questions required the student participants to reflect on their first-

year experience. This meant they needed to have completed an entire first year, which

eliminated current first-year students as potential participants. This left the participant

pool open to sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Juniors and seniors may not have had the

strongest recollection of the specific feelings, thoughts, and events they experienced

during their first year. Their answers might have lacked detail and would not have

provided the most "information-rich" data for the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 77), so I

focused on sophomore students in this study. The sophomore pool of participants was

narrowed even further to exclude those who were under 18, transfer students,

international students, veterans, and adult students. The participants needed to be 18 or

older so that the protection of minors through parental consent in addition to participant

assent was not required for the study. As most sophomores are 19 or older this did not

greatly limit the pool of student participants. Transfer students, international students,

veterans, and adult students were excluded from the study because their retention

concerns are very different than those of traditional first-year students inasmuch as they have different expectations of their experience and have different needs (Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Kahu, 2013). Additionally, transfer students most likely did not experience a full year at the study site.

The data needed to be representative of the study site and the possible different experiences students have depending on their school and the program for which they were a part. Therefore, I wanted to recruit three participants from each of the three major schools on the primary campus: business, humanities, and computer science. I also wanted three participants who were in PP and three who were in the Honors College to see if there was a difference between the first-year experiences and personal connection that these students had and the experience of the students in general. The sampling method that I used to achieve this mix among student participants was purposeful stratified sampling. The principle behind purposeful stratified sampling is that it "illustrates subgroups and facilitates comparisons" (Creswell, 2007, p. 127) and it is used to "capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis. Each of the strata constitute a fairly homogeneous sample" (Patton, 2002, p. 240). The different strata were each school or program.

In this study, I interviewed three faculty members and three staff members. Fifteen students were interviewed; three of whom were part of PP (they are only in PP for their first year) and three of whom who were part of the Honors College. These six students were either humanities, business, or computer science students. The remaining nine students consisted of three from each of the three schools being studied. The total

number of participants was 21. While Creswell (2007) stated that the number of participants should be small in a case study, such as four or five, I wanted to collect data from different groups of people at the study site, so I felt I needed to have more than just four or five participants in order to identify themes from the three groups and be able to compare information across the groups and within them. Additionally, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that 12 interviews were needed to obtain data saturation in a homogenous sample, and because my sample contained several subgroups, more than 12 interviews would be needed to reach saturation.

Gaining Access to Participants

In order to gain access to the participants, I needed approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of Walden University and the study site. After I received approval from the study site (Approval Number 17-62) and Walden University (Approval Number 04-26-17-0201362), I contacted the potential participants. Given that three different groups of participants were studied—faculty, staff, and students—different methods for gaining access to the participants needed to be employed. To gain access to the faculty and staff participants, I e-mailed members of the First-Year Seminar Committee and other members of the faculty and staff that I knew consistently worked with first-year students. In the e-mail (see Appendix B), I briefly explained the study and the expectations of the faculty and staff if they were to participate. This included the length of the interview, which was about an hour long with the option of a second interview for 30 minutes if needed. I also indicated in the e-mail that their identities would not be revealed and they would be referred to by their category and a number (i.e., Faculty

Member 1 and Staff Member 1). My contact information was provided if they wanted to

learn more and/or participate in the study. Additionally, as per the study site's policy, the

e-mail contained the IRB approval information. I followed up with those who contacted

me and selected those who offered the greatest depth of information based on the criteria

previously mentioned.

To gain access to the student participants, I e-mailed 15 instructors who taught

first-year seminar courses last year to see if they were willing to send e-mails to students

listed on their class roster on my behalf. Having the students receive the e-mail from their

former instructor increased the likelihood that the e-mail would be read. If I would have

sent the e-mail, the students might not know me and with an unknown Walden e-mail

address, the e-mail might have gone into their spam folder and never be read. I also gave

the instructors the option of sending me their rosters and I would contact the students

myself. However, that was not the preferred option. Additionally, because I wanted three

participants from PP, three from Honors, and an additional three from each of the major

schools, I asked instructors who taught these specific sections of the first-year seminar

course to e-mail their section for me.

My e-mail to students (see Appendix B) included a description of the study, the

expectations of the students if they were to participate (i.e., sitting down on campus for

one 45–60 minute interview), that the interview would be completely confidential, that

they may choose to leave the study at any time, and my contact information if they

wanted to learn more and/or participate in the study. The e-mail also included the IRB

approval information. From the replies received, I randomly selected participants from each school and program based on the previously mentioned criteria for my study.

Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

One of the most important steps in the data collection process occurred before the data were collected. This step was clearly defining my role as the researcher during the study (Lodico et al., 2010). As I knew the faculty, staff, and some of the student participants, it was important that I was clear that there was a separation between the study and our interactions that normally occurred at the study site. The participants needed to see me as the researcher and not as a colleague or a staff member. To do this, I explained the relationship with them at the beginning of the interview, so they knew what to expect.

The prospective participants received an informed consent form from me outlining the study, confidentiality, data protection, risks and benefits of participating, and that they could withdraw at any time with no repercussions. They later received a copy of the signed consent form so they could refer to it if they had any questions. I made clear to them that not only would their names not be revealed in the published data, but what they told me during the interviews would not be repeated outside of the context of the study. Additionally, I indicated that nothing they said during the interviews would have any bearing on our relationship outside of the interviews. The goal was to "build trust and rapport with [the] participants" so that they would be more willing to communicate their thoughts and feelings (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 162).

Protection of Participants' Rights

I gave each participant a consent form at the beginning of the study before any data were collected that described the study, the participants' rights during the study, the steps taken to protect their identity, and that the study was voluntary. The student participants remained completely anonymous to all but me and were only referred to by the name of their school or program. The faculty and staff also remained anonymous and were only identified by their participant type. Additionally, the participants were told they would be able to see a copy of the transcript and my notes in order for them to make any changes and to double check that all identifiers were removed.

The consent form also indicated that the data would be stored securely on my home computer in a password-protected file. The participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, on the form I specified any potential risks and benefits they could experience from participating in the study. The risk was minimal and included slight discomfort from being interviewed. Participants were able to stop, pause, or refuse to answer a question at any time during the interview. According to Creswell (2012), providing the purpose of the study, ensuring confidentiality, and allowing the participants to review the data through member checking meets the requirements of ethical protection of participants.

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Data Collection

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Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined data as "the rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying" (p. 117). In this qualitative study, it was the

experiences, thoughts, and perspectives as expressed through the words of the

participants at the study site that helped provide insight and answers to the research

questions. The data collected from the participants informed and grounded the study.

Creswell (2007, 2012) viewed data collection as a cycle with every step interrelated, all

leading up to the goal of answering the research questions. The steps in Creswell's (2007)

cycle include "locating the site or an individual, gaining access and developing rapport,

sampling purposefully, collecting data, recording information, exploring field issues, and

storing data" (p. 117). Some of these steps were previously discussed, but collecting data,

recording information, and storing data will be further explored.

Interviews

According to Creswell (2007) there are four types of qualitative forms of data:

observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials, all of which could be

used in case studies, as stated by Yin (2003). Observations were not chosen because they

would not provide the data needed to answer the research questions, even if the student

participants were observed for the span of their first year at the study site. As the research

questions were on personal connection it would be very difficult to determine

relationships and connections from documents or audiovisual materials because pictures

or videos could be deceiving. Only interviews would allow for the participants'

perceptions and experiences of the first year, retention, personal connections, and first-

year initiatives to be conveyed in their own words. As Merriam (2009) stated,

"interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people

interpret the world around them" (p. 88). Additionally, interviews allow for multiple perspectives to be heard and analyzed (Stake, 1995).

The type of interview method chosen was one-on-one open-ended semistructured interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted to ensure that confidentiality was protected. Additionally, participants were more likely to be candid if they felt no one was judging them, and it was a more personal experience for the participant. The interview questions were open-ended so that the participants could freely express their thoughts and opinions (Creswell, 2012). The responses needed to be authentic and not constrained to fit the question or the options presented. Open-ended questions allowed for rich and thick descriptions to be given, which are the best kind of qualitative data to use. The interview was semistructured, which means I had a small list of predetermined questions that I generated (Appendix C), but I decided which of the questions to ask, when I asked them, and I added questions as necessary based on how the interview was proceeding (Merriam, 2009). Interviews could be unpredictable so there was no way to know ahead of time how they would go, so a semistructured format allowed for flexibility during the interview (Merriam, 2009), permitted probative questions to be asked, and allowed the participants' stories to dictate the direction of the interview.

In order to keep organized, I used an interview protocol (Appendix C). The protocol contained a place to record the date and time of the interview, length of the interview, the location of the interview, background information on the participant, and listed the prepared questions. The protocol also indicated if this was the first or second interview with the participant. The interview protocol not only allowed me to stay

organized, but it ensured that the same basic information was collected for all the participants (see Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the protocol gave me a place to record my notes during the interviews and reminded me of instructions I needed to give the participants (see Creswell, 2007, 2012) in terms of explaining the study and reviewing the consent form.

I audio-taped the interviews to ensure that the participants' exact words were recorded (see Merriam, 2009) and the inflections in the participants' tones could be noted. An audio tape as opposed to video recording was used as it was less intrusive for the participants (see Merriam, 2009), especially those who were camera-shy (see Creswell, 2012). I obtained the participants' consent to being recorded prior to starting the interview. As tape recorders can malfunction (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), I also took notes on the interview protocol sheet, which allowed me to remember information that I found important, my reactions to certain statements (see Merriam, 2009), and any nonverbal behaviors I noticed.

The interviews were conducted at a time that was most convenient for the participants. This might have been during the staff and faculty members' lunch breaks or before or after work. In terms of the student participants, interviews were conducted between their classes when they had breaks for eating or studying. The location for the interviews was wherever the participants felt most comfortable and felt there was a sense of privacy. If they did not have a preference or suggest a place to meet, then a private study room on campus was offered as a possible location, but they were free to choose a different location.

As mentioned previously, once IRB approval was obtained from both the study site and Walden University, I e-mailed faculty and staff who met the selection criteria (Appendix B) inviting them to participate in the study. I chose three faculty members and three staff members from the groups of respondents. I also contacted faculty who taught first-year seminar courses in the previous year to e-mail their classes so I could secure student participants. The student participants needed to have met the criteria previously outlined. I chose the first 15 students who volunteered and met the selection criteria. I contacted the participants to give them more information about the study and scheduled the interviews.

Keeping Track of Data

Yin (2008) stated it is important to create an organization system to keep track of the data collected. I made use of three different organization systems to keep track of the data that were collected. The first one was research logs (Appendix D). The logs included the date of the interview, when I transcribed their interview, when I sent their data to review for member checking, when I received their completed member check, and if edits needed to be made. This allowed me to see if I was missing anything from any participant, and it kept me on track with my data collection so that I was continually progressing (see Stake, 1995).

I also used a reflective journal during the data collection process. This allowed me to record my "subjective impressions during the study as a way to control researcher bias" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 132). It was a place where I could record thoughts, feelings, questions, and/or comments during the study (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lodico et al.,

2010) without them entering the official data or analysis. It allowed me to record

behaviors I noticed during the interviews and ideas on themes or connections that came to

mind.

I kept the physical copies of e-mails, consent forms, and notes in a binder that was

divided by the different participants' coded identifier (i.e., Business Student 1, PP

Student 1, Staff Member 1, etc.). This binder was stored in a locked cabinet at my home.

The electronic copies of the data were stored on my home computer, which was password

protected and the individual files were also password protected. The same protection

applied for the audio files from the interviews.

Role of the Researcher

I have been a staff member for over 10 years at the study site and have worked for

two different academic departments, one administrative department, and am now working

for one of the university's colleges. Thus, I have worked with the faculty and staff

participants as colleagues. However, none of them were from the specific college I

currently work for, nor have I had or currently have any supervisory role over them. Nor

did I interview any former coworkers with whom I worked on a daily basis.

As for the student participants, none of them were taught by me nor had any of

them worked for me as a student worker. While three students came from the college I

work for, in addition to ensuring I had not taught them or supervised them, I also made

sure that I was not their assigned mentor or official academic advisor. No responses of

the participants were reported to their supervisors, administrators, professors, advisors, or

others with authority over the participants. As this was my first time studying first-year

retention, my preconceived notions on the topic were limited. However, any opinions I had about the research question were reflected upon and written down prior to the study so I acknowledged them and ensured they did not interfere with the analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), data analysis involves taking apart the data into smaller bits so that it can be organized, examined, and coded, and meaning extracted. Data analysis starts with organizing the data collected (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research, in particular interviews, often leads to dozens if not hundreds of pages of transcript data, which is why it is important for the data to be organized (Creswell, 2012). Organization of the data ensures that nothing is overlooked and that the sheer volume of the data is not overwhelming.

Between the typed notes and the interview transcripts, 236 pages of data were generated. All electronic data were placed in an electronic folder on my computer. Within this folder all participants had their own folder that contained a copy of their audio recording, the notes from their interview, and the transcript. Additionally, paper copies of the documents were kept in a binder divided by tabs for each participant.

Transcription and Coding

Once the data were organized, the next step in the data analysis process was transcribing the interviews. After each interview was conducted, I transcribed the interview into a Microsoft Word document. I transcribed the interviews myself to facilitate greater familiarity with the data (Merriam, 2009) and ensure its accuracy. After

I transcribed each interview, I waited a day and replayed the audio tape to compare it to the transcript to ensure that nothing was omitted or added.

After the interviews were transcribed, the data needed to be coded. Coding is when the text in the data is tagged and labeled based on recurring themes, ideas, and concepts (Creswell, 2012). I did not start to code until all of the interviews had been conducted and transcribed to minimize the influence of any emerging themes I would have noticed so that they did not influence my questions or conversations with the remaining participants to be interviewed. Additionally, I preferred to review the data all at once, not piecemeal, to be better able to see the general picture. I coded the transcripts from each type of participant at one time, which means I coded all faculty transcripts at once, all staff transcripts at once, and the student transcripts at once. This allowed me to notice similarities and differences by participant type.

I coded the transcripts both by hand and with assistance from a computer program. Both Creswell (2012) and Yin (2008) recommended coding by hand, especially if the amount of data is small. I started the coding by hand and printed the transcripts. I wrote on the transcripts some themes that emerged and different categories and elements that comprise the first-year experience. This allowed me to be more hands on with the data and compare multiple pages of transcript next to each other. Once a basic sense of themes and notes were recorded on the paper copies of the transcripts I switched to the electronic versions of the transcripts.

I used Microsoft OneNote to assist with the coding of the electronic transcripts. There were many benefits to using this software, which included the ability to give each

category of the first-year experience a page, tag and color code within the software, search within the data, convert scanned documents to searchable text, password protect pages, and easily manipulate text (Fernandes & Barbeiro, 2015). The software did not do the coding for me, its use just made the process more organized for me. I had used the software before to stay organized and develop themes and it was extremely helpful.

Upon an initial review of all the transcripts, I started by creating 24 pages within the program that covered advising, residential status, different first-year initiatives, connections with students, connections with faculty, the various schools and programs, clubs, and more. This allowed me to divide the data into these 24 areas first and then begin to code the data. I made use of the ability to create custom tags within OneNote to code the different parts of the data based on the emerging themes. The custom tags that I built were: connection in general, connection with faculty, connection with students/friendships, community, feeling welcome/belonging, homesickness, caring, involvement, lack of connection, advising, the city, engagement, careers, challenged academically, opportunities, and financial. Originally, I had only made one tag that represented the lack of something, which in this case was connection. However, as I progressed further with the coding I realized that some of the themes could be viewed both positively and negatively in relation to the data (i.e., opportunities present and lack of opportunities). After the data were on the appropriate page(s) and coded with the themes, I went back and used either the bold, underline, or italics font styles to label the data based on the research question to which it pertained.

Evidence of Quality

In qualitative research, the study is found to be credible if what the participants indicated about their experience aligns with what the researcher stated in the findings of the study (Lodico et al., 2010). To ensure the credibility of the data, I used member checks for the transcripts. This allowed the participants to review the information they provided to check for any errors (Creswell, 2012). Participants were e-mailed their transcripts to review for accuracy of the transcription. They had the ability to add, delete, or modify parts that they did not wish to include or felt took away from their intended meaning. Additionally, Creswell (2014) stated that participants should receive more than just the transcript; the participants also received a summary of my notes from their interview and they had the ability to add to the summary, clarify their meaning, or dispute it. The participants who work for the university were given 3 business days to check the transcripts and notes, and the student participants were given a week. If they did not have any changes, they could indicate that in their e-mail response. Participants who did not respond after the specified period of time and did not e-mail for a time extension were explicitly informed that their lack of response indicated that there were no changes that were needed to be made. Only one participant decided to add additional thoughts to the transcript (see Appendix D).

Another step that was taken to ensure credibility was triangulation. Lodico et al. (2010) defined triangulation as "the process of comparing different sources of data or perspectives of different participants" (p. 189). As there were three sets of data, one from each primary participant group, these sets of data were compared and contrasted. This

process helped confirm or deny the information that was conveyed, in particular within each participant group.

As a researcher, it was important to be open about my bias and what lens I was using to view the data (see Creswell, 2014). At the same time, it is important that the researcher's bias does not interfere with the study. Thus, I used a journal to record my thoughts and preconceived notions about the research questions. This allowed me to acknowledge bias I might have had and assisted me in trying to keep it separate from the data collection and analysis.

Findings

Within this subsection of the study, I will discuss the findings that came from the data analysis of the transcripts and notes. I identified seven findings, each of which is connected to one of the three original research questions. The findings will be explained using examples from the data and will be discussed in relation to the literature. Names of people mentioned during the interviews were omitted and names of the dormitories have been changed to protect confidentiality.

This study was prompted by the problem of a stagnant first-year retention rate at the study site. The research questions were developed with the aim of exploring personal connection in relation to the first-year experience and retention rate. The research questions were:

1. According to faculty and staff how does the study site initially establish and maintain personal connections with its students during their first-year experience?

2. According to faculty, staff, and students, what influences do the current first-year initiatives have on students' personal connection to their institution?

3. According to faculty, staff, and students, what influences do students' personal connections to their institution have on their first-year experience and subsequent retention?

The research questions formed the basis of my interview questions (Appendix C) with my 21 participants. Table 1 displays the participants' basic information including their reference code.

Table 1

General Participant Information

Participant	Code	School	Residential/ Commuter	Gender
Business Student 1	BS1	Business	Residential	Male
Business Student 2	BS2	Business	Residential	Female
Business Student 3	BS3	Business	Commuter	Female
Computer Science Student 1	CSS1	Computer Science	Residential	Male
Computer Science Student 2	CSS2	Computer Science	Residential	Male
Computer Science Student 3	CSS3	Computer Science	Commuter	Male
Honors College Student 1	HCS1	Honors and Humanities	Residential	Male
Honors College Student 2	HCS2	Honors and Business	Residential	Male
Honors College Student 3	HCS3	Honors and Computer Science	Commuter	Male
Humanities Student 1	HS1	Humanities	Residential	Male
Humanities Student 2	HS2	Humanities	Commuter	Female
Humanities Student 3	HS3	Humanities	Residential	Female
Potential Program Student 1	PPS1	Potential Program and Humanities	Residential	Female
Potential Program Student 2	PPS2	Potential Program and Humanities	Residential	Female
Potential Program Student 3	PPS3	Potential Program and Humanities	Residential	Female
Staff Member 1	SM1	Computer Science	N/A	Female
Staff Member 2	SM2	Multiple	N/A	Female
Staff Member 3	SM3	Multiple	N/A	Male
Faculty Member 1	FM1	Humanities	N/A	Male
Faculty Member 2	FM2	Business	N/A	Male
Faculty Member 3	FM3	Humanities	N/A	Female

Finding 1: As a whole, the study site had a difficult time establishing and maintaining a personal connection with its first-year students. Interviewing the students about their first-year classes and professors was difficult because the majority of them had a negative experience. Usually, the only exception was their learning community (see Findings 4 and 5). Nine out of the 15 students did not like the majority of their first-year professors and did not form a relationship with them. Three out of the 15 thought their first-year professors were just adequate and acknowledged their relationships with professors improved in their second year. Of the remaining three students who liked their professors, one came from a very small connected department, one was enrolled in almost all PP classes, and the third was in Honors and received first choice of professors and classes. The reasons listed by the students as to why they did not like their first-year experience with their classes and professors were either due to the larger class size, their courses were general education courses, they did not like their professors, or a combination of these reasons.

Although the majority of the classes at the study site had under 30 students enrolled per class, there were a few introductory courses that met in a lecture hall and usually consisted of almost all first-year students. When there are 75-140 students in a class and just one professor, it can be difficult for the professor to connect with the students and for the students to connect with the professor. Participant FM3 taught many courses at the study site in the lecture hall format and found it difficult to engage with all of her students and not be overwhelmed with the demands of 100 students. She spoke to this, saying:

So I think I have to set up sort of a boundary so I say to the class, "OK everyone look around you, notice that there are 100 of you and there is one of me." I don't have the support that other institutions might have like TAs so I have to set up some boundaries.

When asked how many students she thought she knew out of the 100 each year, she answered about half because she saw them in other classes as well. The lecture halls were difficult for students transitioning from high school with small or average class sizes, which is what PPS2 mentioned:

Freshman year it was kind of difficult. I think it was because they were lecture halls. I went from a setting of 30 students to a setting of over 100 students. But when I moved into the class size I have now [30 students] I was able to interact more with my professors and I really enjoy it.

Although FM3 worked to improve this situation for her department by introducing discussion groups and limiting the number of students in the lecture, there were still more introductory classes taught in this format.

Not all introductory or general education courses were taught in lecture halls; some were taught in regular classrooms. In these cases, the class size did not bother the students, but the fact they were in general education courses did. The two reasons the students did not like these courses was either because of the content or the professors. Participant CSS2's reasoning blended the two together, "A lot of my professors my first year were for my general education courses. I didn't foster a relationship with any of those because they were not pertinent to my career goals." The students' focus on their

careers is discussed further in Finding 5. BS3 also blended the reasons together and discussed why he was not connected to these professors, "I didn't really have relationships…It was so distant. It wasn't classes I needed or cared for, so I stayed to myself." While these two students chose not to fully interact with their professors because the content of the course seemed to be of little value to them, HCS2 felt like his professors did not care. He stated, "Those were people with Ph.Ds. going over the basis of communication in business…I think that it is just that they do not care about the subject matter. They lack the drive for that." BS2 felt unhappy and called home complaining and wanting to transfer, "Because it was general education classes, I wasn't happy with them. At the same time, every time I called my parents to complain, they would say it is general education classes and you are not into your major." Not everyone has parents like those of BS2 who knew it can be a temporary phase that just needed to be endured and encouraged their child to stay the course. Others could have parents who hear the complaints and agree to let their child transfer to another school.

When professors were discussed, both tenured faculty and adjuncts were mentioned by the students as not caring. BS1 found the older tenured faculty to be "standoffish," "stuck in tradition," and "didn't care." He felt because of this he could not form a relationship with them. HCS1 looked at it more in terms of the value, or lack thereof, that they brought to the classroom experience, "Tenured professors haven't been researching in the field in so long that they have lost touch with it." He felt he could not go to them for connections to internships or real world advice as they were out of touch. HCS1 preferred adjuncts because many of them were currently working in the field, but

other students did not share his feelings toward adjuncts. BS1 said, "Adjunct faculty just didn't care. It was just another job to them."

Even members of the institution knew that adjuncts teaching first-year courses was a potential problem. SM2 stated, "Sixty three percent of our first-year professors are adjunct professors who aren't obligated to have any kind of office hours, and typically teach at two or three other universities so they don't typically get to know their students." The problem with older tenured professors and adjunct professors is similar to that of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The students were looking for the perfect in-between, which are either younger professors who were about to receive tenure or those that just recently received tenure. While it could be impossible to satisfy all of what the students want, this one might be particularly important due to its effect on retention. As SM2 pointed out, "I know that many institutions that have increased their retention rate significantly have moved their full-time professors to teaching first-year students and they say that has a significant impact."

Overall, the students and the faculty and staff had some negative comments about many of the professors. The comments ranged from the professors not caring about the students to not liking students in general. HCS2 said his first year was "isolating" and "the majority of them [professors] were never in class or didn't care." HS2 thought her professors were just "here for the salary." She even described one of her professors as "very off-putting" because:

> She would slam the books down and immediately start teaching. She never asked
> us how we are doing. It was never a conversation. She was a very harsh grader,

which is fine in the sense that I like being challenged, but in the sense that it was

just a lot of criticism. A lot of the students in the class didn't like her because they

thought it was more criticism than encouragement.

This aligns with Gallop and Bastein's (2016) statement that some students have reported

being upset by negative feedback. Surprisingly, all three faculty participants agreed with

the students. FM1 stated, "Some faculty don't like students" and FM2 also said

something similar, "I think some faculty just don't like dealing with students that much

[laughs] and prefer to do their research." FM3 mentioned faculty egos and research. If the

faculty did not care about the students, did not like students, were focused more on

research, or were letting their egos show, then it was no wonder that the students did not

connect with their professors.

Other students felt their professors lacked passion for their subject and could not

teach. BS1 spoke to the lack of passion, "First year was absolutely terrible. It was very

evident that they weren't passionate about what they were telling us. It came across that

what we were doing wasn't important. It was just another box to fill." HCS2 had some

criticism about some of his professors:

They were sloppy. They had no idea what they were talking about. No idea about

the material they were teaching. Then Computer Programming II with [name

omitted] I learned absolutely nothing that whole semester. He had no idea what he

was talking about. We had to correct him at every turn. It was really bad. It was

cringe worthy. Then [name omitted] too. Unprepared too. No control of the

classroom. She assigned work she never graded.

When the students felt that they learned nothing and were teaching themselves, then the value proposition of whether or not it was worth it to stay at the institution took place, which BS2 mentioned in her interview several times. One time was in regard to her math professors:

> Literally, they just don't care….We are paying so much money to go here and these professors can't teach. It's hard to sit there for $4,000 and walk out of calculus and have learned nothing. On the teacher review I wrote I walked in confused and I walked out even more confused. That's the downside.

The math department and ineffective teaching was mentioned by SM2 in regard to why students leave, "I think a lot of it is the teaching. I get so many complaints from parents about that, especially the math department. They will leave the university because of it, unfortunately. It is a gateway course." The poor learning experience in the classroom can leave students with a negative impression of these professors, the subject area they teach, and even the institution, and in turn could prevent them from making future connections to any of these areas.

Not all of the departments had ineffective teachers and not all of the students had a bad experience, though the majority did. HS1 was one of the students who enjoyed the majority of his professors from his first year. This is because he came from the art department, which was a small close-knit department. He said the professors in his department were "nice" and "welcoming," but admitted his friends in other departments did not have the same experience. His department held pizza parties where the students and faculty could mingle and get to know each other. After his experience at the parties,

he said, "I never expected everyone, students and professors alike, to just to be in this community setting where everyone is so nice and so friendly." While none of the student participants were from the science department, FM3 discussed how they also held parties with the students and spent time with them in the lounges. She also described a tight-knit community and said,

> I think part of the community is not always doing hard science. I think for the most part [pause] I mean there is a professional rapport, but we are their friends. The upperclassmen they don't call me by my title and last name. They call me by my first name. That sets up the community. We are colleagues. Yeah, we are your professors and you are going to learn from us. We stay in touch with our alumni.

More departments could follow the examples set by fine arts and science so that the students feel like they have a connection with their faculty.

The relationship between a faculty member and a student is extremely important, especially for retention (Kahu, 2013; Kelly et al., 2012; Micari & Pazos, 2012), but as data indicate, the majority of the first-year students were not forming relationships with their first-year professors, which is in line with the reported research (Micari & Pazos, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013; Turner & Thompson, 2014). O'Keefe (2013) indicated that two possible reasons for this were large class sizes and poor student-to-faculty ratios, which was the case for some of the students. One of the other possibilities mentioned in the literature was the burden of conducting research because it leaves little time for faculty to bond with their students or to see the benefits of doing so (Micari & Pazos, 2012). Even FM3 who was student-centric mentioned the pressures of non-teaching responsibilities,

"They [the students] are not familiar with the fact that 33% of my job is teaching; 66% is not teaching. Sometimes you see it in the student feedback. They are not realistic in the fact that we have other responsibilities." Her department tried to balance the demands of research and getting to know the students by including the students in the research process (FM3).

Additionally, the issue of professors not caring and not having passion, which was discussed by the students, was touched upon by Jackson et al. (2013) as one cannot expect unengaged faculty to help engage students. The faculty, the classes they teach, and the first-year initiatives represented the institution to the student. If the students disliked the majority of their first-year faculty and classes and had mixed feelings about the first-year initiatives (see Finding 4), then the institution has not done a satisfactory job establishing that personal connection with the students and maintaining it throughout the first year. This connects back to Tinto's (1975) research because the lack of connection caused by the aforementioned experiences also prevented students from integrating into the university experience, which put them at risk of not staying at the institution. Not wanting to give up and just leave the institution, some students took it upon themselves to rectify the situation and tried to initiate a personal connection with a member of the institution.

Finding 2: In most cases, students were the ones initiating the personal connection with the study site. Several of the student participants talked about having to take their situation into their own hands in late fall of their first year and try to salvage the experience, otherwise they would have transferred. Some of the ways students did this

was by joining clubs, becoming part of Greek life, seeking out their own mentors, and by finding their own opportunities on campus. This required the students to dedicate themselves to getting involved on campus, which as several students pointed out, took work and time. HS2 was one of the students who dedicated herself to improving her experience, but was frustrated by how much effort it took:

It was by joining everything and meeting new people. It took a lot of work though. This is going to sound mean, but I feel a school shouldn't require people to do that much work to be where I am right now. It shouldn't be handed to me [pause] no way, but it shouldn't have been this hard.

HS2 was not the only student who felt the institution needed to make it easier for students to make connections. When BS1 was asked what the institution could improve, he stated:

It's mostly about people connecting to people and that is something [the study site] needs to invest in. It is about people who are personable. Just knowing you have someone there. It is about the follow up. People respond when you are also responsive. Letting freshmen know that they are special.

FM2 said something similar. The students believed that their institution was lacking the facilitation for them to form personal connections and help them want to stay at the institution.

Astin (1975) examined student involvement and persistence. If the students were involved in clubs, Greek life, and research with faculty, they tended to persist. Student involvement also allows them to make more connections with other students in their clubs, sorority, or fraternity and with faculty while they conduct research together. Thus,

it makes sense that the students who wanted to increase their connections with others at

the study site chose to get more involved. Several of the student participants discussed

their decision to get involved in clubs and what the results were from that involvement.

BS1 stated that:

> By winter break I had decided to stay. What did it was that I had gotten more
>
> involved in [two clubs]….The reason why I wanted to get more involved is
>
> because it is a network. That is just a more professional way of saying community
>
> or team or people who just talk. That is what it is supposed to be.

BS2 also had a similar experience:

> Now I say to people that the reason I stayed is because I made those connections
>
> and because I joined those clubs….Those really did make it home and that's what
>
> I wanted in college. But if it hadn't happened quicker I would have transferred
>
> probably by my winter semester. It was really about the community feel.

PPS1 joined a club in hopes it would make her feel more connected, "I thought that going

to that club would help me meet people. And I felt like it would help me become part of

the school a little more…So I felt like that is a good way to meet students." HS2, who

thought the institution should not make it so difficult to make connections, said she

"joined everything possible," to make those connections, but what upset her was that as a

sophomore, she still knows a lot of students who have not made those connections

because they have not put in the effort. This relates to Berger and Milem's (1999) theory

that students who do not get involved in their first semester tend to stay uninvolved.

Additionally, the authors also noted that those who did get involved in the fall tend to

stay involved and remain at the institution, which is also what was described by the students above. The students who joined clubs found the community and friends that they were looking for, which, in turn, made them want to stay at the institution.

Four of the 15 students were part of Greek life; while that is a little less than a fourth of the student participants, it is a large number considering that Greek life is not a large part of the student experience at the study site due to it being an urban campus in an area that does not have a long history with Greek life. HCS1 added that he believed it was not a part of the school culture because the study site does not support, understand, or promote it. However, Greek life had a positive effect on the four student participants. All four participants talked about how it helped them make connections with their fellow students and made them feel closer to the institution. CSS2 stated, "I thought it was a good way to start networking and meet new people, like having more connections. I will say until the day I die it is a good networking experience." PPS1 also talked about meeting new people and feeling connected to the institution, "Just the people that I was able to meet and the friendships I made....Also to be part of the school."

HCS1 and BS2 were the most outspoken about the influence of Greek life on retention. HCS1 stated, "Fraternity life equals significant more involvement and happiness in school....It helps kids stay." BS2 talked about how unhappy she was and how much she wanted to transfer at the beginning of her first year because she "didn't feel that community feeling [her] first year which [she] really super wanted," but once she joined her sorority, it changed everything for her. She said, "It really made my college experience so much better. I'm more involved. I know so many more people now.

No matter what, I have that campus feel now….It is definitely that community feel....It is really, really helpful" (BS2). The students' experiences supported what the research indicated, that Greek life helped give students a support system and feel like they were part of a family (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014). As with the clubs, the students who joined a sorority or a fraternity found the connections and community they were looking for, which helped keep them at the study site.

Since many of the student participants talked about not forming a connection with their professors in their first year, they tried to make a concerted effort to do so in their second year. Several of the student participants talked about finding their own mentors, whether they were staff or faculty members. During her interview, PPS1 talked about her frustrations with not being given help or advice about her future career during her first year, so she took matters into her own hands and approached one of her psychology professors for advice. They entered into a mentoring relationship after that. HCS1 talked about spending hours in his sophomore year with an advisor who was not assigned to his major or grade level, but they had an excellent relationship so he did not care. During his second year, BS1 befriended the chair of his department and spent all his free time in his office. BS3 also started relationships with the professors in her department in her second year, so much so that the dean of her school bought her food during final exam week.

Others had similar stories, but almost all of them occurred in the second year. This is one of the reasons why the majority of the student participants said their second year was better than their first. The students felt that connections with faculty and staff should have occurred within their first year. The fact that the students were looking for

their own connections to staff and faculty aligns with the research that stated that students need faculty who believe in them and who are approachable (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015).

Only two students indicated that they had a professor approach them to start to build a relationship in their first year. HCS3 was approached by one of his professors in one of his honors classes because she saw that he and a few other computer science students were more advanced than the rest of the class. She gave them the opportunity to build a mobile application to be entered into a contest where they placed in the top three. He said, "She took it upon herself to make her my mentor. She saw something in me. We work on research together. She helped us every step of the way. She's been fantastic. I wish there were more people like her." HS3 had a similar experience with her English professor who approached her to work on research, which was the highlight of her first year. These experiences aligned with the research literature, which mentioned the importance of quality student and faculty interactions (Micari & Pazos, 2012). Other students sought these opportunities and experiences on their own, which will be discussed further in Finding 5. Some, like HCS3, were able to make those meaningful connections through being part of the Honors College.

Finding 3: Students in either the Honors College or the Potential Program were able to establish a personal connection with their advisors and felt that they were part of a community at the study site. Faculty, staff, and students at the study site tended to think of the university as being divided into mainstream and Honors and PP. The Honors College and PP had a lot of similarities such as specialized advisors, classes,

first-year seminar courses, and events. It is these similarities that helped provide the

Honors and PP students with a more personalized first-year experience. Both the Honors

and PP students described advising experiences that were superior to their mainstream

classmates, which is aligned with what research indicated about honors college advising

(Alger, 2015; Nichols & Chang, 2013). PPS2 described her experience compared to that

of her mainstream roommates,

> I really, really, really loved being a PP student. The ability to walk into my
>
> advisor's office whenever I wanted to talk to him was great. I became close with
>
> another PP advisor as well. I really think it made my freshman year….I know I
>
> had to help my roommates [with registration]. They would say their advisors
>
> wouldn't answer their e-mails and it would take 2 weeks to respond. My advisor
>
> was a phone call away, I could walk into his office, or I could send him an e-mail
>
> and he would get back to me in 20 minutes at most.

PPS3 had the same experience with her mainstream friends and advising, which is why

she decided to try to have PP help them out:

> The amount of times my friends would complain about something and I would
>
> ask [PP advisors] to help my friends and they would say of course….My friends
>
> definitely struggled not having that individualized attention….The PP advisors all
>
> happily took my friends in. What are they going to do, say no to them because
>
> their advisors don't have time for them?

PPS1 also compared her experience to her mainstream friends and said hers was better

because she saw her PP advisor once a week. As the PP was only for the first-year, the

students were supposed to get new advisors for their second year. PPS3 chose not to, but PPS1 and PPS2 did receive new advisors. Unfortunately, PPS2 experienced what it was like to be in the mainstream when it came to advising and said, "If I were to compare my two academic advisors, my advisor this year, I don't really know her. I don't really see her. We only exchange contact via e-mail. We don't see each other or anything like that." Transitioning out of PP into mainstream showed her how beneficial her first-year advising experience really was, which is why she appreciated it more in hindsight.

The Honors College students had the same positive experiences as those of PP in their first year when it came to advising. HCS1 found the advisors to be "very good at accommodating the students." HCS2 compared his Honors College experience with that of his business experience and felt it came down to the fact the Honors College staff cared about their students,

> I am so much closer with [name omitted] than I will ever be with the business school administration [pause] well pockets of it. The fact that [name omitted] has called my mother before me ever attending here speaks miles and paragraphs about what actually goes on here as opposed to the rest of the university….I mean [name omitted] really cares about her students. You can really tell. I mean the fact you can e-mail her at 2 a.m. and she'll probably get back to you by 3 a.m. is indicative of how much this individual administrator really cares about her students and that's what I love….I guess it is dependent…you have to find people that actually care as opposed to people who just need it to get insurance and get food.

HCS3, like HCS2, compared his experience working with the Honors College staff to his experience working with the advisors in the Computer Science School and had similar thoughts:

> I had to drop an IT class and take a public speaking class and I brought it to [name omitted] who did it instantly. Having that kind of attention is great….If I wasn't in Honors I feel like I would be a lot more lost. I have friends that aren't in Honors and they are lost. I wind up helping them. If they had people like [Honors Advisors] then I feel like their experience would be a lot better. You can see that with the computer science school advisors. If you are in the computer science school and non-Honors, you would go to them only and that would suck.

HCS3 brought up the feeling of being lost if you are a mainstream student. When non-Honors College and PP students were asked their feelings on the subject, three of the nine students mentioned feeling lost. BS2 who spent time in an all Honors group of friends discussed how difficult it was for her not being in Honors in her first year:

> They have [Honors Advisors] to go to. They would be like, I am going to [Honors Advisor] today and I would be like, I have no one to go to so that's fun. So as a freshman that made a difference. That would have made the difference. Having those branches outside of the major. That really does make the difference. They can listen to you and help you no matter your major or troubles.

During the interviews it was clear that the students like BS2 who were very close to Honors or PP students were the ones who were most upset and vocalized feeling lost. They knew that there was an alternative to the advising experience they were having and

it was a better one, but they could not partake in it. The other students who were not friends with Honors or PP students in their first year did not know how these special programs worked in terms of advising. So they did not know what they were not experiencing.

The students were not the only ones who mentioned the quality of advising that students received in PP and Honors. SM2 stated, "Every time we do a survey on advising, the PP and Honors always comes out on top. The students always say their advisors truly care about them. Always," which supported what HCS2 said about the advisors caring for the students. However, as SM2 later pointed out, "Caring is free, but it is hard to show that you care when you have 800 students on your caseload," which is one of the reasons why there was a difference in the experience that PP and Honors students received because they are part of a smaller advisor-to-student ratio, which allowed for more personalized attention. PPS3 mentioned a good point in regard to the personalized attention she received, but her mainstream friends did not,

> My friends definitely struggled not having that individualized attention. I get why PP students have it, but I feel like every college student should have it. Just because college is a massive change and the city is a massive change. So all students should have access to the individualized attention and support that PP students got.

However, the PP and Honors College experience was more than just about the connections formed between the advisors and the students.

The Honors College and the PP were also about the community among the students and between the students and the staff. The community aspect was discussed by all three groups of participants. FM3 talked about it for both Honors and PP, "Honors and PP have a community that they are embedded in and mainstream students do not." SM2 mentioned that when she taught the first-year seminar course in the past for PP she worked to build a community among the students, which was something the PP first-year seminar instructors still did. She also discussed how close Honors was and the difference that made, "Honors knows its students by name and I know that sounds ridiculous, but that in itself shows the students that they matter." SM2 had previously mentioned in her interview how faculty not learning their students' names bothered her and the students, which is just another difference between mainstream and Honors when it comes to personalized attention.

HCS2 talked about the "close-knit" group of students in his interview and that the "likeminded students" were one of the reasons that kept him at the study site. PPS2 and PPS3 also mentioned the community of students. PPS2 said, "PP classes are smaller to begin with so I really got to know my classmates well." PPS3 said, "It played a super big role in my life. Most of my friends came from PP in my classes or my first-year seminar course." She also said she felt she came into a built-in support network. One of the PP students was so passionate about PP that she said, "I honest to God would die on the cross for PP" (PPS3). Mainstream students CSS1, CSS3, BS1, and BS2 all befriended Honors Students and found that by doing so they were welcomed into the community. CSS1 said Honors adopted him. It was by unofficially joining the Honors Community

that many of them started to feel comfortable at the study site. The fact that the Honors

College established a community where the peers felt connected with each other was not

unique to this Honors College, as research indicates it is common across honors colleges

(Nichols & Chang, 2013). The students also described the Honors College as a family.

The community and family feel that was created is related to Tinto's (1975) ideas on

integration. These students clearly integrated into Honors or PP because of their positive

experiences, which encouraged them to stay at the institution.

   Finding 4: Overall, first-year initiatives had mixed effects on students'

personal connections to the institution. Numerous first-year initiatives were discussed

in the interviews by all three participant groups. The first-year initiatives that were

discussed most frequently were the first-year seminar course, learning communities, and

first-year housing. Other first-year initiatives were only mentioned by the staff and

faculty, which included taking students out to lunch, first generation mentoring, Latinx

empowerment, and the leadership program. The fact they were not brought up by any of

the 15 student participants either meant none of them participated in these initiatives or

none of them found them worth discussing. Either way, that speaks to the fact that these

initiatives are not memorable.

   Every first-year student was required to take a first-year seminar course in their

first semester at the institution (SM3). The instructor also doubled as their first-year

advisor and an older student was assigned to the class to serve as a Peer Leader (SM3).

This course was intended to play a crucial role in the student's first-year experience

(SM3). However, the course was met with very mixed reactions from the student

participants. Eight students did not like the course; two thought it was fine; and five liked it. Out of the five who liked the course, two had the same professor, though they were in different sections and had different Peer Leaders, and two were in PP. The eight students who did not like the class described it as "a waste of time" (BS2 and HCS3), "useless" (HCS2 and CSS2), "unnecessary" (BS3), "uncomfortable" (BS1), and "boring and dry" (HS2).

When the students were asked more detailed questions about their experience in the course, it became clear that for all eight of them the issue was the lack of connection that occurred in the class. Two of the students, HS2 and BS3, indicated that they felt their professors were just there because it was their job. HS2 added "She didn't look genuinely happy. She kind of faked it….Whenever I was with her, I didn't want to be with her. I got bad vibes from her." BS3, who had a different instructor, had similar thoughts, "I felt like she just did the bare minimum. She didn't go the extra step to make us feel comfortable." BS2 also had a problem with her professor whom she thought was unpredictable and yelled at their Peer Leader for no reason; thus she said, "My professor was insane" and upon reflection about what could have been better she said, "If I had had a professor who actually could connect with us and could make it about more than just the class. To try to make the connection." HCS2 did not feel connected to the professor because he canceled class all the time and CSS2 felt that his professor was not teaching and interacting with the students on their level because he was usually a professor who taught the upperclassmen.

Some of the students found issue with the lack of connection with their fellow students. CSS1 stated that he had "no connections with [the] other students" and BS1 also had that experience, "I didn't really make any connection with anyone from that class." While the students could bond on their own, it was one of the responsibilities of the professor and Peer Leader to help make these bonds to happen (SM2 and SM3). However, the faculty participants who taught the course saw this as the job of the Peer Leader more than their own (FM1 and FM2).

The inability of the Peer Leader to help the students form a bond might be why 13 out of the 15 students did not like their Peer Leader. Some felt their Peer Leaders were irrelevant (HCS1), just stayed in the background, and did not talk. Others had more negative experiences with their Peer Leaders. BS2 was quite upset and explained her experience, "She ignored me….She made us feel dumb. Like she was higher up than us. It wasn't how can I make your experience better at the university. It was I'm doing this and I am so cool for doing this." PPS3 and BS3 had similar experiences with their different Peer Leaders, "[The instructor] would ask if she wanted to present and she would say I don't want to. She would show up late with coffee and food. She was snotty….She was pretty bad" (PPS3) and "she kind of intimidated me. She was a senior and was kind of done with the university" (BS3). Others, like BS1 and CSS2, also remarked on their Peer Leaders not caring or wanting to assist. This is the exact opposite of how SM2 described the ideal Peer Leader and what their role was, "As mainly a cheerleader for the students. To make them feel comfortable, supported, embraced, valued, and to talk about the university from their perspective." While almost all of the

faculty and staff interviewed indicated that in all of their years teaching the course they had at least one Peer Leader who disappointed, the majority of them did not. This speaks to a disconnect as to how the students are viewing a Peer Leader's effectiveness and how the professors are, which is a potential problem.

The disconnect between how the faculty and the students view the Peer Leader's effectiveness might stem from the fact little research has been done on the effective characteristics of a Peer Leader or mentor (Holt & Fifer, 2016). One of the reasons for this was the varying expectations of the Peer Leader (Holt & Fifer, 2016), which is what seemed to be occurring at the study site. The instructors' and students' differing expectations of the Peer Leader means that the Peer Leaders probably cannot satisfy both groups of people. Holt & Fifer's research showed that in order for peer mentors to be viewed as effective by the students, they need to try to contact and connect with their mentees. The student participants clearly indicated they wanted that as well from their Peer Leaders. Yomtov, Plunkett, Efrat, and Garcia Marin (2015) also found that Peer Leaders needed to be involved and keep their cell phones out of sight, which is something the student participants said was not occurring.

The five students who liked their first-year seminar course all had something in common, which was an exceptional instructor. Two participants had the same instructor in the humanities school and two participants were in PP, but had different instructors. They all indicated that it was their instructor who made the class experience positive and helped the students bond with each other. HS3 enjoyed her experience and could not stop talking about how outstanding it was, "We had a great sense of community. It was great

overall….My instructor was great and funny too. Anyone who teaches it should have a sense of humor." HCS1 and HS1 who both had the same professor said he made them feel comfortable, was accessible to the students, was engaging, was helpful, and made class fun. PPS2 and PPS3 indicated that their instructors had these same traits and behaviors. All five mentioned in their interviews that the class was either close or very comfortable with each other, which was part of the reason they liked it. Thus, the students found their first-year seminar courses to be a positive experience because the professors were successful in fostering a community within their classrooms.

The study site requires that all students participate in at least one learning community in order to graduate; however, the vast majority of students enroll in their learning community in their first year. Thus, it is considered one of the first-year initiatives. Learning communities can consist of two paired courses around a common theme or one 6- or 7-credit course that covers a theme. As the courses are 6 or 7 credits, the students are guaranteed to see each other for a minimum of 6 to 7 hours each week in a classroom. Additionally, a learning community has two professors, which decreases the student-to-faculty ratio for the course. Due to the number of hours students spend together and the small student to faculty ratio (Smith, 2010), as well as the focus on a theme and the collaborative structure of learning communities, the courses are usually considered as a way to help improve retention (Arensdorf & Naylor-Ticknell, 2016).

Of the 15 students, nine said they liked their learning community, four did not like it, and one did not mention it during the interview. The students discussed two aspects of their learning community, the content and the community in the courses. Content will be

discussed in the subsequent finding. Community was a recurring theme throughout the students' responses about their learning community. The students who enjoyed their learning community indicated that a community was formed either among the students, between the students and the faculty, or both.

All nine students who liked their learning community mentioned that they made friends in their learning community, many of them, like HCS2 and HCS3, indicated they met their best friends. Six of the students indicated that they were closer to their classmates in their learning community than their other classes because of the amount of time they spent together. HCS1 explained why that happened, "You definitely get more of a bond with the students because you see them more. You work with them more. You study for tests and help each other with homework. You know them." HS1 felt it happened naturally in his art learning community because of time spent together and how it was set up:

> I had an emotional connection with the kids in the class because I saw them twice
>
> a week….My learning community helped create community. We were in a big
>
> circle. We were all looking at each other and talking to each other. We were all
>
> friends. It was a lot of fun and I really liked it.

HCS2 felt the amount of time they spent together forced them to become a community, but even though it was forced, he was happy about it, "As freshmen I think it is important because you come to school and are like friends, friends, friends, when you see people three times a week, it's like you are going to be friends."

Several of the students also indicated that they became closer to their learning community professors than their other professors. Even CSS3, who stated that he is introverted and did not like the content of the learning community, developed a relationship with his learning community professors. He said, "I think I felt closer to them because they were open to us and they pushed us to be open to them as well. They asked us how we were doing." HCS3 echoed similar sentiments in terms of professors caring; he thought one of the benefits of his learning community was getting to know the history instructor, because "if I e-mail him I know he will take care of me. Whenever I need something he will answer in a heartbeat." BS2 not only spoke about how caring her professors were, but also how welcoming, "Dr. [name omitted] really made sure we did feel welcome and weren't being judged." The sentiment of caring and welcoming learning community professors was found in many of the interviews and sometimes it was implied. HS1 teared up while talking about a moment between him and his professor where he complimented HS1's work to the entire class and how it meant the world to him, so much so he said it was highlight of his first year. This instance supports what Gallop and Bastien (2016) indicated about the importance of students having faculty that believe in them and the effect feedback has on students.

Community is important not just in the classrooms, but also in the dormitories. The study site has separate buildings for first-year housing. The only older students who are allowed to live in these residence halls are the resident advisors (RAs). There are two residence halls for the first-year students, Dormitory B has two lounges on every floor and Dormitory A only has one lounge for the entire building. Dormitory A is a newer

building, but is located about 5 minutes away from campus. Six of the participants lived in Dormitory B and five lived in Dormitory A as first-year students. PPS3 lived in Dormitory B her first year and also lived in Dormitory A as a RA in her second year. All 11 students who lived on campus believed that the experience in Dormitory B was much better for making personal connections with other students.

The students in Dormitory A had a lot to complain about in terms of their limited opportunity to make friends. The primary complaint was the layout of the building was not conducive to forming friendships. Not having a lounge on every floor limited the opportunities for students to meet and spend time together (HCS1). PPS2 stated, "We didn't have a communal area so I didn't have a lot of friends. I noticed my dorm building was kind of cliquey because we didn't have a lounge area." The layout of the hallway into two separated segments, as opposed to the hallway in Dormitory B, which is in the shape of a giant continuous square also helps to isolate the students. HS3 said:

> In Dormitory A we were very separated. It was kind of like a real life situation where everyone has their own apartment and you have neighbors who you just say, "Hi" to in the hallway and elevator. You don't have any type of personal connection to them.

BS2 also spoke about not knowing her neighbors despite being on the floor with them for a year, "At the last floor meeting last year I still didn't know people on my floor and thought they were just visiting, but they lived down the hall."

One of the other concerns was that the doors to the rooms automatically shut and lock behind the students and they were quite heavy. The students found it added to the

feeling of isolation. PPS2 said, "The doors are really heavy so you can't keep them open. It makes it much more private. I would never see my neighbors. You would have to knock on the person's door." Both HCS1 and HS3 also mentioned that getting to know people on the floor required knocking on doors, but as HS3 pointed out, it can be a little awkward, "As a freshman you are not going to knock on someone's door and be like hi let's be friends." It is no wonder that the students viewed the doors as restrictive, "I feel like when you start developing friendships with people there shouldn't be boundaries" (HS3). PPS3 who lived in both buildings and thought Dormitory B was superior added, "A floor of heavy doors that lock shut is not really an inviting place to be," which, referring to Findings 1 and 2, is another example of how the institution did not help facilitate the establishment of personal connections and it was up to the students to make the effort. PPS3 felt, "the doors are like a perfect symbol of what it is like being a resident in Dormitory A compared to what it is like being a resident in Dormitory B where the doors don't lock on their own and stay wide open all day if you want them to." PPS3 was not the only participant who lived in Dormitory A who made comparisons to Dormitory B.

The Dormitory A students all compared and contrasted their dormitory experience to that of those living in Dormitory B, while the students in Dormitory B did not. What it came down to was the Dormitory A students felt they had fewer friends and were not as close to the people on their floor and building. PPS1 thought she "missed out" by not being in Dormitory B because "in Dormitory A you don't meet people the same way you do in Dormitory B." HCS1 said:

Dormitory A is horrible. Dormitory B is significantly better. You talk to any

student they will all agree Dormitory B is better. Because regardless of what

people think about communal bathrooms and showers, that is honestly how you

end up meeting people and having conversations….In terms of numbers, more

friends of mine that lived in Dormitory B are dating now than those who lived in

Dormitory A.

Both BS2 and HS3 had very similar thoughts on the two different first-year dormitories.

They both felt they were missing the "community" and "family feel" in their building,

but their friends in Dormitory B had what they were missing.

The students in Dormitory B all loved their experience. Community, family,

friends, and being open with each other were all mentioned numerous times. The students

felt the communal setting created by the lounges, shared bathrooms, and doors that could

stay open allowed a community to be built. HS1 said:

It honestly was great. I 100% loved it. I loved the community setting and the

lounge. The lounge is the thing I miss when at Jefferson [the upper class

dormitory]. It was so great. It was so communal and you just met so many people.

The big thing with our floor was that no one was afraid to go into the lounge and

talk to people….There is always going to be someone in the lounge…I just made

so many friends there. It was great. It was just so much fun.

BS1 also echoed these sentiments, "I absolutely loved it….I was always talking to

someone or in the lounge….I think having that constant state of community really

motivated me to get going." He also mentioned that the community on the floor was what

he missed most after he finished his first year. CSS2 summarized the experience in

Dormitory B and supported what HCS1 previously said about relationships

> If you don't have friends going into it, you are going to have friends coming out
>
> of it. You can't live next to 45 people in that type of setting with a communal
>
> space without making friends. Some of my best friends are from my floor. My
>
> girlfriend is from my floor.

The experience in Dormitory B enabled students to form personal connections with one

another and in turn, made for a positive experience for the students, as many of them

listed their floor community as either one of the highlights of their first year or what they

missed most about their first year. As PPS3 pointed out, the students in Dormitory B felt

they received a residential experience closer to that of traditional universities, "It was just

nice because one of the things you miss at the study site is the typical dorming college

experience, but I got it in Dormitory B but with the city spin on it."

As some of the students mentioned, they wanted to have that family feel or at

least a connection with those on their floor because their floor served as their home for

their year. The students in Dormitory A did not experience this and did not even know

some of their floormates. While Astin (1975) equated living on campus to increased

levels of involvement, this is not the case in this scenario. Instead, the type of experience

the students had in the dormitories determined if they felt integrated, which is related to

Tinto's (1975) research. The students did not feel integrated into their environment due to

the setup of their dormitory and this influenced their feelings towards transferring, which

is in line with Tinto's research. However, many of them sought other ways to try to integrate and get involved on campus.

Finding 5: Initiatives and opportunities related to the students' majors and their future careers were the most beneficial to first-year students and helped them establish connections to the study site. While the student participants viewed most of the first-year initiatives with mixed feelings, they had positive feelings towards learning communities that were related to their majors. Two participants, in particular, made the connection on their own between their interest in their learning community and that it was connected to their major. BS2 stated, "I feel like having learning communities that overlap with your major really did help me want to take that class" and HS1 who appreciated working with two professors in his field mentioned, "I liked that there was a learning community that could tailor to my major." Other students were not as fortunate with the learning community they were assigned and received classes outside of their major. The computer science students were particularly upset to be placed in humanities learning communities that were about art. When asked if they would be willing to try a learning community again if it was in their major, CSS2 answered, "Sure. That was part of the reason why I was annoyed. I feel like I was cheated out of an effective learning community. It felt like everyone was in a relevant learning community except for me."

In addition to the students having positive experiences with learning communities connected to their major, they also mentioned in the interviews that they enjoyed some of the initiatives aimed at the upperclassmen. These included undergraduate research and opportunities through Career Services (i.e., internships). Undergraduate research at the

study site refers to students working with a faculty member on a research project, which is often funded by either an external or internal grant. Students often receive a small stipend for their work. Undergraduate research opportunities existed at the study site across the disciplines. Though undergraduate research can be open to everyone, it is specifically targeted at sophomores through seniors. FM3 explained that while the science faculty talk about their research to the first-year students, "We generally do not take students into our lab until at least after Introduction to Biology. It's faculty preference really. A lot of faculty wait until after the first year." Additionally, as the number of students conducting research was increasing, first-year students still only made up a small portion, which SM2 mentioned in her interview, "we have more than doubled the number of teams this summer and we do have a couple of first-year students."

Participation in undergraduate research was so meaningful for some students that two of them, HCS3 and BS3, said it was the highlight of their first year and wished they had done more. Other participants did not realize it was an option available to them in their first year; CSS1 stated, "I didn't think about research or any ways I might get involved with my professors." FM3 said that offering research opportunities to students who were thinking about transferring helped keep them at the university. Thus, it makes sense that SM2 expressed her desire in seeing "them involved in research early on."

The study site discouraged first-year students from visiting Career Services in their first year and from applying for internships on their own. However, many students ignored that advice and sought out internships. Internships may be paid or unpaid, though most first-year students do not receive monetary compensation and receive course credit

instead. Of the 15 student participants, nine mentioned internships multiple times in their interview. Five of the students who did not mention internships were employed or volunteered in areas connected to their major. Additionally, 4 out of the 6 staff and faculty participants also mentioned internships. FM2 said it best in regard to students and internships, "They love the internships" and HCS1 agreed and added, "So, for many kids, the focus is on internships, so I would definitely focus on that being part of the experience here." BS2 had some advice for the study site in regard to changing the internship demographic, "Push freshmen to get internships. That helps them want to stay at the study site."

It was clear that these students are career driven and want a challenge. Careers were mentioned 42 times during the interviews and being challenged was mentioned 16 times. This aligns with research on millennials. They view themselves as adults and want guidance on how to prepare themselves for their future careers (Williamson et al., 2014). As Cortes et al. (2014) stated, they are often not getting this advice from their academic advisors, which was a noteworthy point of frustration for PPS1, and in the case of the humanities students, not getting advice from their school, so they had to turn to individual faculty members. These faculty members offered the possibility of research experiences or connections to internships, which was why it was important for first-year students to have had classes in their major, so they could be exposed to professors and opportunities in their field.

The students' desire to gain experience in their fields, whether in the classroom or in the real world has led them to approach their peers and professors to begin the process

of networking. BS2 expressed this when she talked about why she tried to make an extra effort to get to know her business professors, "But for my major courses I wanted to make a bond with them to have a relationship with them so they could help me with internships." HCS1 expressed that he liked to spend his time with professors still working in the field because "they have internship opportunities right out of the gate." The upperclassmen were not immune from the networking attempts of first-year students. BS2 mentioned how she used her RA "for personal advice like internship advice." The efforts of these students had been successful as HCS3 worked on several research projects with a professor with whom he took a class during his first year and HS1 talked about his experience with one of his learning community professors, "[Name omitted] was like I have a friend who does animation and they have an internship program so whenever you are ready for an internship let me know. Which is awesome! That kind of blew my mind."

While the first-year students may have had a personal incentive for trying to establish a connection with faculty or an upperclassman, nonetheless, their efforts not only resulted in a potential career-related opportunity, but also a connection between the student and a member of the institution. The more students reach out to professors and classmates in their field with the hopes of expanding their network, the more chances they have to build connections to their institution, which in turn helps students want to stay at the institution. PPS3 agreed with that and stated that the two reasons she stayed at the study site were, "the internships and the connections."

Astin (1984) defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518); one of the examples given for involvement was student research with a faculty member. While student research fits Astin's definition of involvement, so do internships and networking. Both of these require the student to devote physical and mental energy to build connections, understand the field, polish skills needed in the field, go on interviews, craft cover letters and resumes, and everything else involved in these processes. Thus, all of these career-related opportunities the students have taken advantage of have not only helped them gain personal connections, but have kept the students involved in the institution and helped them want to stay at the institution, which supports Astin's research.

Finding 6: Personal connections were one of the main reasons students decided to stay at the study site. Of the 15 students interviewed, 13 of them indicated that the reason they stayed at the study site and ultimately decided not to transfer was because of a personal connection they made. Whom that personal connection was with and how that personal connection was made varied among the student participants. BS2 mentioned multiple times throughout her interview the influence of her personal connections in her decision to stay, "It really was the people I met at the study site; those were my connections and my ways to stay here and want to stay here" and later "those connections that I made and those friendships really made me want to come back to the university the next year. It is the same thing for the coming year." HS3 echoed similar sentiments, "Although I was considering leaving the university I felt personally attached to the university." These personal connections helped them integrate into the university,

which as Tinto (1975) discussed, helped increase their likelihood of staying at the institution.

Another participant, PPS3, who never wanted to leave the study site because of her personal experience with PP added, "I have made so many connections with professors, advisors, jobs, friends that even if I wanted to leave I am in too deep. I just can't." She was not the first participant who mentioned feeling like they just could not leave because of the connections they had made. BS1 also felt like he could not leave because his friends would be upset with him and have "to pick up the pieces." In a short period of time they felt they made connections so strong that there would be emotional ramifications for either themselves or those they left behind. One of the two participants who did not cite connections as a reason he stayed, HCS1 felt that if he were to leave, his fraternity brothers would be fine with it in the end because they would want what was best for him.

Others, like CSS1, BS1, and PPS2, only felt it was a connection with their friends that made them stay at the study site. CSS1 stated, "My friends were right there by my side. That is what kept me here." BS1 said something similar, "What brought me back was there was a student body that I was attached to…the friends I made." The students felt that making those connections, whether they were in a classroom, student group, or on their dormitory floor served as the turning point in their first-year experience. As mentioned in Finding 2, several students talked about their involvement with a club or Greek life and the connections they made with other students via those experiences as the turning point for them at the study site, which supports Astin's (1975, 1984) research on

the role involvement has on retention. Some like HCS2, HCS3, and HS3 felt it was the connections, discussed in Finding 5, which were made while at their internship or conducting research that made the difference. Others were more general, like HS1, who felt "the turning point was definitely making friends and when I started to try to build a relationship with my professors."

Finding 7: Personal connections were more important and harder to create at an urban institution. The location of the study site in a large city has many benefits such as more opportunities for internships and more activities to stay entertained, which many of the participants pointed out during their interviews. However, it also has its drawbacks. HCS2 said the "city can be intimidating" and for students looking for a connection it can feel isolating, which HCS1 explains, "This city is not exactly the warmest of cities that there is. You can't really talk to people. Good luck finding friends or a random date." It is no wonder all three participant groups listed it as one of the reasons students transfer.

The urban location means the study site is not a traditional campus, which several participants were quick to point out. Football fields, rolling acres of grass, and huge common spaces are nonexistent, which as HCS1 stated, leads to a lack of school spirit and community:

> First of all, look around, how many people do you see wearing the letters, colors, or study site clothing? Very few. As opposed to other schools where you are going to see them all day. Sports is another way people bond and we are a city school so we don't have it.

PPS2 echoed these thoughts when asked to compare her first-year experience to that of her friends at a traditional campus:

> They have a lot of space and sports so they have a more spirited campus. We are in the city so we don't have as much space….My friends were stuck on campus their first year because they couldn't bring cars on campus. I guess that was good for them because they made a lot of friends.

The intimidating and isolating nature of the city and the lack of school spirit or community can lead to "homesickness and a different expectation of what college would be like" (SM3).

Previous research indicated that homesickness can cause students not to integrate into their college environment (English et al., 2016; O'Keeffe, 2013) and not feel connected to their college (Wilson et al., 2016). The data from the interviews supported this research. BS2's parents had learned from her older sister and told her, "the minute that the kid comes home that first week of school then they don't have that connection" so they forced her to stay at school, which "pushed me to find those connections at school to make it feel like home." Both PPS3 and BS1 remarked that others around them who frequently went home ultimately did not stay. Thus, the students enter a negative downward spiral because their lack of personal connection or feeling of isolation due to the city and the non-traditional campus makes them homesick, and if they act on this homesickness and remove themselves from campus, they further perpetuate the feeling of being isolated or not connected with the university. It is a perfect example of Tinto's

(1975) research findings in that their lack of integration on campus causes them to not

want to stay at the institution.

The urban environment and lack of traditional campus meant the institution

started off with an immediate disadvantage in trying to build a connection and

community with its students. Yet, the students craved this connection to combat that lack

of warmth and school spirit. This made the relationship between the students and their

urban institution a challenging one. As FM2 pointed out:

> I think being an urban university your connection and relationship with the school
>
> is a little bit different. It is maybe more transactional. You go to class, you do
>
> your homework, you get a job, and you might live in the dorm, but you don't have
>
> a campus with a lot of campus activities and at the end of the day if the student
>
> stays or not at the school depends a lot on whether they feel they belong at that
>
> school. That they feel comfortable at that school.

Thus, urban institutions need to help the first-year students feel connected and that they

belong in order to try to retain them.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases are those that differ from most of the data and are considered

outliers because they seem like they do not fit with the rest of the data. Each of these

cases were noted in the analysis and if an explanation was known, that was noted as well.

All data serve a purpose, so the discrepant cases needed to be analyzed to determine why

they might have occurred. Additionally, they provide a well-rounded view of the situation

at the study site as not every participant will have the same exact experience. As the

number of participants interviewed was very small, a discrepant case could speak to just one participant's experience or it could be representative of the experience of the majority of a school or division, which is why the cases were reported.

Conclusion

In this qualitative case study, the first-year experience at the study site was examined to understand why the first-year retention rate has been stagnant. The study consisted of interviews with 21 participants, 15 of whom were students from three different schools and two different programs. The remaining six participants were three faculty and three staff members who had been at the study site a minimum of 3 years and had worked with the first-year student population. All of the participants volunteered to be part of the study and signed consent forms. Data were collected via one-on-one semistructured interviews with the participants, which were audio recorded. The data were transcribed and member checking took place to ensure credibility. Additionally, triangulation involved comparing the different sets of data.

The transcripts were coded and analyzed for themes and then those themes informed the findings of the study. The following seven findings emerged from the data after coding and analysis:

Finding 1: As a whole, the study site had a difficult time establishing and maintaining a personal connection with its first-year students.

Finding 2: In most cases, students were the ones initiating the personal connection with the study site.

Finding 3: Students in the Honors College or the Potential Program were able to establish a personal connection with their advisors and felt that they were part of a community at the study site.

Finding 4: Overall, first-year initiatives had mixed effects on students' personal connections to the institution.

Finding 5: Initiatives and opportunities related to the students' major and their future careers were the most beneficial to first-year students and helped them establish connections to the study site.

Finding 6: Personal connections were one of the main reasons students decided to stay at the study site.

Finding 7: Personal connections were more important and harder to create at an urban institution.

As the findings indicate, there are concerns across multiple areas of the study site in regard to first-year retention. These concerns were seen in first year courses, housing, first-year initiatives, the first-year seminar course, access to career-related opportunities, advising, and more. Thus, a project that speaks to the problem of the institution's stagnant first-year retention rate by addressing the different areas across the institution that are of concern is warranted. A policy recommendation would allow for the different areas of concern to be discussed along with suggestions for addressing the concerns. A review of the literature will be completed to assist with the development of the project.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In this section, I will discuss the project that emerged from the findings, which became evident after data analysis was completed. The purpose of the project was to address the findings by recommending various solutions based on the literature and the data that were collected. The project chosen was a policy recommendation paper, which is more commonly referred to as a white paper, and the rationale for this selection will be explained further on. I conducted a literature review on the genre so that the purpose and structure of a white paper could be understood and implemented correctly. Following the literature review, a description of the project will be included, along with an explanation of needed resources, existing supports, potential barriers, the implementation timeline, and the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the project. Lastly, a project evaluation plan and implications of the project will be included.

Rationale

I chose a white paper as the project (see Appendix A) because the data analysis described in Section 2 showed numerous areas across the study site that needed to be addressed in regard to first-year retention. These areas included the setup of the dormitories, the events in the dormitories, the role of Peer Leaders in the first-year seminar course, the curriculum for the first-year seminar course, learning community design and assignment, the lack of promotion of opportunities at the university, the lack of social spaces, and more. As these concerns were not confined to just academics, curriculum development was ruled out as a possible project. Some of the concerns

involved the physical space of the campus, which is not something that can be remedied in a project that involves program evaluation or professional development. A white paper was the project that best allowed me to address academic, physical, and programmatic concerns.

The medium of a white paper allowed me to discuss the concerns that came from the data analysis in terms of what was occurring at the study site. It also allowed me to frame what was occurring at the study site within the general context of research in the field of retention. Additionally, based on the data analysis and other research, I proposed solutions to these concerns so that the stakeholders, upper administrators at the study site, can decide an appropriate course of action. As retention is currently an issue of concern at the institution, it is my hope that the expeditious nature of a white paper will help get the needed information into the stakeholders' hands so that the overall retention issue is addressed in a timely manner.

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Review of the Literature

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I conducted a literature review on the genre of the project, which is a white paper. However, white papers can have many other names, and according to Graham (2013), some of these names include a competitive review, discussion paper, evaluator's guide, executive briefing, market overview, position paper, product briefing, and special report. Other common names are policy paper and grey literature (Ćirković, 2017; Haddaway, Collins, Coughlin, & Kirk, 2015; Hyatt, 2013). As white papers can serve many purposes (Campbell & Naidoo, 2016; Willerton 2013), many of them related to business

(Willerton, 2013), I narrowed the list of interchangeable names to grey literature, position paper, and policy paper as these were more in line with the purpose of my white paper.

I conducted the search for sources using Google Scholar and the databases of both Walden University and the study site. In particular, ERIC and ProQuest were used. The main search terms included: *grey literature*, *policy*, *policy analysis*, *policy implementation*, *policy paper*, *policy reform*, *position paper*, *white paper*, *writing a policy paper*, *writing a white paper*, and *writing policy*. These terms were also combined with one or more of the following terms: *academic persistence*, *attrition*, *college attendance*, *higher education*, *history of*, *persistence*, *retention*, *Tinto*, and *Winston Churchill*. While numerous search terms were used, the results were limited in terms of sources that were current and peer reviewed. This seems to be a common problem within in this field of research because many white papers are not peer reviewed (Campbell & Naidoo, 2016) due to the time the process takes (Paez, 2017), the purpose of white papers (Campbell & Naidoo, 2016; Paez, 2017), and the intended audience of the paper (Mahood, Van Eerd, & Irvin, 2013).

White Papers

White papers got their name back in the early 20th century in the United Kingdom (Graham, 2013; Kantor, 2009). They were first used in the field of government (Willerton, 2013) when the aides working for the members of parliament would provide brief reports for their representatives on the legislation that was coming up for a vote (Kantor, 2009). The quick turnaround time of these reports meant that the members of parliament just needed the facts, so their clerks did not waste time on binding the

document and giving it a hard cover (Graham, 2013; Kantor, 2009; Willerton, 2013).

Instead, they just put a regular white page on top of the report, which caused the reports

to be called *white papers* (Graham, 2013; Kantor, 2009; Willerton, 2013). This

distinguished these reports from blue books, which were bound reports with a blue cover

(Willerton, 2013) and white books, which were official national publications from the

government (Stelzner, 2006). White papers continued to be used in government with one

of the early white papers coming from Winston Churchill in 1922 on the conflict in

Palestine (Stelzner, 2006).

As government and technology started to become intertwined during the world

wars, white papers started to appear in the field of technology (Graham, 2013). Willlerton

(2013) specifically pointed to the scientists working on the Manhattan Project for the

crossover of the white paper into the world of technology. Nevertheless, the introduction

of the personal computer and the Internet created a need to quickly understand the new

technology, which led to white papers becoming a fixture in the technology market

(Graham, 2013; Willerton, 2013). This new technology led to the development of desktop

publishing and gave businesses the chance to produce their own marketing reports

making white papers a staple in the business industry (Graham, 2013).

Currently, there are many different definitions of a white paper due to the fact

there are many different purposes for them (Graham, 2013; Willerton, 2013). Graham's

(2013) definition was, "A white paper is a persuasive essay that uses facts and logic to

promote a B2B [Business to Business] product, service, technology, or methodology" (p.

58). As the white paper for this project was in the field of education as opposed to

business or technology, that definition was not completely applicable. However, the core element of the definition is true in this situation, which is that it is "a persuasive essay that uses facts and logic" (Graham, 2013, p. 58). Campbell and Naidoo (2016) had a similar thread running through their definition, which was white papers are "documents [that] both inform and persuade readers" (p. 9). White paper industry leader, Michael Stelzner (2006), defined a white paper as a "persuasive document that usually describes problems and how to solve them" (p. 2), which is closer to the purpose of the white paper for this project.

White papers are flexible and can serve many different purposes (Willerton, 2013). Some researchers have classified white papers by their purpose, others have classified them by their audience, and others by type (Campbell & Naidoo, 2016). Those that classify them by purpose tend to divide them into two main categories: marketing documents and impartial briefing documents (Willerton, 2013). Those that classify by audience divide the main audiences for white papers into business, education, government, and technology (McPherson, 2010). Those that classify by type, like Graham, believe there are three types, which are backgrounder white papers, numbered-list white papers, and problem/solution white papers (Campbell & Naidoo, 2016). Backgrounders are white papers that provide the background of a product or service, numbered-lists provide the key points about an issue, and problem/solution ones contain a solution to a problem (Campbell & Naidoo, 2016).

Most of the researchers seem to agree that white papers can be used in a variety of sectors (Graham, 2013; McPherson, 2010; Willerton, 2013). However, Oswald (2013)

viewed white papers strictly in terms of public policy. In particular, Oswald believed that there are two types of documents regarding public policy, those that explore policy questions and those that influence policy. According to Oswald, the former are called green papers and the latter are called white papers, which is an important distinction because they can be mistaken as the same type of document even though green papers are more opinion based. This mistake seems to occur in the United States because the United Kingdom distinguishes between the two (Oswald, 2013).

Because the definition and purpose of a white paper can vary, so too can the length and format. Campbell and Naidoo (2016) found little guidance on writing a white paper so they conducted their own genre analysis using 20 white papers. They found the average page length was 12.2 pages, though the white papers they studied ranged from six to 29 pages. In terms of format, they found that the first step is to introduce the problem, which includes introducing the background, mentioning the questions or gaps identified, and providing an outline. The next step is to present the solution, which includes the benefits of the solution, the key features, the limitations, and the sustainability. The third step is the call to action, and the fourth step establishes the credibility of the author.

Rotarius (2016), who discussed white papers in reference to health care, suggested the paper should be about 25 pages and the sections of the paper should include: statement of the issue, background, review of the literature, possible solutions, proposed solution, implications, a conclusion, and references. Graham (2013), on the other hand, indicated that most white papers are between six and eight pages, but they

could be as long as a 100 pages. Pershing (2015) also suggested a similar page count and put the average at five to 10 pages. Powell (2012) felt a white paper should have 10 sections, which include the problem identification, history, presentation of the positions, benchmarks, outcomes, benefits of the stated position, call to action, references, executive summary, and a cover page. According to Graham, the format changes based on the type of white paper chosen, but despite the format white papers include many of the elements previously listed.

Grey Literature

White papers fall under the category of *grey literature* (Ćirković, 2017; Haddaway, Collins, Coughlin, & Kirk, 2015). Unlike white papers, grey literature has a standard definition, which was adopted during the Third International Conference on Grey Literature in 1997 in Luxembourg (Bellefontaine & Lee, 2013; Lawrence, 2012; Lawrence, Thomas, Houghton, & Weldon, 2015). That standard definition is "Information produced on all levels of government, academia, business and industry in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing, i.e., where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body" (Bonato, 2016, p. 252). The term grey literature came "from the German phrase 'Graue literatur'" and was adopted in 1978 (Lawrence, 2012, p. 123). According to Mahood et al. (2014), the types of documents that fall under grey literature include dissertations, conference proceedings, reports, book chapters, magazine articles, newsletters, and blogs. Lawrence (2012) also listed working papers, technical manuals, and government publications as examples of

grey literature, while Bellefontaine and Lee (2013) added unpublished studies and Anameric (2009) added patents and meeting minutes as well.

The main publishers of grey literature are universities and other higher education institutions; government agencies on the international, national, and local levels; and various companies or firms (Bonato, 2016). While there are numerous types of grey literature documents from a wide variety of sources, this type of literature is actually difficult to find and organize (Bellefontaine & Lee, 2013; Lawrence, 2012; Paez, 2017). This is because these sources are primarily not peer reviewed and usually do not appear in journals, which would help researchers locate them easily (Lawrence, 2012). Some of these documents do not even appear in electronic form (Lawrence, 2012). Several studies on grey literature centered around various systematic searches of grey literature on a specific topic (Bonato, 2016; Haddaway et al., 2015; Mahood et al., 2014; Paez, 2017). All of them concluded that various search tools were able to find grey literature, but the results were usually not in the first dozen pages of results and some important results were missing (Bonato, 2016; Haddaway et al., 2015; Mahood et al., 2014; Paez, 2017).

While grey literature may be hard to find, the benefits of the literature are quite clear. According to Bellefontaine and Lee (2013) and Paez (2017), grey literature helps minimize the effects of publication bias when included in studies that use peer-reviewed sources, results get disseminated faster because they do not have to be reviewed for journal publication, null or negative results of studies can be reported, and the fact that it informs stakeholders and usually contains up-to-date information. Ćirković (2017) also

echoed the benefit of distributing the data quickly. Additionally, the fact the documents are often not published in journals means the documents can be read without a fee.

Lawrence et al. (2015) found that very little was known about how grey literature was used in public policy, so they conducted several surveys with the sample size ranging from 125–1,012 people. They found that grey literature was an important source for those making policy and "makes up 60% or more of the material they consult" (p. 236). The authors also reported that policy makers appreciated that the information was timely, free, and contained information they could not find in other places. Grey literature was also how the policy makers disseminated their results on policy (Lawrence et al., 2015) because publishing in journals does not guarantee that consumers and other similar organizations and agencies will read the results (Mays & Hogg, 2012).

Policy Papers

Policy papers or briefs are one form of white paper (Hyatt, 2013) and like white papers, there is not just one definition. Nash (2013) suggested two definitions for policy, "the basic principles, or guidance, that directs our actions" (p. 1) and "a series of steps that should be taken to achieve an outcome" (p. 3). Moore's (2013) definition also included taking action, "unique documents [that] present a discursive act tied to concrete action, drawing attention to the social, cultural, and political effect of technical communication" (p. 64). DeMarco and Tufts (2014) defined policy briefs as "reports addressing the interests and needs of policy makers" and describe their characteristics as "short and easy to use" (p. 1).

Overall, the definitions seem to be that policy papers are documents that provide policy makers information on an issue at hand so they may decide on the appropriate action. While the aforementioned definitions focused on policy makers, there are other audiences for policy papers and briefs (Trueb, 2013). The general public or the people affected by the policy may also read the policy paper (DeMarco & Tufts, 2014). The audience for the policy is usually determined by the topic or purpose of the policy (Biswas & Paczynska, 2015).

Policies can serve many different purposes (Nash, 2013) and appear in a wide variety of sectors. These sectors can include health care, business, education, government, and more. The primary purpose of policy papers is to provide information or findings on a certain topic and make recommendations (DeMarco & Tufts, 2014). However, it is important to know who wrote the policy and who they wrote it for as that shapes the format, content, and even the tone of the policy paper (DeMarco & Tufts, 2014). A policy intended to inform the average consumer might use different examples and wording than a policy aimed at industry experts.

Those who write about writing policy have different ways of approaching and formatting a policy paper. Some of the consistencies across the authors are that policy papers need to be clear and concise (Biswas & Paczynska, 2015; Nash, 2013; Swain & Swain, 2016). Additionally, they cannot just be large blocks of text. They need to be formatted with titles and headings (Swain & Swain, 2016); bullet points (DeMarco & Tufts, 2014; Nash, 2013); and use font styles such as bold, underline, and italics (DeMarco & Tufts, 2014). As for the setup of the document, Nash (2013) and Hyatt

(2013) were the least specific. Nash just specified that there needed to be a title, purpose, and it needed to connect back to the appropriate legislation, while Hyatt mentioned the authors needed to legitimize their claims.

DeMarco and Tufts (2014) were more specific and believed a policy brief should contain four parts: an executive summary, background and significance, a position statement with appropriate actions, and a current reference list. They believed the whole document should not be longer than four pages. The background and significance part of the document is where the key concerns are laid out and data are used to support the concerns. The position portion focuses on the recommendations and what could occur if something is not done about the issue.

Cooley and Pennock (2015) analyzed policy writing and determined there were eight steps including defining the problem, assembling evidence, constructing alternatives, selecting criteria, projecting outcomes, confronting tradeoffs, deciding the story, and telling the story. The second step of assembling evidence involves determining the scope and background of the problem. Constructing the alternatives, selecting criteria, and confronting tradeoffs involves assessing other approaches, using a specified set of criteria to eliminate or narrow down the possible approaches, and requires the pros and cons of each alternative to be weighed. The last two steps involve storytelling, which Moore (2013) also believes should be part of the process. Additionally, Cooley and Pennock included writing the executive summary in this step. The executive summary is particularly helpful for those short on time (DeMarco & Tufts, 2014) and when policy documents are particularly long.

Policies on Higher Education Persistence

As policies can be written in various sectors, it is important to review policies in higher education as those are the most relevant to this study. Unfortunately, policies in regards to persistence, in particular first-year retention, are not common. St. John, Daun-Barnett, and Moronski-Chapman (2012) stated that state and federal policies on higher education persistence are fairly new, underfunded, and are not often studied because policymakers place more emphasis on degree completion than persistence. Additionally, it is difficult to connect the effects of a government policy on persistence because each institution is unique and has its own internal policies and programs, which means results are inconsistent due to too many confounding variables (St. John et al., 2012). Rigby, Woulfin, and Marz (2016) pointed out that educational policies are rarely implemented as intended, which also makes their effects difficult to trace. Another issue with persistence policy is if states reward the schools with higher retention rates, then that money is going to the wealthier elite schools, which hurts schools with different demographics (St. John et al., 2012).

President Clinton tried to have the states create systems that would report retention outcomes so that the public could be informed, but it was met with resistance and failed (St. John et al., 2012). While Clinton may have failed, similar systems were developed in recent years. One area that has been shown to improve college persistence is financial aid policy. St. John et al. (2012) noted that the changes and improvement of financial aid policies over the years have influenced persistence rates.

Another policy that had an effect on retention was the reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008, which was in response to a directive from Congress to outline "the gaps in access to and completion of higher education" (Ross et al., 2012, p. v). This act had a stronger focus on retention (St. John et al., 2012). It gave states grants that were specifically focused on persistence, in particular in connection with low income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). These grants were to be used as financial aid and to fund programs that focused on outreach, intervention, and mentoring (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Additionally, a pilot program was started that allowed institutions of higher education to apply for funding to support student success, in particular retention (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). These various grants were found to have a positive connection with retention (Chen & St. John, 2011). Student Support Services, which is part of the federal TRIO programs, has also shown some success in regard to retention (St. John et al., 2012). Unfortunately, many of these grants and programs are either being dismantled or are facing cuts (Douglas-Gabriel, 2017), which means institutions need to think of new ways to improve retention.

Project Description

Based on the data analysis and the review of the literature I created a white paper related to the study site's first-year retention concerns. These concerns include the setup of the dormitories, the events in the dormitories, the role of Peer Leaders in the first-year seminar course, the curriculum for the first-year seminar course, learning community design and assignment, the lack of promotion of opportunities at the university, the lack of social spaces, and more. These concerns along with the solutions that stem from the

data analysis and previous research are included in the white paper. The white paper will

be presented to the key stakeholders involved in the institution's retention plan.

Needed Resources, Existing Supports, and Potential Barriers

Very little resources are needed to have my project heard and discussed amongst

the stakeholders; only the price of photocopying and binding the white paper would be

incurred, which is nominal. However, the needed resources to implement the solutions in

my project are much greater. Time is one of the biggest resources needed, as changing

the structure of curriculum, programming, and advertisement of opportunities would take

time. The second biggest resource needed is money, which is also a potential barrier as

the institution is experiencing a tight financial period. It is my assumption that the

solutions that require financial input will be met with the biggest challenge from the

stakeholders and might require the institution to wait to implement those until there is an

improvement in the finances.

Numerous administrators have expressed interest in my work. Many of them have

been eagerly waiting for my results to be shared with them. Aside from finding a day for

scheduling, I do not anticipate having a difficult time bringing the key stakeholders

together to discuss my white paper. However, I could foresee some pushback from

several directors in the divisions I discuss in my white paper as they might take what I

present as criticism and feel offended, when that is not the intention.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

Upon approval of my study by Walden University, I will schedule a meeting with

the vice president for student success, the director for student success, the provost, and

the associate provost as these are administrators within the university that concern themselves with the university's retention. I will present my white paper to them and discuss my study. As noted in my white paper, there are problems that exist across several divisions in the university, so it is my hope that the administrators will either discuss these concerns with the division administrators or allow me to invite representatives from these areas to a larger conversation. In particular, I believe the director of Residential Life and several top staff members from the Center of Academic Excellence should join the conversation. I am hoping many of the concerns and solutions can be discussed over the summer so that some of the solutions could possibly be implemented for the upcoming school year.

Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others

It is up to me to contact the aforementioned administrators to set up a meeting and explain the importance of said meeting. It is also my responsibility to send them copies of the white paper in advance of the meeting so they have enough time to review it. I also need to anticipate questions and concerns that they might have and be ready to respond. If they want me to have additional meetings with other stakeholders, then I will need to schedule those meetings and prepare for them. It is the responsibility of the stakeholders to read the white paper, attend the meeting(s), actively participate, and hopefully help advocate for the solutions proposed if they agree with them.

<p align="center">**Project Evaluation Plan**</p>

The project evaluation plan will include both formative and summative evaluations. Formative evaluation is conducted while the project is underway (Lodico et

al., 2010). The benefit of this form of evaluation is that data are collected in the moment, which provides feedback that can help adjust the project as it progresses. If there is a problem that occurs, it can be addressed right away instead of waiting until the end of the project. The formative evaluation will take place in two stages. The first stage will occur before the project is presented to the primary stakeholders, who are the vice president for student success, the director for student success, the provost, and the associate provost. This stage will involve qualitative data collection in the form of a survey (Appendix E) that will focus on the clarity and thoroughness of the project and recommendations. The data will be collected from a small group of faculty and staff who did not participate in the study, but teach first-year students. I will randomly choose eight professors and staff members and e-mail them to request their participation. They will be sent the white paper and survey electronically and will have a specified period of time in which they need to return it to me. I will review their responses and make any adjustments needed to the white paper.

The second stage of formative evaluation will occur once the project is underway, when at least one recommendation is in the process of being implemented. As many of the recommendations require financial and human resources, donors and administrators cannot wait until the end of the project to receive information, updates, and data. Thus, Stage 2 would occur via the written updates from the various staff, faculty, and administrators tasked with making the project a reality. Meetings throughout the year with the stakeholders may take place, so that the updates can be discussed altogether and advice could be solicited.

Summative evaluation occurs at the end of the project (Lodico et al., 2010). In this situation, the evaluation would occur a year after the project has been fully implemented because first-year retention requires a cohort to complete a full year in order to track their retention. While the overall first-year retention rate will be reviewed, more importantly, the first-year retention rate for the particular groups affected by the recommendations will need to be examined (i.e., Dormitory A students). The combined formative and summative evaluations will provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of the project.

Project Implications

The purpose of this project is to provide information and possible solutions to the administration at the study site to improve the institution's first-year retention rate and benefit the institution in numerous ways. The study site would benefit financially (O'Keefe, 2013) as each student retained means additional tuition and housing revenue. The ripple effect from additional revenue could be reflected in a number of ways including more full-time faculty being hired or an increase in student conference funding, all of which would help improve the experience students have at the institution. Additionally, an increase in first-year retention could result in an increase in institutional rankings and reputation (Aljohani, 2016), which usually is coupled with an upturn in admissions, and the value of a degree from the study site could increase in the eyes of employers.

The project will also allow the issue of first-year retention to be discussed from a new perspective within the study site and with new data. This is particularly important

since the overall retention rate has remained stagnant; a change is needed. Retaining students also benefits the students as it means they will stay at one institution, which means they have a better chance of graduating and receiving their degree within 4 years (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). As previously stated, degree completion has been shown to lower the risk of unemployment by 15%–25% depending on age, and increase potential wages by an average of 62% (Kena et al., 2015, pp. 42, 47).

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

With this project, I aimed to increase personal connection, and subsequently, the first-year retention rate by making small changes to structures, programs, and other items that were already in place at the study site. This, in itself, is a strength because the project would not require a drastic change to the status quo meaning that it is more likely to be considered and implemented. The recommendations in the project were intended to increase personal connection, which research has indicated has numerous benefits for the students such as a sense of belonging (see Aljohani, 2016; O'Keefe, 2013). Another goal was to increase students' connections with faculty members in the classrooms and through other opportunities, which would be beneficial to both the students and the institution (Micari & Pazos, 2012; Nalbone et al., 2015). The recommendations to improve the concerns with the Peer Leaders would help increase student-to-student connections, and in particular, mentoring, which has been found to improve retention and is beneficial to both the mentor and mentee (see Yomtov et al., 2015). Additionally, my recommendation to increase and improve the learning community offerings would allow the study site to improve an already effective first-year initiative (see Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016; Bonet & Walters, 2016; Nosaka & Novak, 2014).

The main limitations for this project involve approval and resources. As the project was presented in a white paper format addressed to administrators, it requires them to not only read the recommendations but also approve some or all of them in order to make them happen. The recommendations are not necessarily bottom up or grassroots

initiatives that could be implemented without top administrative approval. Additionally, some of the initiatives, like changes to the doors in the dormitories, require the allocation of financial resources. There is no alternative for the doors that does not require money; therefore, the solution is solely dependent on financial input from the institution.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The problem I addressed with this study was the stagnant first-year retention rate at the study site. I chose to address that problem through the lens of personal connection, specifically the lack of students' personal connection. A qualitative study was conducted using one-on-one interviews, and I used the results to write a white paper. Another approach to the problem could have been to study other potential variables in first-year retention, such as those relating to students' financial or emotional issues or issues of the institution. Alternatively, I could have explored a different aspect of the social realm in regard to first-year retention.

Other options would have been to explore different study designs, data collection methods, and projects. A quantitative study could have been conducted assessing at-risk students on the previously mentioned variables and then analyzing their transfer and retention data. Focus groups could have been used instead of one-on-one interviews to determine if different groups of participants had shared experiences. Additionally, other projects could have been explored, such as an update to the first-year seminar curriculum including the Peer Leader component, a new training course for first-year seminar instructors and their Peer Leaders, and professional development for all instructors and staff working with first-year students on how to form connections with the students.

A different approach to the retention concerns of the study site would have been to study second- or third-year retention, which would involve more variables and where there is less research. That approach could have involved a longitudinal study following certain students for more than 1 year to learn what affected the likelihood that they would transfer. Data could have been collected from students who had left the university to determine the reasons why they chose to transfer after they had already spent several years at the study site.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

I was always a person who learned more by doing than by being in a classroom being lectured at or reading a textbook. The experience with this study was no different. The research classes at Walden introduced research, different research designs, data collection, and evaluation. However, it was not until I started this study that I truly learned what it meant to be a researcher. The skills I learned over the last year and a half have been invaluable to me as a student and a higher education professional.

Prior to this study, I had written several theses and research papers. I knew how to use the library, interlibary loan services, and was familiar with databases. However, I relied mainly on books as sources and my use of articles was limited. The need to have almost 60 peer-reviewed current sources was a new and scary concept for me when I first started. Over the course of this study, I learned how to effectively use databases by learning how to correctly use search terms. I became familiar with numerous educational databases and explored other databases in the fields of psychology, political science, health, and library science. The research skills I acquired have already proven to be

useful because I can now find elusive articles for my students who are conducting their own research.

The familiarity with databases and the access to journals they compile has helped me learn to appreciate the various journals that exist. A whole new world of educational reading was opened up to me once I started reading hundreds of journal articles for this study. Upon seeing their importance, I now subscribe to several different journals in the fields of history, higher education, honors education, and retention. I have also learned the importance of attending conferences to learning about new research being conducted and hearing new solutions to old problems. I have increased my attendance at conferences including one on retention. I plan to attend and hopefully to present at conferences on the first-year experience and retention in the future.

As my background is in history and education, many of the research papers and theses I wrote dealt with the past, and they did not require me to collect data from or about those who are living. While I was previously an IRB member and reviewed other researchers' proposed studies, I had never conducted my own study requiring IRB approval. Conducting this study made me realize how intricate the IRB process truly is and how it can be daunting for the researcher, especially the student researcher. As the student, an individual's own study seems to be clear and in alignment, but that is because every aspect of the study is known to the student regardless of whether or not it is on paper. The IRB reviewer represents a new set of eyes and may not be able to see what is obvious to the student. This is why it is important for every detail of the data collection process to be specified, regardless of whether it seems repetitive. I now have a new

appreciation and understanding of the IRB process from both the perspective of the student and the reviewer.

As someone who has been trained in project-based learning and has assisted students with it, I found the process of this study to be a good test of the skills I had been previously taught. Some of those crucial skills involved brainstorming, organizing, planning, and outlining. I found I had to stay organized to keep progressing. I organized folders in my computer to correspond to the different parts of the process, but more importantly, I used one notebook to record my thoughts, notes, outlines, lists, deadlines, advice, and more. Having one location for everything kept me focused and on track, especially when I had to return to previous sections and make edits. Organization was also vital for the literature review. I had three binders that were alphabetized and broken down into categories with dividers, which made writing and later editing the literature reviews much easier. Additionally, I kept my notes and quotes from the literature in a categorized document in Microsoft OneNote, which I referenced throughout the study. Without staying organizing and planning everything, the research process and writing would have been overwhelming.

The experience conducting this study challenged me in ways I never thought it would both physically and mentally. I learned critical skills that I can apply to future research and classes as well as my teaching and other interactions with my students. The research experience has inspired me to become more engaged at the study site as a leader as well as in my field. I now feel more confident speaking up at meetings with administrators and advocating for first-year students because I know the research in the

field and I know the data at the study site. I am looking forward to applying everything I learned during this project study when conducting more research on related and new topics in the future.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

Having worked at the study site for 10 years in various departments, I thought I knew everything there was to know about how the institution functioned and how members of the institution perceived it, in particular, the students. I believed the first-year seminar course and the Peer Leaders associated with the course would be the students' favorite part of their first-year experience. After conducting this study, I realized I did not know as much about the institution as I thought I did. I also incorrectly assumed that all students' experiences would be similar to those my students have at the institution. The results of this study made me aware of multiple areas in which the study site can improve and not just in terms of first-year retention. It also made me realize that not all students' experiences are equal because the various professors, dormitories, classes, schools, and programs affect their experiences. Additionally, I now see the different departments and schools in a new light.

Since I started this study, I have approached my work and meetings with a new perspective. I try to view aspects of the institution through the lens of retention but also through one of personal connection. I have found that personal connection is important to all kinds of work at the study site and not just in regard to retention. The research required to complete this study has made me a more informed staff member, and I have found that I have engaged more in administrative conversations because I know the data

and the history of the institution. Lastly, the research skills required to complete this study have also made me a better research advisor for my students. I have been able to help them develop research questions and hypotheses, search for articles, organize a literature review, and complete IRB paperwork with much more ease.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Findings from this study indicated that personal connection does play a role in whether a student stays at the study site. As personal connection has not been an area that the institution has focused on in regard to first-year retention efforts, focusing on this area and following some of the recommendations I made may help to start to improve the first-year retention rate. As the recommendations would take time to be discussed, approved, and implemented, change is not expected to occur right away. There could be a slight improvement in the first cohort that experiences the changes and even greater improvement after the changes have been in place for more than a year.

The recommendations might put the study site back on track to reach the 2020 retention goal of 79% either in 2020 or shortly afterwards. Additionally, viewing first-year retention in a new light might help to develop other solutions that will move the study site away from the status quo. I also hope that this study brings more attention to the mainstream students who need more advising, guidance, and connection. By improving the experience for the students at the study site, the first-year retention rate may improve, and also the 4-, 5-, and 6-year graduation rates because researcher has shown there is a link between first-year retention and graduation (see Barefoot, 2004).

If I were to expand this study, I would interview students who had left the study site to learn why they left and when they knew they wanted to leave. I would also want to know their thoughts about the institution they transferred to, and if that was a better fit for them, and why. Personal connection and the related recommendations may also be applied to the retention concerns for second- and third-year retention, which would be an interesting study to conduct in the future. Additionally, case studies could be conducted with varying institution sizes, locations, and types to assess the role of personal connection. Research on personal connection in regard to retention is limited and it is my hope that this study is a small step toward others investigating the topic.

Conclusion

This study began as something I noticed at the study site, which seemed to be a lack of personal connection between the students and members of the institution. At the same time, I was learning about the institution's first-year retention rate and the struggle to improve it. Curiosity made me want to investigate whether there was a connection between the two. After an extensive review of the literature on retention, in particular first-year retention, it was clear that personal connection was an underresearched topic within the field of retention and that it was an underlying theme in many of the traditional first-year retention issues. The results of conducting 21 interviews with a combination of students, staff, and faculty indicated that the lack of personal connection was indeed a problem at the study site and that whether a student felt connected to the institution influenced their decision to stay.

The data also revealed numerous areas that the institution needed to improve in order to increase personal connection and influence first-year retention. Some of these areas included the first-year seminar course, learning communities, housing, access and knowledge of opportunities on campus, spaces to spend time together, and professors who show they care about students. I composed a white paper offering recommendations for possible improvements to courses, training, the setup of dormitories, specialized retention committees, and more specifically, to address the concerns indicated in the findings of the study. Implementation of the recommendations and a focus on increasing personal connection may help to improve the first-year experience and subsequent retention of the first-year students at the study site.

There is a famous paraphrase of a passage from French novelist Marcel Proust (1923, trans. 1968), the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes. This study has been a journey and the benefit has been a new perspective on research, but more importantly, on the first-year experience at the study site. While my hope is that information learned from the study helps to solve the problem of the first-year retention rate at the institution, it in turn allows for the opportunity to improve students' educational experience, which is the reason why I became an educator. Now I hope to open the eyes of others who can assist me on this voyage.

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Appendix A: The Project

Increasing Students' Personal Connections on Campus in an Effort to Improve

the First-Year Retention Rate

A White Paper Prepared by

Jaclyn Kopel

November 2017

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Executive Summary

The Problem
<u>National Level</u>
The number of students transferring is estimated to be between 30-50% and more than half of these students transferred in their first year of college. The national first-year retention rate of 64% is the lowest in the industrialized world.

<u>Local Level</u>
The study site has been working to improve its first-year retention rate, which has a 19-year average of 75%, lower than the recent average for its peer group of institutions of 86%. Since 1997 the study site has shown little improvement in its first-year retention rate despite numerous first-year initiatives.

The Study
A qualitative case study was used to <u>explore the effects of personal connection on first-year retention</u>. Interviews were conducted with 15 students, 3 faculty, and 3 staff members on the main campus.

Findings
1. As a whole, the study site had a difficult time establishing and maintaining a personal connection with its first-year students.
2. In most cases, students were the ones initiating the personal connection with the study site.
3. Students in the Honors College or the Potential Program were able to establish a personal connection with their advisors and felt that they were part of a community at the study site.
4. Overall, first-year initiatives had mixed effects on students' personal connections to the institution.
5. Initiatives and opportunities related to the students' majors and their future careers were the most beneficial to first-year students and helped them establish connections to the study site.
6. Personal connections were one of the main reasons students decided to stay at the study site.
7. Personal connections were more important and more difficult to create at an urban institution.

Recommendations
- Improve the hiring process for first-year seminar instructors
- Improve Peer Leader training and allow them time to meet with students in class
- Increase learning community offerings to match the majors offered
- Discontinue removing floors from Dormitory B for staff offices
- Replace the doors in Dormitory A
- Create an Opportunities Fair
- Create a Cross-Campus Retention Program made up of several specific committees who work collaboratively.

Background

National Level

The number of students enrolling in college in the United States is on the rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), but so is the rate of students transferring from one institution to another, which is estimated at between 30-50% (O'Keeffe, 2013; Staklis, Bersudskaya, & Horn, 2011). As more than half of these students transferred in their first year of college (Morrow & Ackerman, 2012), first-year retention is particularly concerning. The national first-year retention rate of 64% is the lowest in the industrialized world (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; O'Keeffe, 2013). It is no wonder that the research on first-year retention is extensive.

Review of the Literature

The research on first-year retention cites numerous potential causes for students transferring or dropping out. Some of these potential causes include financial issues, emotional issues, social issues, and the institutional experience. However, the underlying theme of many of these concerns is the lack of personal connection.

Financial Issues:

- Many first generation, low income, and immigrant families are **not financially literate** and can find the process confusing and overwhelming (Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2015).

- The **lack of financial literacy** has the potential to affect the amount of financial aid students will receive in their first and subsequent years as well as the amount of loans they will accrue (Witkow et al., 2015).

- The amount of **debt** accumulated from college loans and/or credit cards used to pay for college expenses becomes a **financial stress** on the family and the student, which has been shown to cause students to either transfer to a less expensive school or drop out completely (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Letkiewicz et al., 2014).

- Working off-campus often detaches the student from the campus, lowering the chances of integration (O'Keeffe, 2013).

- Financial concerns and stresses often are not addressed by institutions through any type of counseling service (Bonet & Walters, 2016).

Emotional Issues:

- **Homesickness** can wear on students and cause them not to completely integrate into their new environment (English, Davis, Wei, & Gross, 2016; O'Keeffe, 2013) or make them want to go to an institution closer to their home (Mattern, Wyatt, & Shaw, 2013).

- Wilson et al.'s (2016) studies on homesickness and ecological tethering found that **leaving campus had numerous negative effects** on the students in relation to retention; students reported feeling less connected to the university, felt more isolated, and their GPAs decreased.

- Kelly, LaVergne, Boone Jr., and Boone (2012) found that over half of the students indicated they were **stressed**, which the researchers believed was one of the factors that affected retention.

- About a third of American students are **struggling with depression** (Novotney, 2014) and many students arrive on campus with **preexisting mental health issues** (Field, 2016).

- Counseling centers are being stretched beyond capacity (Field, 2016; Novotney, 2014).

- Without emotional support and counseling (Delgado-Guerrero, Cherniack, & Gloria, 2014), mental health problems can lead students to transfer or drop out of school (O'Keeffe, 2013; Novotney, 2014).

- Sixty-five percent of students **left their institution for non-academic reasons** (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012); therefore, it is important to look at the social realm, especially when students left their institution even though they had high GPAs (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

- Students often complained that they felt they **did not belong** (O'Keeffe, 2013), that they **did not fit in** (O'Keeffe, 2013), **were unhappy with their social life** (Kelly et al., 2012), or had **no connection** to their peers (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Kelly et al., 2012). Many went as far as to say they felt like an **outsider** (Kahu, 2013) or were in **isolation** (Kelly et al., 2012).

- Without a feeling of connection or a sense of belonging these students either indicated that they were more likely to leave their institution or they actually transfered to another one (Aljohani, 2016; Bers & Schuetz, 2014, Kahu, 2013; Kelly et al., 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013).

- Minority students **did not feel welcomed** by their peers (Schreiner & Nelson, 2013).

- **Commuters** reported **lower levels of integration** with the campus community (Ishitani, 2016). They have also been shown to have **lower engagement levels** (Letkiewicz et al., 2014).

Institutional Experience:

- A **student's relationship with a faculty member** is consistently listed as one of the **most important relationships** a student can have on campus, especially in terms of retention (Kahu, 2013; Kelly et al., 2012; Micari & Pazos, 2012).

- Students believed significant **relationships between faculty and students were lacking** (Micari & Pazos, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013; Turner & Thompson, 2014).

- Research, teaching, and publication are usually emphasized in the tenure process, which **leaves little room for faculty to bond with students** or even see the importance of doing so (Micari & Pazos, 2012).

- Millennial students, defined as those born between 1982 and 2002, are used to "helicopter parents" who are constantly there for them, and high school teachers who care for them during homeroom, advisory meetings, or after school, which is not how faculty typically act or what they do (Turner & Thompson, 2014, p. 94).

- Despite students constantly using technology, professors often failed to use it in their classrooms (Lin, Hoffman, & Borengasser, 2013; Nalbone et al., 2015). Researchers including Pruett and Absher (2015) found the level of **in-class engagement had the biggest influence on retention**.

- Like in-person classes, **students craved personalized and individual interactions** with their peers and faculty (Hoskins, 2012), in particular, faculty feedback (Noble & Russell, 2013), but often did not receive them (Hoskins, 2012) in online classes.

- **Generic and brief advising** (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Williamson, Goosen, & Gonzalez Jr., 2014) inhibited students from forming a connection to their advisor.

- Many of the problems with advising were due to **too many students assigned to each advisor** (Williamson et al., 2014), which made personal and individualized advising almost impossible.

Local Level

The study site has been working to improve its first-year retention rate, which has a 19-year average of 75%, lower than the recent average for its peer group of institutions (determined by the SAT range and geographic location) of 86% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2015). While the first-year retention rate of the study site is above the national average of 64%, since 1997 it has shown little improvement in its first-year retention rate despite numerous first-year initiatives (Study site, 2014). During the last 3 years, the study site has consistently maintained a first-year retention rate above 76%, which is the first instance of 3 consecutive years above 76% since 2003 (Figure A1). While this is a small improvement, it is not enough for the institution to reach its 2020 goal of 79% (Study site, 2014), nor is it enough to catch up with its peer group, most of whom have made double digit improvements in the last two decades (DePaul University, 2015; Study

site, 2014). Therefore, the problem that was addressed in this study was the lack of

improvement in the retention rate.
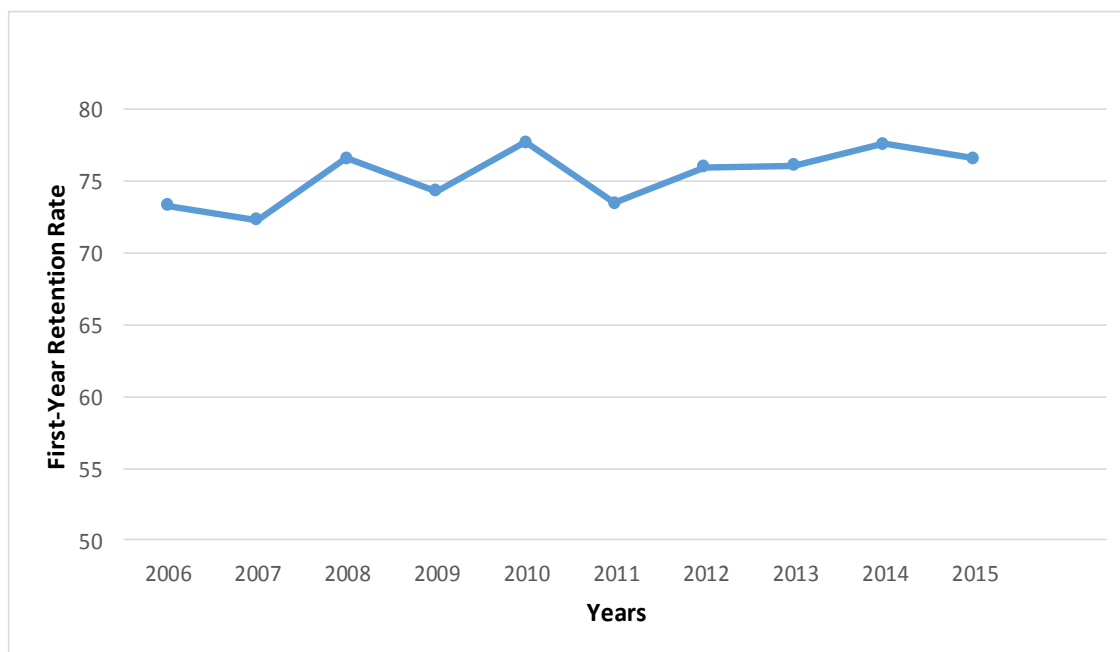
Figure 1. The Study Site's Overall First-Year Retention Rate (Vice President for Student

Success, personal communication, August 10, 2017)

A study conducted by the local site in 2014 included retention and graduation data

over two decades for the institution and its peer institutions, an analysis of why students

leave the institution, and retention initiatives (Study site, 2014). This study found that

there are several possible reasons for the lower than desired first-year retention rate,

including academic, social, and financial problems. I studied one of these issues that

permeates the academic and social problems associated with retention, which was the

lack of personal connection between first-year students and the institution.

Overview of the Study

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence that students' personal connections to the study site had on their first-year experience. Previous research indicated that forming a relationship with a staff or faculty member is important because having a bond with one or more individuals who represent the institution is more likely to encourage students to feel connected to their institution (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Tinto, 2015; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Given the relationship between retention and connection (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomane, 2002; Tinto, 1998), as well as numerous factors that could result in a lack of personal connection between students and their institution, I decided to further explore students' connections to the institution, especially during their first year, in an attempt to shed light on possible means to improve the first-year retention rate.

Design

A case study was chosen as the qualitative research design. I wanted to gain an understanding as to why the study site is having a difficult time improving its first-year retention rate. A case study allowed me to focus on the specific problem, as well as view it from multiple perspectives such as those of faculty, staff, and students. A case study is employed in a bounded situation; in this study the boundaries were the first-year experiences and retention of full-time traditional students (i.e., not transfer students, international students, adult students, or veterans) on the main campus.

Participants

The three primary groups of participants for the study were faculty, staff, and students. In terms of the faculty and staff, homogenous purposeful sampling was used. The selection criteria were that the individuals:

- Had worked or were currently working with the first-year student population,

- Had worked for the study site for a minimum of 3 years,

- Could not be one of my immediate supervisors or direct reports, and

- Could not have been a previous supervisor or direct report.

As for the student participants, they needed to reflect on their first-year experience, which meant they must have completed their first year and remember the details of that year. This ruled out first-year students, juniors, and seniors. Thus, sophomore participants were the best fit for the study. The sophomore pool of participants was narrowed even further to exclude those who were under 18, transfer students, international students, veterans, and adult students. The participants needed to be 18 or older so that the protection of minors through parental consent in addition to participant assent was not required for the study. Transfer students, international students, veterans, and adult students were excluded from the study because their retention concerns were very different than those of traditional first-year students inasmuch as they had different expectations of their experience and had different needs (Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Kahu, 2013). Additionally, transfer students most likely did not experience a full year at the study site.

The data needed to be representative of the study site and the possible different experiences students had depending on their school and the program for which they were a part. Therefore, I wanted to recruit participants from each of the three major schools on the main campus: business, humanities, and computer science. I also wanted participants who were in PP and the Honors College. This was to see if there was a difference between the first-year experiences and personal connection that these students had and those experiences of the students in general.

Three faculty members and three staff members were interviewed. Fifteen students were interviewed, three of whom were part of PP (they are only in PP for their first year) and three of whom who were part of the Honors College. These six students were either humanities, business, or computer science students. The remaining nine students consisted of three from each of the three schools being studied. The total number of participants was 21. See Table A1 for participant information.

Research Questions

As the purpose of the study was to explore students' personal connections to the local site during their first year, the research questions focused on how the institution, through its employees, establishes and maintains a connection with its students, whether that is done through first-year initiatives, and the potential influence of that connection.

Table A1

General Participant Information

Participant	Code	School	Residential/Commuter	Gender
Business Student 1	BS1	Business	Residential	Male
Business Student 2	BS2	Business	Residential	Female
Business Student 3	BS3	Business	Commuter	Female
Computer Science Student 1	CSS1	Computer Science	Residential	Male
Computer Science Student 2	CSS2	Computer Science	Residential	Male
Computer Science Student 3	CSS3	Computer Science	Commuter	Male
Honors College Student 1	HCS1	Honors and Humanities	Residential	Male
Honors College Student 2	HCS2	Honors and Business	Residential	Male
Honors College Student 3	HCS3	Honors and Computer Science	Commuter	Male
Humanities Student 1	HS1	Humanities	Residential	Male
Humanities Student 2	HS2	Humanities	Commuter	Female
Humanities Student 3	HS3	Humanities	Residential	Female
Potential Program Student 1	PPS1	Potential Program and Humanities	Residential	Female
Potential Program Student 2	PPS2	Potential Program and Humanities	Residential	Female
Potential Program Student 3	PPS3	Potential Program and Humanities	Residential	Female
Staff Member 1	SM1	Computer Science	N/A	Female
Staff Member 2	SM2	Multiple	N/A	Female
Staff Member 3	SM3	Multiple	N/A	Male
Faculty Member 1	FM1	Humanities	N/A	Male
Faculty Member 2	FM2	Business	N/A	Male
Faculty Member 3	FM3	Humanities	N/A	Female

The research questions included:

1. According to faculty and staff, how does the study site initially establish and maintain personal connections with its students during their first-year experience?

2. According to faculty, staff, and students, what influences do the current first-year initiatives have on students' personal connections to their institution?

3. According to faculty, staff, and students, what influences do students' personal connections to their institution have on their first-year experience and subsequent retention?

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, it was the experiences, thoughts, and perspectives as expressed through the words of the participants at the study site that helped provide insight and answers to the research questions. The data collected from the participants informed and grounded the study. One-on-one, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were chosen for the data collection. This allowed the participants to freely express their thoughts and opinions, rich and thick descriptions to be given, and the protection of the participants' confidentiality.

The interviews were audio-taped to ensure that the participants' exact words were recorded (Merriam, 2009) and to detect the inflections in the participants' tones. I obtained the participants' consent to being recorded prior to the interview starting. IRB approval was obtained from both the study site and Walden University. I e-mailed faculty and staff whom I knew met the previously stated criteria to request their participation. I

also contacted faculty who taught first-year seminar courses in the previous year to contact to their classes to assist me in securing student participants. The student participants needed to have met the criteria previously outlined. Fifteen students were chosen to participate.

Summary of Findings

The seven findings that emerged from the data after coding and analysis were:

1. As a whole, the study site had a difficult time establishing and maintaining a personal connection with its first-year students.

    i. Large lecture hall classes were not conducive to forming a personal connection.

    ii. Students felt less connected to the material and professor in their general education courses.

    iii. Many of the students felt their first-year professors did not care and lacked passion.

2. In most cases, students were the ones initiating the personal connection with the study site.

    i. Many of the students chose to get involved on campus via clubs or Greek life.

    ii. Some students chose to seek out mentors.

3. Students in the Honors College or the Potential Program were able to establish a personal connection with their advisors and felt that they were part of a community at the study site.

    i.   The Honors College and the PP students had a better advising experience.

   ii.   Many of the non-Honors and PP students felt lost.

 iii.   The Honors College and the PP both had a strong community.

4.   Overall, first-year initiatives had mixed effects on students' personal connections to the institution.

    i.   Many of the students found the first-year seminar course to be useless.

   ii.   The majority of the students did not form a connection with their Peer Leader.

 iii.   There was a disconnect in how the faculty and students viewed the role of the Peer Leader.

 iv.   Learning communities helped the majority of the students form a connection to the study site.

  v.   The majority of the students felt that the experience in Dormitory B was superior to that of Dormitory A in terms of forming personal connections.

5.   Initiatives and opportunities related to the students' major and their future careers were the most beneficial to first-year students and helped them establish connections to the study site.

    i.   Students found learning communities to be more effective when they were connected to their major.

   ii.   The students who engaged in research with faculty found it meaningful.

 iii.   The majority of the students had internships, jobs, or volunteer experience in their field, which they found helpful.

iv. Students sought to make connections with students and professors who
could help them with their career.

6. Personal connections were one of the main reasons students decided to stay at
the study site.

7. Personal connections were more important and more difficult to create at an
urban institution.

i. The lack of a traditional campus led to a lack of school spirit and
community.

As the findings indicate, there are concerns across multiple areas of the study site
in regard to first-year retention. These concerns were seen in first-year courses, housing,
first-year initiatives, the first-year seminar course, access to career-related opportunities,
advising, and more.

Recommendations

Based on the data from the interviews and previously published research, I
suggest the following solutions be considered in regard to some of the aforementioned
findings.

Academics

First-Year Seminar

Instructors

As noted by participant SM3, the first-year seminar course is supposed to help
students transition from high school to college and help set them up for success.
However, eight out of the 15 students found the first-year seminar course to be "a waste."

When the reasons why they felt this way were explored the majority of them felt no connection to their professor, their Peer Leader, or the class. The connection and role of the Peer Leader will be addressed later. The students' connection to their first-year seminar professor is crucial because the professor serves as their first-year advisor and should also serve as their advocate during their first year. As Levitz and Noel (as cited in Nosaka & Novak, 2014) pointed out, having a connection with one person on campus helps form a connection to the institution. One warm encounter can change their whole experience (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). If they are missing that connection it can make their first year much lonelier and they could feel lost. The students who did not have a connection with their professor felt their professor either did not make them comfortable or did the bare minimum. They felt like their professors did not want to be there.

The issue is with 60 sections of the first-year seminar course, at least 50 professors (some professors teach more than one section) who are engaging and work well with first-year students are needed. That is a difficult task, especially when it requires a yearlong commitment from the professor. Staff and faculty are not mandated to teach a section and other than a small stipend they receive, there is no benefit from doing so, especially in the tenure process (SM3). This is one of the reasons why FM3, who is an effective first-year seminar instructor, was originally hesitant to teach the course as there are other job responsibilities that need to be managed, including research. Thus, there is not a long list of willing participants to choose from as instructors. Because of this, if first-year seminar instructors receive negative feedback on their evaluations, they may still return the following year; there is not another faculty or staff member willing to

replace them. One ineffective first-year seminar instructor has the potential to negatively affect 20 students, which means lost revenue if the students transfer.

Additionally, there had been a push by the former Provost to have as many of the first-year seminar courses taught by faculty as possible, to have students get to know faculty in their school in their first year. Currently, faculty teach about 60% of the sections; many of the complaints from the students were about these sections where faculty were clearly not comfortable working with first-year students. So, while the push for faculty interaction with first-year students is admirable, it cannot be interaction just for the sake of interaction—it must be purposeful. Schools should put forth the professors with playful, caring, and nurturing personalities; in other words, the professors who are good at working with first-year students. There are excellent professors at the study site who work with upper-level students and are quite serious about their field and work. They treat the undergraduate students more like colleagues or graduate students. However, that teaching style and personality does not fit in a first-year classroom, which is something CS2 pointed out during the interview. This applies not only to the first-year seminar course, but to all first-year courses. Lastly, faculty, as opposed to staff, are only on campus a few days a week, which means less time to devote to advising and other first-year responsibilities. These issues need to be considered when directives for more faculty teaching first-year seminar courses are made.

One way to solve some of these issues is to open the position of first-year seminar instructor to staff who have bachelor's degrees, but with a few caveats. That pool could be limited by only considering staff who have been at the university at least 5 years and

have a recommendation from their supervisor regarding how they interact with first-year

students. An interview process could also be added, if needed. This would allow more

people to be eligible to teach these sections, thus giving the school the option not to

assign professors with low ratings to these classes.

Another solution would be to incentivize the position for both faculty and staff so

that more people would want to participate. This could be release time for the faculty.

The class is only one credit, but faculty could receive three credits of release time which

would provide greater opportunity to work on research and publishing. The staff might

receive a certain amount of compensatory time as they do if they work during

commencement. Whatever the incentive may be, vetting will be required because more

incentives will also attract those faculty and staff members who are most interested in the

incentives, which is what some of the students mentioned. One form of vetting could be

interviews with the First-Year Seminar Group, the Center for Academic Excellence, a

panel of students, current effective first-year seminar professors, or a combination of

these.

Bonding

In addition to many of the participants not feeling connected with their first-year

seminar professor, they also did not feel connected to their classmates. There seems to be

two reasons for this, one of which is related to the Peer Leaders and will be addressed in

the next section. The other reason has to do with the amount of content covered and a

lack of training for the instructors. As SM3 pointed out during the interview, many

different groups within the university want to add content to the first-year seminar

because of the built-in audience to hear about their special program, services, majors, and other activities. Instructors, at minimum, are expected to cover the syllabus and expectations, ice breakers, the 4-year plan, advising, registration, time management, financial literacy, counseling, Career Services, the library, and usually, information about the city—in only 21 hours. Most instructors add content that is specific to their cohort of students like Honors, PP, business, computer science, and other majors. Presenting all of that content in a short period of time limits the number of effective bonding activities the professor can do with the class.

Besides many of the bonding and team-building activities that take time to implement, instructors are not taught any of these effective activities. Ice breakers are touched upon a bit in training, but bonding requires more than just learning each other's names and some fun facts about peers. It involves shared experiences and having students learn from each other and trust one another. Icebreakers are given more attention in the training that the Peer Leaders receive, as it is assumed they will be responsible for that part of the first-year seminar course.

Peer Leaders

All six first-year seminar instructors interviewed felt the Peer Leader was responsible for the bonding and connection with the students. They viewed Peer Leaders as one of the most effective aspects of the first-year seminar. However, 13 out of the 15 students interviewed did not form a connection with their Peer Leader, and many did not have positive comments to share about them. They felt their Peer Leader did not make an effort. Thus, there is a real disconnect occurring in terms of the role of the Peer Leader.

What seems to be occurring is that the Peer Leader is not given enough time and responsibility within the hour and a half class time to form a connection with the students. The students I interviewed who were currently serving as Peer Leaders talked about how they had to make the effort to bond with the students before class, after class, via e-mail, via text, or through individual appointments, all of which was done on their own time. Not every student serving as a Peer Leader is willing or able to make that kind of effort outside of class hours.

One way to try to rectify this would be to strongly encourage instructors to allot time for Peer Leaders to do more than just icebreakers, though many instructors may not sacrifice their time. Another way would be to return to the first-year seminar course being 2 hours with the last half hour of each class used strictly by the Peer Leaders to focus on bonding, team building, study skills, sharing advice, or whatever they deem appropriate given that point in the semester. This would allow the students and Peer Leaders contact time, where they could get to know each other. Holt and Fifer (2016) found that contact between the mentors and mentees was most important. This structure would also mean that the professors would not need to extend their teaching time; it would be a compromise between those who want to return to the 2-hour format and those who want to keep the current format (SM3).

If the Peer Leaders were to obtain this extra period of time for working with the students, then they need more training; in particular, they need more training in mentoring. Effective peer mentors help their mentees with both the academic and social aspects of the institution (Holt & Fifer, 2016). According to Holt and Fifer (2016), the

Peer Leaders should learn how to help students with various challenges, serve as a role model, share their own experiences and challenges, teach academic skills, and know how to refer students to appropriate resources. Mullen (2016) noted that there are many different mentoring styles that fit different situations, including formal mentoring, informal mentoring, diverse mentoring, electronic mentoring, group mentoring, multiple-level comentoring, and cultural mentoring. Peer Leaders should learn about the different types of mentoring so they know which type to use in various situations and with various personalities. Additionally, Peer Leaders should be trained on how to spot a warning sign that a student is having a problem and they should learn some potential ways to help those students (Yomtov, Plunkett, Efrat, & Marin, 2015).

A change in how Peer Leaders are used in class, coupled with more training, would help the Peer Leaders be more relevant to students in the class. This may help to solve the disconnect between how instructors view the role of the Peer Leader and what is actually occurring in the eyes of the students. Peer Leaders can be an effective tool in helping students feel connected to the institution (Holt & Fifer, 2016; Yomtov et al., 2015). These changes may help make that feeling of connectedness a reality at the study site.

<u>Learning Communities</u>

Learning communities are typically considered an effective first-year retention initiative (Arensdorf & Naylor-Tincknell, 2016), and for the majority of the student participants (9 out of 15) that was the case because their assigned learning community was connected to their major. BS2 stated, "I feel like having learning communities that

overlap with your major really did help me want to take that class" and HS1, who appreciated working with two professors in his field, mentioned, "I liked that there was a learning community that could tailor to my major." The students who did not like their learning communities were in ones that were not connected to their major. Three out of the six students who did not like their learning community were computer science students; the study site does not currently offer a first-year learning community designed for students in the computer science school.

While there have been concerns in the past about creating a learning community for these students due to issues of coverage and redesigning the curriculum, it has become a bigger concern since enrollment in the computer science school has been increasing over the last couple of years; it is now a retention concern. Recently, a computer science advisor mentioned that her students were not enjoying their assigned learning community; the concern is not going away. The computer science school has approximately 100 first-year students and 72 of those are on the main campus. Even with PP students who have their own specialized learning communities, as well as mainstream and Honors students who might have Advanced Placement credit, that would still leave more than enough students to create one or two learning communities involving the first computer programming course. Another option would be to have a few learning communities that do not involve the required computer courses and instead focus on computer-related topics like cybersecurity, design thinking, or robotics.

While it is clear that a learning community needs to be created in computer science, there are other majors and fields that are also lacking a relevant learning

community. The learning community offerings should be revisited and compared with the majors of recent cohorts enrolled at the study site. This way, more of the learning communities can be tailored to the students, thus increasing their connection and engagement. This initiative has support from the coordinator of learning communities and now needs support from the various schools that are not yet creating classes for their first-year students.

Cocurricular and Extracurricular Activities

The study site prides itself on being a school full of opportunities. However, according to the students, many do not know what opportunities are available to them. The participants mentioned only finding out about research, travel experiences, contests, and scholarships through either a faculty member, staff member, or friend with whom they were connected. Once students participated in these activities, they had stronger connections to the institution as they were involved and engaged, as suggested by Astin's (1975, 1984) theory on retention. Several of the students indicated that these opportunities were the highlight of their first year. Thus, it is important for students to know about the opportunities available to them and to hear about them during their first semester when they are building their 4-year plan.

I propose that the study site have an opportunities fair, which would be aimed at first-year students, but open to all students. Opportunities and offices that should be included are: study abroad, undergraduate research, prestigious scholarships, Career Services, the community center, becoming a mentor (International Student Services and Center for Academic Excellence), becoming an RA (Housing), becoming a tour guide

(Admissions), transferring into the Honors College, the first-year honor society, on-campus jobs (Human Resources), becoming an Orientation Leader (Student Activities), and Model United Nations. Through these various opportunities on campus they will meet likeminded students and faculty with whom they can connect, which will help them feel that they belong. Many a student has been retained by providing them an opportunity to get connected.

Housing

<u>Dormitory A Changes</u>

All 11 students who lived on campus believed that the experience in Dormitory B was much better for making personal connections with other students when compared with the Dormitory A. The reason for this was the layout of the Dormitory A. Dormitory A lacks student lounges on every floor and instead has one communal lounge for the whole building. The layout of the hallway into two separated segments, as opposed to the hallway in Dormitory B, which is in the shape of a giant continuous square also helps to isolate the students. Additionally, the doors to the students' rooms in Dormitory A are extremely heavy and automatically lock behind the students. They are extremely difficult to prop open. The students who lived in that building remarked that the setup contributed to feeling isolated, and that they did not know all of the students on their floor. They found it difficult to make friends.

This is especially concerning because more and more floors of Dormitory B are being converted into office space and staff apartments. The study site may be erring by removing what most residential students felt was the best part of their first year. The first

recommendation is to stop the office expansion into Dormitory B. Dormitory A could not undergo construction to its floors to add lounges without the cost of both the construction and loss of revenue from the two or three rooms per floor that would need to be removed; therefore, there is probably no solution to the lounge problem in Dormitory A. However, as the study site is growing in terms of student enrollments, a new dormitory might be in the near future. If so, this new dormitory could be designed with one lounge per floor and be used for the first-year students.

While structural changes cannot be made to Dormitory A without incurring a large cost, cosmetic modifications could. The doors in Dormitory A were a surprising retention-related problem that was consistently mentioned. PPS3, who lived in both buildings and thought Dormitory B was superior stated, "A floor of heavy doors that lock shut is not really an inviting place to be." PPS3 felt, "the doors are like a perfect symbol of what it is like being a resident in Dormitory A compared to what it is like being a resident in Dormitory B where the doors don't lock on their own and stay wide open all day if you want them to." Ideally, the doors could be replaced with less heavy ones that could be propped open if desired by the students. This would be an expense for the study site. However, a cost benefit analysis should be conducted to weigh the cost of replacing the doors with the potential revenue associated with increasing first-year retention.

The less expensive option would be to invest in an industrial door stopper for each of the doors so the students may prop them open. Any changes to the doors would also need to be accompanied with a directive to security to allow students to congregate in the halls, except during quiet hours and not in front of the emergency exits. In addition to the

physical changes that need to be made to Dormitory A to offset the current structure,

there could also be changes to the RA training so that the RAs in Dormitory A are given

specific guidance on how to build community without common space.

Combating Homesickness

Previous research indicated that homesickness can cause students to not integrate

into their college environment (English, Davis, Wei, & Gross, 2016; O'Keeffe, 2013) and

not feel connected to their college (Wilson et al., 2016). The data from the interviews

supported this research. BS2's parents had learned from her older sister and told her, "the

minute that the kid comes home that first week of school then they don't have that

connection" so they forced her to stay at school, which "pushed [her] to find those

connections at school to make it feel like home." Both PPS3 and BS1 remarked that

others around them who went home a lot ultimately did not stay. Thus, the students enter

a negative downward spiral because their lack of personal connection or feeling of

isolation due to the city and the non-traditional campus makes them homesick, and if they

act on this homesickness and remove themselves from campus, they further perpetuate

the feeling of being isolated or not connected with the university.

There needs to be a concerted effort from Housing, Student Activities, and other

departments to ensure that students remain on campus for the first few weekends. This

could be done through a series of community events for the residential buildings and the

individual floors. This encourages and provides a reason for them to not only stay on

campus, but to make friends with the students on their floor. A series of floor events

outside of the dormitories is particularly important for those living in Dormitory A, so

they can start to build the community that they struggle to build on their floors due to their setup. Additionally, if these events were held in various parts of the city, it may also help combat the apprehension that some of the residential students have about the city.

Cross-Campus Retention Program

Personal connection to an institution is two-fold. Students need to feel connected to members of the institution, and they need to feel that members of the institution feel connected to them. The students want to feel like they are cared for and that they matter to someone. The students in the Honors College, PP, and close-knit departments like science and art had this feeling because the faculty, staff, and students watched out and cared for each other, which was evident to the students interviewed. In the mainstream population and with larger departments, students felt like they get lost in the shuffle. This is one of the reasons some other institutions, like Missouri Western State University and Walsh University, have created cross-campus retention programs (each has its own specific name) to help address the issue of students getting lost in the crowd and then transferring (Grimes & Hardwick, 2017; McCulloh & Coneglio, 2017). Within these programs there are several committees, each with a specific purpose, with staff and faculty assigned to the committees (Grimes & Hardwick, 2017; McCulloh & Coneglio, 2017).

While the study site has a few of these committees or committees whose functions include these tasks, the committees are not centralized nor do they work with each other. Thus, the work each committee does toward the first-year experience and retention is not being supported by the other committees, which diminishes its effects and has the

potential for duplication of efforts. Many of these committees are only known to the members of the committee and their immediate supervisors, so the work that they do can sometimes go unnoticed by the administration, but more importantly, the students. The work of these committees is usually to benefit the students, but they do not know it is taking place and thus feel that no one cares about them.

Below are the proposed committees, their purpose, areas of focus, and a list of staff and faculty members who should be invited to sit on the committees.

1. First-Year Experience (FYE)

   a. Purpose: To shape the first-year experience and help improve first-year retention

   b. Areas of Focus: Learning communities, first-year seminar course, housing, orientation, PP, and transfer credits

   c. Members: Learning Community Coordinator, Director of First-Year Programs, Associate Director of First-Year Programs, members of the current first-year seminar committee, Director of Housing, Director of First-Year Housing, resident directors for Dormitory A and Dormitory B, members of the orientation team, Director of PP, the Director of Honors, Director of Student Success, staff member from Degree Audit, and the Director of Admissions

2. Second Year to Graduation

   a. Purpose: To shape the experience of students after their first year and help improve retention

b. Areas of Focus: Housing, student activities, advising, transfer students, and internship and job placement

c. Members: Director of Housing, Director of Upper Class Housing, resident directors for Kennedy and Jefferson, Director for Student Activities, Director of Honors, Director of Student Success, Senior Academic Advisor for each school, Transfer Admissions Counselor, staff member from Career Services, and staff member from Degree Audit

3. Care Team

a. Overall Purpose: Address issues of concern forwarded by faculty and staff regarding student challenges

    i. Sub-Committee Purpose: Develop and implement a plan for students struggling academically

b. Overall Areas of Focus: Housing, financial matters, student account concerns, mental health, security and safety issues, and attendance issues

    i. Sub-Committee Focus: Serious academic concerns

c. Members: Dean of Students, Assistant Dean for Students, Director of Housing, Director of PP, Director of Honors, Director of the Counseling Center, staff member from Security, staff member from Multicultural Affairs, Director for Student Success, Associate Director of Financial Aid, Registrar, Associate Director of Student Accounts, and Senior Academic Advisor from each school.

i. Sub-Committee Members: Director of the Tutoring Center,

Director of the Writing Center, Director of PP, Director of Honors,

Senior Academic Advisor from each school, and at least one

faculty member from each school chosen by their Dean or Assoc.

Dean.

There is already an Academic Advising Group that meets monthly to discuss

various concerns, many of which are raised in the committees above. While the group is

effective, there are so many concerns and not enough time because the group is trying to

touch upon issues that need to be addressed by other committees. The current advising

group could become a sub-committee of both FYE and Second Year to Graduation or it

could be part of the Cross-Campus Retention Program with their own specific purpose

and focus. This way there is less overlap and they would be built into the communication

and reporting structure.

The institutions that use this retention program and committee format require that

the committees set goals every semester or year, document their work, and submit reports

at the end of the semester or year (Grimes & Hardwick, 2017; McCulloh & Coneglio,

2017). This allows the institution to determine what is improving, what still needs work,

which students were assisted, what the students' concerns were, what was done to

address student concerns, and the amount of work required to make improvements and

address student concerns. Additionally, it allows for information to be shared,

communication to be improved, and valuable retention work to be focused and

strengthened. This addresses the concern FM3 raised about committees and departments

not speaking to each other and how it is detrimental to the institution. Lastly, as there would be a reporting structure, especially in regard to the Care Committee, students and parents would learn that their concerns are being addressed and someone is watching out for them. This would convey the message that the members of the institution care about their students.

Other Suggestions

The suggestions below require construction and/or finances and thus are not feasible in the near future. So they are not described in depth and are only mentioned in order to be kept in mind when the next expansion project is discussed or there is a significant change in the institution's financial situation.

- Adding classrooms so that lecture halls are no longer needed for large introductory-level first-year courses

- Expanding the cafeteria so that students can sit and connect with each other

- Creating a commuter lounge so commuters and other students can spend time together and have a place to go between classes

- Hiring several additional academic advisors across the schools so there is a smaller student-to-advisor ratio

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Conclusion

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Research has shown there are numerous causes for first-year attrition, such as financial, emotional, academic, social, and institutional issues. Almost all of these concerns involve the students' connection to their institution. At the study site, it was made clear by the participants, especially the students, that personal connection is an

important factor in whether they stay at the institution. To help increase personal

connections at the study site and possibly improve the first-year retention rate, changes

need to be made to the first-year seminar course, learning communities, and the

Dormitory A Dorm. Students also need more information and access to the wide variety

of opportunities available to them on campus. Additionally, cross-campus committees

need to be formed to support the retention effort and address various aspects of the

campus experience. The majority of these changes require very little money and could be

implemented before the next academic year. The start of a new administration and the

renovation of the main campus make right now the opportune time to try a new approach

to improving the stagnant first-year retention rate.

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Appendix B: E-mails to Potential Participants

E-mail to Faculty and Staff

Dear _____,

I am reaching out to you because you either serve on the First-Year Seminar Committee, work closely with first-year students, or have been involved in the university's first-year retention efforts. I am conducting a study on the university's first-year retention for my doctoral project study at Walden University. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. I will interview faculty and staff members to get their perspectives on the university's first-year retention, first-year initiatives, and whether or not students feel connected to the university. I will also be interviewing sophomore students to get their perspectives.

The interview will last about an hour and will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. If we have more to talk about after the hour has elapsed, then a second interview for 30 minutes may be scheduled. The interview(s) will be audio taped with your permission, but will only be listened to by me. This university's information will be masked and you will remain anonymous to the readers. You will only be identified by your subcategory (i.e., Staff Member 1 or Faculty Member 1). You do not have to participate and if you agree to, you may leave the study at any time without repercussions. At the end of your interview you will receive a $5 Starbucks gift card to thank you for your time. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of this university.

If you are interested in participating, want to learn more, or have any questions about the study, please contact me at XXXXXXXX or XXXXXXXX. As I am keeping this study separate from my work at the university, please do not contact me at my work e-mail or phone number in regards to this study.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jaclyn Kopel

E-mail to First-Year Seminar Instructors to Solicit Student Participants

Dear _____,

I am reaching out to you because you taught a first-year seminar course last year. I am conducting a study on the university's first-year retention for my doctoral project study at Walden University. I would like to interview students to get their perspectives on the university's first-year retention, first-year initiatives, and whether or not they feel connected to the university. I will also be interviewing faculty and staff to get their perspectives.

I am hoping you will either reach out to your class on my behalf or provide me with the list of names and e-mails of your students so I may contact them. The former would be preferred so they have a point of reference. If you e-mail them on my behalf please use the verbiage attached to this e-mail in your e-mail to them. I know students are often hesitant to give up their free time, but please encourage them to participate as they will get a chance to share their feedback about the university and have their voice heard. At the end of their interview they will receive a $5 Starbucks gift card to thank them for their time. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of this university.

If you want to learn more, or have any questions about the study, please contact me at XXXXXXXX. As I am keeping this study separate from my work at the university, please do not contact me at my work e-mail or phone number in regards to this study. Thank you for your help,

Jaclyn Kopel

E-mails to Students

E-mail A contains the verbiage that will be sent to the instructors to send out to their class rosters. If the instructors choose to provide me with a list of names instead, then I will send E-mail B to the students on their list.

E-mail A

Dear _____,

I am reaching out to you in hopes that you can help one of my colleagues, Jaclyn Kopel, with a study she is conducting for her doctoral work. She is studying the university's first-year retention and needs to interview students from the various schools to get their perspectives on the university's first-year retention, first-year initiatives, and whether or not you feel connected to the university. She will also be interviewing faculty and staff.

The interview will last about 45 minutes to an hour and will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio taped, but will only be listened to by Jaclyn. The university's name and other identifiers will not be given in the study and you will remain anonymous. Your identity and what you tell Jaclyn will be protected. You do not have to participate and if you agree to, you may leave the study at any time without repercussions. This is an opportunity to provide feedback on your first-year experience at the university so the members of the university who are in charge of the first-year experience can learn what they should improve and what should stay the same. At the end of your interview you will receive a $5 Starbucks gift card to thank you

for your time. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of this university.

If you are interested in participating, want to learn more, or have any questions about the study, please contact Jaclyn at XXXXXXXX. As she is keeping the study separate from her work at the university, please do not contact her at her work e-mail or phone number in regards to this study.

Thanks,

[Insert instructor's e-mail signature]

E-mail B

Dear _____,

I am reaching out to you because your first-year seminar instructor provided me with your name. I am conducting a study on the university's first-year retention for my doctoral project study at Walden University. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. I will interview students to get your perspectives on the university's first-year retention, first-year initiatives, and whether or not you feel connected to the university. I will also be interviewing faculty and staff to get their perspectives.

The interview will last about 45 minutes to an hour and will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio taped, but will only be listened to by me. This university's name and other identifiers will not be given in the study and you will remain anonymous. Your identity and what you tell me will be protected. You do not have to participate and if you agree to, you may leave the study at any time without repercussions. This is an opportunity to provide feedback on your first-

year experience at the university so the members of the university who are in charge of the first-year experience can learn what they should improve and what should stay the same. At the end of your interview you will receive a $5 Starbucks gift card to thank you for your time. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of both this university.

If you are interested in participating, want to learn more, or have any questions about the study, please contact me at XXXXXXX. As I am keeping this study separate from my work at the university, please do not contact me at my work e-mail or phone number in regards to this study.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jaclyn Kopel

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol for Faculty and Staff

Name:	
Position/Title:	
Faculty or Staff (Circle one):	Faculty Staff
Time spent working at the university:	
Date of interview:	
Time start:	
Time end:	
Location:	
Interview (circle one):	1 2
Received signed consent form (circle one):	Yes No

Instructions:

Before the participant arrives-Check the audio recorder to make sure it is working.

When the participant arrives-Thank them for coming. Explain the study. If they have not

already signed an Informed Consent Form go over that with them. If they already did

then give them their copy. Confirm once again that they consent to be audio recorded for

the interview and remind them they can stop, pause, or leave at any time without

consequence.

Questions:

1) How would you describe your relationship with your first-year students?

2) Do you try to establish a connection with your first-year students? If so, how? If not, why?

3) What kinds of interactions do you have with your first-year students?

4) How would you describe an ideal student-faculty/student-staff relationship?

4A) What are some of the barriers to establishing this ideal relationship?

5) Which first-year initiatives are you familiar with?

5A) Which of the first-year initiatives have you been involved in and to what extent?

5B) Are there aspects you find effective in helping students to integrate into the university community? Why?

5C) Are there aspects you find effective in helping them to stay at the university? Why?

6) In what ways do you think the student-faculty/student-staff relationship affects retention?

7) In your experience what are some of the reasons why students have left the university?

8) What role do you think the students' majors and/or schools have on their first-year experience?

9) How do you think being in PP or Honors affects the experience the students have in their first-year?

Interview Protocol for Students

Name:	
School:	
Is the student in the Honors College or PP?	
Date of interview:	
Time start:	
Time end:	
Location:	
Received signed consent form (circle one)?	Yes No

Instructions:

Before the participant arrives-Check the audio recorder to make sure it is working.

When the participant arrives-Thank them for coming. Explain the study. If they have not already received an Informed Consent Form go over that with them. If they already did then give them their copy. Confirm once again that they consent to be audio recorded for the interview and remind them they can stop, pause, or leave at any time without consequence.

Questions:

1) Which school and/or program are you part of?

2) Are you a residential or commuter student?

3) What clubs, activities, and academic groups are you part of on campus?

3A) Do you hold leadership positions in any of them?

3B) Which of these did you participate in during your first year?

4) Coming into the university, what expectations did you have in terms of establishing a relationship with faculty and staff members?

5) Describe the overall relationship you had with faculty and/or staff here at the university during your first year.

6) What connections or attachments did you make to various aspects of the university?

7) How would you describe your first-year seminar course (insert the name of the course during the interview)?

8) Were you able to establish a relationship with your instructor and/or Peer Leader?

8A) If yes, what enabled that to happen? If not, what prevented it from happening?

9) Have you ever thought about leaving the university? Why/why not?

10) What were some of the highlights of your first-year?

11) What could have been improved in your first-year?

12) What role did your college and/or major have in your first-year?

PP/Honors Only:

A) Honors Only-When did you join the Honors College?

B) In what ways did your involvement in PP or Honors affect your first-year?

Appendix D: Data Log

Participant Code	Interview Date	Transcription/ Date Sent	Date Received	Edits Needed
CSS1	5/1/17	5/9/17	N/A	N/A
HCS1	5/4/17	5/21/17	5/25/17	No
HCS2	5/4/17	5/27/17	N/A	N/A
PPS1	5/2/17	5/21/17	N/A	N/A
BS1	5/4/17	5/29/17	5/31/17	No
PPS3	5/9/17	6/11/17	N/A	N/A
PPS2	5/4/17	6/3/17	6/3/17	No
BS2	5/5/17	6/8/17	N/A	N/A
HS1	5/5/17	6/8/17	N/A	N/A
CSS2	5/6/17	6/10/17	N/A	N/A
HS2	5/11/17	6/24/17	6/26/17	No
BS3	5/12/17	6/25/17	6/29/17	No
HCS3	5/11/17	6/17/17	6/18/17	No
HS3	5/12/17	6/25/17	N/A	N/A
CSS3	5/15/17	6/26/17	N/A	N/A
SM2	6/20/17	7/9/17	7/9/17	Yes-additions
FM1	6/1/17	7/9/17	7/11/17	No
FM2	6/1/17	7/9/17	7/12/17	No
SM1	6/8/17	7/14/17	N/A	N/A
FM3	6/16/17	7/10/17	N/A	N/A
SM3	6/21/17	7/10/17	N/A	N/A

Appendix E: Project Evaluation Survey

<u>First-Year Personal Connection Retention Study Evaluation</u>

Please read the attached white paper entitled *Increasing Students' Personal Connections*

on Campus in an Effort to Improve the First-Year Retention Rate, which is the result of a

study I conducted at this institution. The white paper will be presented to a committee of

members involved in the institution's first-year retention concerns in an effort to improve

the retention rate by implementing one or more of the various recommendations. Your

feedback will help ensure that the white paper is thorough and clear so that the

presentation, distribution, and possible implementation goes smoothly. Please complete

this evaluation out after you have finished reading the white paper.

1) Did you feel that the executive summary page contained the most crucial
information contained within the white paper? Please check one: ☐Yes   ☐No

    If you felt more information was needed, which pieces of information do you
    believe should be added? If you felt information was included that was not crucial
    in the executive summary, please also indicate that below.

2) Did you need more information about the study that was conducted in order to
understand what was discussed in the paper? Please check one: ☐Yes   ☐No

    If you felt more information was needed, on what areas would you have liked to
    have had more information?

3) Please rate each of the recommendations listed below on the qualities of clarity and comprehensiveness with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. You may add comments to clarify your responses.

Recommendation 1: Improve the hiring process for first-year seminar instructors

Clarity: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5
Comprehensiveness: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5

Comments:

Recommendation 2: Improve Peer Leader training and allow them time to meet with students in class

Clarity: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5
Comprehensiveness: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5

Comments:

Recommendation 3: Increase learning communities offering to match the majors offered

Clarity: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5
Comprehensiveness: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5

Comments:

Recommendation 4: Discontinue removing floors from Dormitory B for staff offices

Clarity: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5
Comprehensiveness: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5

Comments:

Recommendation 5: Replace the doors in Dormitory A

Clarity: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5
Comprehensiveness: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5

Comments:

Recommendation 6: Create an Opportunities Fair

Clarity: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5
Comprehensiveness: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5

Comments:

Recommendation 7: Create a Cross-Campus Retention Program made up of several
                  specific committees who work collaboratively

Clarity: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5
Comprehensiveness: ☐1   ☐2   ☐3   ☐4   ☐5

Comments:

4) If you have any additional thoughts, questions, or concerns please add them below
   so I can address them before document distribution.

Thank you for your feedback!