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Perceptions and Experiences of Students Who Withdrew from College Prior to Degree Attainment

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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

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MPA, Florida Atlantic University, 1997

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Nationally an estimated 41% of traditional students who begin seeking an undergraduate degree do not persist through degree attainment. Guided by Tinto's theory of student departure and the theory of social integration, the purpose of this study was to identify the reasons students withdrew from college prior to degree completion. A qualitative case-study design was implemented, and 13 former college enrollees were purposefully selected for individual semistructured interviews. The students graduated from one high school in the Southeastern United States. Data analysis was conducted using open coding procedures with iterative recategorization to identify key themes. Findings indicated that inadequate preparation, lack of guidance, and ineffectual support structure as high school students contributed to subsequent early withdrawal from college. As former college enrollees, participants identified mandatory enrollment in remedial courses, lack of maturity, and a lack of nonacademic support services as causes that led to early withdrawal. Based on these findings, leading recommendations for high schools include providing more rigorous coursework and higher academic expectations. Recommendations for colleges and universities include strengthening academic and social support systems for first-year students. These results may encourage high school leaders and educators to design and implement strategies to improve college readiness initiatives, retention programs, and support services in institutions of higher education.

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Dedication

To my daughter, Nyah. My angel, my love, my inspiration. Thank you for putting up with my madness these last few years. The lost moments, time that I cannot replace. I hope and pray that you will understand and forgive me for the many hours I was locked away in my office working. We are going on a serious vacation!

To my husband, my best friend, Anthony Jenkins. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader. Thank you for your support, friendship, love, and for being an awesome dad to our daughter. You will forever be a part of our family. We miss you. She misses you. I miss you. Our world is not the same without your laughter in it. Losing you has profoundly changed our lives forever.

To my family, my mother, father, brothers, closest friends, and ACP, thank you for the many years of support, words of encouragement, and nonstop prayers. Through the high and the lows, you were always there. I love and appreciate you. To my little sister Deborah, no one will even understand the depth of despair you may have felt which led to you leave us so soon.

Thank you to everyone who helped or encouraged me along the way. To the students who have profoundly impacted my life as a teacher, I thank you. Thank you for inspiring me, making me laugh, being opened to learning, and the many friendships that have developed over the years.

Lastly, I would like to thank the courageous individuals who participated in this study and were willing to share their experiences.

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Thank you to my dissertation committee. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Chris Godat, thank you for your patience, encouragement, and your dedication. Thank you to my second committee member, Dr. Jerita W. Whaley and my URR, Dr. Paul Englesberg, for your guidance. It was an honor to have worked with each of you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Over the past few decades, higher education enrollment has increased within the United States. However, the Southern Regional Education Board (2014) reported that annually only two-thirds of first-year students are prepared for the academic challenges of college. In the State of Georgia, college enrollment among traditional age, first-time students have increased due to state sponsored merit based financial aid opportunities (Cornwell, Mustard, & Sridhar, 2006). However, as students continue to enroll, many are considered underprepared for the academic rigor of a college curriculum. Darling-Hammond (2015) reported that many of the country's high school graduates in 2012 were not prepared for college. Additionally, SAT reading scores had fallen to the lowest levels since the 1970s (Adams, 2009). Likewise, in a study conducted by the ACT on improving college and career readiness, 26% of high school graduates met the college readiness indicators in the core subject areas (ACT, 2016). These results further reveal that students who complete high school may not be sufficiently prepared for the required courses in the first year of college in science, reading, English, or math.

A recurring theme in high schools, regardless of the students' academic level, is that all students can be prepared for and ready for college (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, & Hurd, 2009). This theme is the standard by which many educators and school systems drive curriculum. Although many high schools throughout the country provide classes and curriculum that are college preparatory and available to all students, many high school students who matriculate to college face academic challenges and difficulties such as remediation and eventually

attrition (Williams, 2016). National statistics have suggested that less than 60% of students earn a degree in a 6-year period. Colleges and universities lead the charge of enrolling students and ensuring graduation (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010; Moore, Slate, Edmonson, Combs, Bustamante, & Onwuegbuzie, 2010).

Background

In an effort to combat the decreasing college completion rate33 state governors committed their states to confronting the issue of college attrition (Complete College America, 2011). For the first time, states' leaders and higher education institutions shared data about student performance. Evidence of the problem from the literature indicated that very little is known or recorded about whether high school graduates who attended college went on to earn a college degree. The Complete College initiative created a need to improve college graduation rates as more students have requested assistance to reach degree attainment. More specifically, students are asking for more support from advisors, academic support, and flexible scheduling in college to earn a degree.

As college and state leaders seek to eliminate roadblocks that prevent students from being successful, the Lumina Foundation and Complete College America joined to create an initiative to increase college completion rates. Through the Complete College America initiative, stakeholders have been charged with the primary purpose of increasing graduation rates to 250,000 by the year 2020, helping students complete degrees on time, and spend less money in the process (Complete College America, 2014). Additionally, the goal of the initiative is to track students who are enrolled in 2-year and 4-year colleges to prevent the need to take remedial courses.

In this qualitative case study, I explored the perceptions and beliefs of former students from one local high school who have withdrawn from a college or university before earning a college degree. Additionally, the study objective was to offer suggestions as to how educators could improve college readiness as a necessary step to increasing college attainment. In this chapter, I lay the foundation for the study and present the research problem, the significance of the study, the purpose, and the research question, as well as the conceptual framework.

Problem Statement

Each year students are completing graduation from high school and enrolling in college in increasing numbers. However, research conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board (2014) revealed that approximately 60% of students, who entered the first academic year of college and had satisfied all the academic eligibility requirements, were lacking academically. The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2017) reported that 41% of first-time, full-time, undergraduate students earn a college degree in six years. Many of these students are required by colleges to take and pass lower level courses in English or mathematics; however, these are noncredit bearing courses, which act to bring students' knowledge and skills up to the college level (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). Published reports identify that the graduation rate from Georgia's 4-year state colleges, within 6 years, were approximately 34% (Complete College America, 2011). The State Board of Regents, which governs the Georgia's public system, ordered all campuses to find ways in which to support student retention.

Evidence of the problem comes from the deficiency of college readiness strategies at a local high school and how the high school prepared its graduates for the academic rigor of the college curriculum. In 2012, the United States Department of Education granted the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) an accountability waiver to allow the state more flexibility as to how the state would be allowed to measure yearly progress. As a result of the waiver, the state superintendent of schools identified the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) as a measuring stick of the improvements needed in the schools. According to the Georgia Department of Education's website, CCRPI is defined as "a comprehensive school improvement, accountability, and communication platform for all educational stakeholders that will promote college and career readiness for all public-school students" (GaDOE, 2017, para.1). Additionally, the district superintendent for the local school included in this study also identified the CCRPI as the focus of student achievement goals for the district. Though the local school in this study has a history of underperformance, students are still graduating high school and enrolling in college. Unfortunately, most of these students are doing so unprepared. As indicated by the nearly 60% of first-year college students who are required to take remedial courses in mathematics and English, the overall lack of readiness for college is a significant correlation for early college departure (Southern Regional Education Board, 2014).

A comparison of nationally standardized test scores, including ACT, SAT, EOCT, and HSGT for 2008 to 2014, revealed that this local high school experienced a decrease in scores in nearly all test categories (GaDOE, 2014). In comparison to schools across the

district, this local high school has the lowest academic performance, lowest socioeconomic levels, and lowest number of students enrolled. Also, this local high school has experienced a drop in the average for the CCRPI.

Reported CCRPI scores for this local high school have been consistently lower than the state and district average for the past four years. Results are based on a 100-point scale of measurement. As shown in Table 1, the results for the state, district and local high school CCRPI averages for the assessment years 2012 through 2015.

Table 1

College and Career Ready Performance Index Scores

Results	2012	2013	2014	2015
State	72.8	71.8	68.4	75.8
District	73.4	70.5	67.9	73.4
Local	68.1	63.7	63.3	66.5

Note. Adapted from the Georgia Department of Education, College and Career Ready Performance Index results from 2012 – 2015. Copyright 2012, 2113, 2014, and 2015. http://ccrpi.gadoe.

The objective of this qualitative case study was to investigate the impact of college readiness on early student withdrawal from college and to provide findings for school administrators and district leaders to address the implications of the data. The results of this study explored the perceptions and beliefs of former undergraduate students from one local high school in the Southeastern region of the United States, who have withdrawn from a college or university prior to completing or earning a degree. There is not a great deal of data available as to the percentages of students from the local high school who have withdrawn from a college or university.

As part of the Complete College Georgia initiative, launched by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement [GOSA] (2011), the college completion plans were released from every public institution within the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia (Complete College Georgia, 2011). Georgia was one of the first states to introduce a completion plan for public higher education institutions required statewide. *Complete College Georgia: Georgia's Higher Education Completion Plan 2012* was developed to combat college attrition and improve completion rates (2011). In the state of Georgia, only 54.5% of students in 2-year colleges continue their education and come back for a second year, while 82.2% of students in 4-year colleges return for a second year. Complete College America (2011) found that this percentage drops each year (see Table 2).

Table 2

Student Retention in Georgia 2-year and 4-year Colleges

	Full-time				Part-time			
College Return	Start	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Start	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
2-year student	100	54.5	38.5	--	100	38.3	26.3	--
4-year student	100	82.2	71.4	65.4	100	52.4	37.0	27.7

Note. Adapted from *Complete College Georgia 2011*. Complete College Georgia. (2011). Georgia Higher Education Completion Plan 2012. Retrieved from http://docplayer.net/2487893-Complete-college-georgia-georgia-s-higher-education-completion-plan-2012.html

In this study, I explored the views of high school graduates regarding college readiness for the high academic expectations of the college curriculum and their experiences. Although many students who can matriculate into a collegiate environment and be successful, the annual drop out and withdrawal rates, combined with those who must enroll in a remedial mathematics or English class, made an examination of this topic

necessary. This information could be valuable to students and may allow for schools to focus on how to decrease the likelihood of college remedial support, therefore potentially increasing college graduation rates.

Nature of the Study

I used the qualitative case study method to explore and identify the former students' perceptions of readiness for the academic rigor of college and the occurrence of early withdrawal. I focused on college readiness and attrition, specifically within a group of students who had graduated from a metropolitan area high school in the Southeastern United States within the last nine years and were accepted and enrolled in a 2- year college and 4-year university but had since withdrawn. I conducted interviews regarding reasons for withdrawing from college and perceptions of college readiness utilizing a semistructured interview format. The former college students' perceptions were essential in analyzing whether college readiness did or did not influence the participants' decision to leave their institution. Additionally, the study further investigated what these former college students believed that educators could do to improve the readiness of high school students for the educational demands of the collegiate curriculum. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze a potential relationship between college readiness and early student withdrawal.

The rationale for this study was to search for insight as to what public school educators can do to better prepare high school students, both academically and socially, for the transition into the collegiate world. This study is important as the findings can be used to increase readiness and limit the number of students attending college but are

failing to graduate. Assessing how teachers could impact student retention at the local level can serve as a national model as the nation continues to face increasing attrition rates.

Research Question

The objective of this study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of former college students regarding readiness at the high school level and the decision to withdraw before earning a college degree. The following research question was developed to guide the study: What impact did college readiness in high school have on students' decisions to withdraw from college?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of former college enrollees concerning readiness and what factors led them to withdraw prior to degree attainment. The students' perception of what could have enhanced college readiness at the college level was also investigated as a part of the study. Additionally, during the interviews, study participants shared their views on what educators could do to better prepare students for college. It is important to investigate this experience as there is a need to develop strategies to further assist unprepared students considering the higher rates of college attrition (Bound et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2010). Though most high schools focus on college readiness strategies, the reality is that some programs at the high school level may still be lacking in rigor. Additionally, state standards for high school graduation may not require the development of knowledge and skills needed for college academic success (Porter & Polikoff, 2012; Wiley, Wyatt, &

Camara, 2010; Wyatt, Wiley, Proestler, & Camara, 2012). In many colleges and universities, remedial classes and academic support programs are in place, but these may not address all students' needs nor may these programs stop attrition (Howell, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

Tinto's theory of college student departure and the theory of college retention (1975; 1993) have formed one part of the conceptual framework for this qualitative case study on the impact of college readiness on college attrition. Additionally, central to Tinto's (1993) theories of college student retention, student persistence or departure is predicated on the student's ability to academically and socially integrate the high school to college transition. Tinto's theory provides the perspective of what the institution can do to address student retention. These include specific conditions such as high expectations, support, and advice (Tinto, 2010).

Inspired by Tinto's theory, Mishkind (2014) established a list of "actionable definitions" (p.3) and learning styles of students. Mishkind (2014) identified skills that students can develop or that their teachers can use to guide them in developing that will contribute to the students' college readiness; these characteristics are termed *actionable definitions* because they can be linked to many states' teaching standards as well as supported and fostered by teachers. Mishkind's actionable definitions include the following categories: *critical thinking, academic knowledge social and emotional learning, communication, collaboration, resilience, perseverance, citizenship* and *community involvement*. These actionable definitions serve as a basis and framework for this qualitative study.

McNeely (1938) defined “college student mortality” as the failure of students to graduate. Student morality leads to a wealth of knowledge of the different variables that could contribute to a student’s decision to withdraw from a college or university (Braxton, 2000). In the 1970s, many researchers began to recognize that there was a lack of research about reasons or causes of early student departure (Braxton, 2000). Tinto’s views on student departure remedied this lack of theoretical formulation, constructing an interactionalist framework of early student departure by connecting the interaction of the student to the social and academic systems of the institution of attendance (Berger & Braxton, 1998).

Tinto (1993) later asserted that college is like any human community. Tinto’s theory of individual departure identifies the significance of the power of the communities to influence the lives of people. Similarly, when a student chooses to leave the college community of which the student is a member, the student makes this decision as a direct result of things that happened earlier and a general reflection of the health of the university.

Historically, many students who dropped out of college were labeled as being different or deviant from the remaining student population (Tinto, 1993). The term *dropout* has been used to designate all students who depart irrespective of the causes or factors that contribute to leaving. The freshman year of college proves to be a significant year in the process of completion of a college degree. Many students depart from school before the second year of college. Tinto (1993) reasoned that the use of the term *dropout* should be limited to a small section of the students who depart early.

While establishing the theory of student departure, Tinto (1975) probed into two areas. The first area of inquiry was to analyze the percentage of students who completed their required program in within a 6-year period. Second, he analyzed the rate of departure as it pertains to gender, race, social origin, and aptitude. Additional areas of inquiry included whether these variables differed at the colleges and universities depending on the level of the institution as 2-year or 4-year. Regardless of the level, much of the student departure rate occurs in the first year of enrollment (Tinto, 2013).

Tinto's (1993) early research on the composition of the college student population by ethnicity, age, and gender is worth noting because many of his research findings are still relevant (Tinto, 2013). Tinto observed the differences in rates of completion for older college students as compared to traditional age college students. Most recently noted is a distinct difference between those students enrolled in 2- year versus 4- year schools, with students at 2-year institutions not having benchmarks for successfully moving towards associate degree completion or completing courses that make them eligible to transition to a 4-year institution (Tinto, 2013). Additionally, the age of the student combined with their enrolled at half-time or full time also influenced whether students completed a degree program. Tinto discovered that those who were enrolled in a 4-year university full-time were far more likely to achieve degree attainment in comparison to part-time students and those attending community college (Tinto, 1993). He later found that part of these students' success hinged upon whether their progress was marked by specific benchmarks that contributed to what Tinto (2013) identified as "momentum" (p. 1), asserting that when students experience continued and consistent momentum, they

completed college courses more successfully. Additionally, by declaring a major, these students were more likely to move towards degree completion.

Tinto also acknowledged the differences between student departures from an institution and student departures from the broader system of higher education. Many of those students who depart from one university eventually enroll or transfer to another to complete their studies. Therefore, students who leave, but continue their education, are not seen as system departures, only as departures from an institution. This does not take into consideration those students who simply stop enrollment temporarily, identified as *stopouts*. This delay may be for one or more semesters (Tinto, 1993). None of the participants included in the current study are identified as *stopouts*.

Operational Definitions

Academic Integration: Interactions that occur between the student and college, including but not limited to instructors, advisors, and study groups that promote participation within the informal and formal academic systems of the college (Tinto, 1993).

Attrition: The action of leaving the college system, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, prior to degree completion. (Shaw & Mattern, 2013; Tinto, 1993).

Dropout: Individuals who leave a university or college before the completion of a college degree (Tinto, 1993).

Persistence: First-time enrolled students who continue to enroll in classes each semester or year while continuing to do so until degree attainment (Tinto, 1997).

Readiness: References the behavioral aspects of possessing the adequate social and emotional tools and dispositions to feel comfortable, and even thrive, as a college student, in addition to the academic knowledge and skills necessary (Moore et al., 2010). The terms *readiness* and *preparedness* will be used synonymously and interchangeably throughout this study.

Remedial courses: College courses in mathematics, reading, or writing offered to students lacking college-level academic skills and abilities (Jenkins & Boswell, 2002).

Retention: Continuous enrollment at a first-time institution through to degree attainment (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004).

Social Integration: The social interaction that occurs between the student and others promoting participation within the social systems of the college (Tinto, 1993).

Stopouts: Students who, after leaving, have re-entered higher education later to complete a degree (Tinto, 1993).

Student Departure or Withdrawal: The act of exiting a college or university before the completion of an academic degree (Tinto, 1975).

Assumptions

I designed this qualitative research study to have no predisposition toward the local high school or the population of students. However, the study can relate to the problem of readiness and college attrition. The leading assumption of this study is that the lack of readiness at the secondary level contributes to the lack of readiness of students at the postsecondary level and facilitates withdrawal from a college or university before earning a college degree. I assumed that the participants honestly reported explanations

for not finishing college. The intention of this study was to explore the level or amount of college readiness the students received at the high school level, and if that preparation hindered or enhanced the decision to withdraw from school. Another assumption was that participants would be able to provide a first-hand account of the contributing factors that influenced their decision to withdraw from college, therefore, identifying causes attributed to the college attrition rate. Additionally, I assumed that the study participants would be able to identify how well prepared they were for college from high school, and connected this to their decisions to leave college. I assumed that the study would describe these connections in detail. I further assumed that the interview questions would be the best method for collecting data and ensuring the study's reliability and validity. Participation in the study was voluntary and participant confidentiality was provided; therefore, it was assumed that each participant's response during the interview was truthful.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this qualitative study is restricted to individuals who graduated from the target high school located in the Southeastern region of the United States. This study focused on whether students felt that they were adequately prepared for college and identified specific reasons for withdrawing from college. The study is limited to 13participants who graduated from a local high school during the years of 2008 to 2015 and enrolled in a 2-year college or 4-year institution who have since withdrawn.

The results of this study could be generalizable to former college students who (a) graduated from the local high school between 2008 to 2015, (b) enrolled in a 2-year of 4-

year college or university, (c) were enrolled for at least one semester, and (d) withdrew from school prior to earning a degree. The local high school included in this study is in a suburban community where most the students are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. This study does not include any teachers, administrators, or counselors. Finally, this study does not include those who have reenrolled or are currently attending a college or university.

Limitations

In this research study, I determined potential limitations related to participants' response to interview questions as it relates to their perceptions of the impact of high school readiness and their decision to withdraw. There were several possible limitations to this study. I served as the human instrument that collected the data. Therefore, there was a possibility of bias within the study. Possible bias could have been derived from the tone of my voice during the interview, style of language, or the fact that I am currently employed by the district in which the participants once attended. The methods I used to avoid researcher bias included being clear, asking simple questions to reduce misunderstandings, keeping questions neutral, and assuring that only participants who have experience or point of reference about the subject of the study are included. Avoiding bias was accomplished through a screening process to determine the worthiness of the participants. Additionally, question order can show bias. I avoided this possibility by asking questions that addressed readiness. As the interview progressed, I then asked questions related to withdrawal. Finally, I asked questions about remediation. Marshall

and Rossman (2014) explained the significance of focusing on the research question to eliminate any bias.

Another possible limitation of this study is the methodological design. Those who are critical of the case study design argue that the study of a relatively limited number of participants does not work to determine reliability nor does a small number of participants provide the researcher with the capacity to take a broad view and apply the results to a broader population (Soy, 1997). Researchers have dismissed this type of research as effective only when the researcher is at the exploratory stage. The case study research design can provide insights and results as the study is developed, organized, and the data collected carefully and thoughtfully. With careful planning and groundwork, case study research offers a framework in which study participants have the ability to share their perceptions of the study topic.

Next, this qualitative study was limited by participants available who qualified as having withdrawn from a college or university in the last 9 years. The sample size was limited due to convenience and availability of participants. Thirteen former college students were interviewed for this investigation. Additionally, the case study included graduates from one local high school, which further set limits to the study. Initially, the time allotment for completion of the case study interviews was limited to 2 weeks. I allowed for flexibility with teleconferencing, video conferencing, and in-person interview options. Participant responses could be limited based on personal experiences and the decision to withdraw from school before earning a college degree. A weakness of the study is the reliance on full disclosure of the participants in their responses to interview

questions. The study participants had to discuss withdrawing from college prior to completion. Due to the personal nature of their experience about having to withdraw from school, the possibility of not wanting to discuss their college experiences and the details of what may have led to withdrawal could influence their responses. Participants that did not fully disclose all details when responding to interview questions may lead to overgeneralizations or minimal responses.

Lastly, during the interviews participants identified the perceptions of how they were academically prepared in high school and were asked to link this to motives for withdrawing from college. I assumed that the study participants could identify and make specific connections between readiness and the relationship to college withdrawal. This assumption could be considered as another limitation of this study because students described how well prepared they were from their high school along with the relationship of this to their leaving college. This could have been problematic in that former students may have answered in ways that did not address the questions directly. Another limitation could be the participants' ability to ascertain how well they recall their preparation for college during high school. Therefore, participants may not have answered honestly or sometimes referred broadly to items instead of providing details. The study's focus is of graduates of one local high school with a unique curriculum and staff, and the school culture along with the uniqueness of the community in which it is located could act as a limitation to this study.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant at the local level, because it may provide specific ways in which a local high school can better contribute to college readiness. Feedback from former students is critical in the school's attempts to improve college readiness for current and future students. This study should enable teachers and administrators to discover what students believe is helpful, regarding support towards college readiness. In a broader context, it may help identify practices that will be useful in assisting educators with increasing college readiness. Interview responses have suggested specific ways in which teachers and administrators can support and assist students in college readiness.

There is an expectation and assumption that when a student completes high school and decides to enroll in college, a degree will follow. A national report on college and career readiness revealed that only 26% of high school graduates meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks in mathematics, science, English, and science (ACT, 2016). The study further revealed that between 2013 and 2016 the average ACT composite scores decreased for students with a family income below $80,000 while also increasing for those with a family income above $80,000. This suggests the need to reverse declining readiness levels for students from low-income families. Finney, Perna, and Callan (2014) discovered that the United States is facing a shortage of college graduates as the segment of the population that is considered to possess the highest levels of educational attainment, also known as baby boomers, begin to retire. Sixty percent of first-time college students who were enrolled in 2008 earned a 4-year bachelor's degree in 2014 (NCES, 2016). Therefore, educators are concerned about the lasting impact of academic

and curriculum policy that contribute to a lack of college readiness skills. Lastly, concerning social change, findings from this study could also improve college readiness for students who attend similar high schools throughout the country and possibly curtail the rate of college attrition.

Researchers and scholars have conducted little research on college persistence that includes perceptions and beliefs of students related to pursuing and completing a college degree. Retention programs have increased at many universities and colleges throughout the nation; however, these programs continue to lack support and need reform because they have failed to significantly increase student retention (Complete College America, 2014; Tinto, 2012). This qualitative research study supports the body of knowledge concerning college readiness and the perceptions and beliefs that contributed to college readiness and what hindered college readiness. Additionally, this study was designed to uncover what practices can benefit students while in high school to prepare them as they move to a college environment and coursework. At the local level, data from this study may assist educators, administrators, and all stakeholders at the target school in making informed decisions and possibly reforming current practices on preparing students for college. The interview responses could address a need for a more rigorous curriculum or a need for additional support and resources outside of the classroom such as exposure to specific jobs and industries through internships (Sum, Khatiwada, & Palma, 2010). Findings could also be used to implement new teaching and mentoring strategies that would bolster college readiness.

The outcomes of this qualitative research study could assist instructors, counselors, and administrators at the secondary level in adequately preparing students academically for the challenges at the college level. This study could lead to an overhaul of the education system that has become very dependent on standardized assessments, re-testing, differentiated instruction, credit recovery, and grade inflation. The results of this study may help to identify practices that do not emulate the academic integrity of coursework students may encounter at the collegiate level. Outcomes of this study may lead to professional development for secondary instructors that could include instructional strategies with a focus on college readiness (Hafner, Joseph, & McCormick, 2010). College readiness policies at the high school level could also include closing the achievement gaps amongst various socioeconomic, ethnic, and gender groups (Gilkey, Seburn, & Conley, 2011; Markow & Pieters, 2011).

This study is significant because the results could draw attention to the connection between college readiness, or the lack of readiness, and the inability of college students to satisfactorily earn an undergraduate degree within six years. In addition to a college diploma, college graduates gain other benefits related to higher salaries, higher self-esteem, and higher rates of contributing socially and economically to local communities (Hamilton, 2010). Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2011) analyzed the states' economy considering the last recession alongside the condition of the states' high schools, and concluded that dropouts and poorly prepared students negatively impact the states' economy. The *Communities in Schools Georgia* report (2011) revealed that 61,500 of the 2010 graduates of high school dropped out of college. Decreasing the number of dropouts

by 50% could prove to be of great value and benefit to the state. When high school graduates matriculate and complete a college degree, the benefits to the local and state economies are significant. Individuals, who complete high school and then earn a college degree, will earn relatively higher incomes than nonhigh school graduates and noncollege graduates. Due to these increased earnings, these individuals then contribute at higher rates to local and state economies (Communities in Schools Georgia, 2011).

Summary

The need for college-ready high school graduates is a pressing issue nationally and was supported by the Department of Education under the administration of former President Obama. Additionally, the Governor's Office of Georgia introduced the initiative to reduce attrition statewide through Georgia's Higher Education Completion Plan in 2012. In Chapter 1 of this research study, I provided insight into the study with an emphasis on the background, problem statement, nature of the study, research question, purpose of the study, conceptual framework, significance of the study, and definitions highlighting terminology relevant to the study.

In Chapter 2, I include an examination of current literature that addresses how high school graduates are academically unprepared for the rigor of the college curriculum. In this review, the research includes a focus on the following areas: college readiness, high school reform, college and career readiness indicators and predictors, college attrition, and Tinto's theory of early student departure. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology of this study along with the research design.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of former college enrollees regarding the level of readiness needed for increased academic success towards completion. This chapter comprises a detailed review of literature related to college readiness, college and career ready standards, college readiness predictors, college attrition, and the use of remediation to assist academically unprepared college enrollees. Chapter 2 begins with a definition of college readiness that will then lead to a discussion of the influence that Tinto's theory of student departure has had on understanding the reasons why students withdraw from college. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the predictors of college readiness.

The public library, as well as Walden's library website, was used to obtained scholarly journals and research using the EBSCO and ProQuest databases as well as SAGE database. Additionally, information and research from the College Board and the GaDOE were included. The following keywords were used when searching for scholarly literature: *grade inflation, college attrition, college readiness, preparedness, college retention, remediation, early student departure,* and *college dropout.*

Conceptual Framework

In the 1970s researchers began to identify gaps in theories and research that considered the reasons or causes of early student withdrawal from college (Braxton, 2000). Spady (1971) created a framework for the study of college retention, noting that students bring much of their precollege qualities, both internal and external, to an

institution of higher learning. Researchers identified that having sufficient family and community support as one reason students stayed in college (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1979).

Tinto's Theory of Early Student Departure

Utilizing the student integration model, Tinto (1975) identified student attrition as a process that includes an understanding of the social and academic processes involved in the integration of first-year students into the college experience. Additionally, students who do not finish higher education are theorized as having failed to create an attachment to their institution, which is related to their inability to persist to the second year of college. Tinto further identified how student attrition can consist of many interconnected elements and how understanding these elements contribute to a multilayered process to attrition. Tinto's theory of student departure (Tinto, 1975; 1993) is frequently referenced in academic discussions about success, retention, and attrition in higher education (see Figure 1).

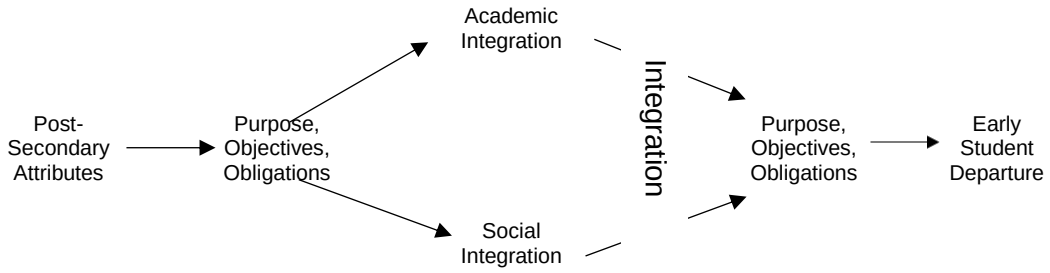

Figure 1. Tinto's model of early student departure (simplified). Adapted from " Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition" by V. Tinto. Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Supporters of Tinto's Theory of Departure

Other theorists have used Tinto's theory as foundational research on student departure. In a second theoretical movement, centered on theoretical and empirical studies circulated in the 1980's, Bean (1990) developed an explanatory model of student retention. Bean asserted that environmental factors and the student's intention could also influence student departure. This is contrary to Tinto's theory which ascribed student departure to academic and social integration. Bean's assumptions were later incorporated in Tinto's 1993 model.

Like Tinto's model, Bean (2001) asserted that after enrollment the student interacts with members of the college community both academically and socially. The student also interacts within the institution's organizational arena and is concurrently being influenced by personal issues such as homesickness, running out of money, or wanting to be with a significant other. Bean (2001) also asserted that because of "interacting with the institution," the student develops specific sentiments about "himself or herself as a student and towards the school" (para. 20). These sentiments contribute to how the student feels he or she fits within the institution along with his or her loyalty and contribute to whether the student remains enrolled and progresses towards graduation.

Tinto and Bean's theories offer some explanation for early student departure. Regardless of the model approach, both theorists concluded that the progression of student retention remains the same and that it is the shared experiences and academic abilities that occur before enrollment that are important; however, student interaction both socially and academically once enrolled is a deciding factor for continued

enrollment (Bean, 2001, para. 24). Students must know that they are accepted and that they are a part of the collegiate community to remain until degree completion. Results of a study conducted by Bean and Metzner (1985) concluded that nontraditional students are less affected by the social integration variables than the external environment. Milem and Berger (1997) investigated Tinto's (1993) revision of his initial conceptual model of early student departure. The review included a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between increased student integration with the social and academic environment of the college.

In promoting positive educational outcomes for students, Berger and Milem (1999) conducted an examination of student persistence and first-year retention. Findings from the study support the use of the student integration model for future research (Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 2000). Additionally, Schudde (2011) examined Tinto's (1993) student departure model to evaluate students' decision to leave or persist in school based on the students' academic background. Schudde's study further supports Tinto and Bean's theories on early student departure. Schudde discusses the relationship between persistence and student integration theory, which holds that students must effectively assimilate into the culture of the university to avoid issues that may lead to departure. Based on Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) models of student attrition, Davidson and Wilson (2013) conducted an extensive review of the literature to assess the validity of factors that predict student attrition. The researchers concluded that developing college relationships positively impacts a student's ability to complete college.

College Readiness

College readiness is defined as having the ability to succeed at the minimum qualifications required for credit bearing, entry-level courses leading to the attainment of a bachelor's degree (Conley, 2012). An understanding of college readiness commonly involves understanding student needs, regarding academic preparation, to successfully enroll students in college programs without the need to be enrolled in remedial level courses (Conley, 2012). Included in this understanding of readiness are various undergraduate degrees and certificate programs. As reported in a study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] (2010), many students do not meet current high school graduation standards. The NAEP is a federally mandated project administered by the NCES and is responsible for collecting data and for ongoing evaluations of student aptitude in the various core subject areas. The NAEP is an assessment considered to be the nation's report card. The NAEP has based this input from the public, research, assessments, educators and specialists. Student achievement was identified on three core levels; basic, proficient or advanced. Students who are identified as being at the advanced or proficient level demonstrated aptitude of subject matter that is considered challenging and is expected of a student entering college. Proficiency included areas such as, analytical skills, knowledge of the subject matter and applying this knowledge to real world conditions. NAEP has determined that many students do not meet these standards. In 2009, NAEP found that only 38% of high school seniors were proficient on the reading assessment and only 26% were proficient in the mathematics assessment (NCES, 2010).

The common assessments used to assess how academically successful a student will be in college are the SAT and the ACT exams. These exams are taken within the final two years of high school. A result of this standardized assessment is used to determine college readiness in the core subject areas. The ACT assessment reveals that 67% of students met the English benchmark, 31% in science, 46% in mathematics, 52% in reading (ACT, 2012). These results reveal that only 25% of student met the college readiness benchmarks overall, ultimately revealing that these students only had a one in two chances of receiving a "B" or greater in core first-year classes in college. Equally, SAT data for graduating seniors for 2012, reveal that 43% of those tested met the college readiness standard. This further indicates that 65% of those students were expected to earn a minimum grade "B-" in required core classes the first year of college (College Board, 2012). Even with these statistics, students are still enrolling in higher institutions of learning each year. Approximately 65.9% of students who graduated from high school in 2013 matriculated to college, which was a slightly lower percentage in 2012, where 66.2 % of graduates enrolled (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2014). Many enrollees are encouraging; however, the number of students who matriculate through the varying college and university level institutions and earn degrees is dismal. In 2009, 35% of students in search of an undergraduate degree completed a degree in four years, while 56% received a degree within six years (NCES, 2010).

One of the leading explanations for why students are academically unsuccessful in college is the difference in abilities and the academic potential at the college level (Conley, Aspengren, Stout, & Veach, 2006). Many first-year students discover that

college courses are more challenging than high school classes (Mattanah et al., 2010). College professors expect students to possess critical thinking and analytical proficiencies that are essential to success in college (National Research Council, 2002). Along with this expectation, these students can infer, research, support theory, hypothesize, interpret data, and think critically in general (Pike, Hansen, & Childress, 2014). Furthermore, first-year students can conduct comprehensive presentations, work with other students and solve multifaceted problems (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). The faster pace of the college class requires students to have the skill to read and maintain courses that require reading nearly eight times of what they read in high school (Conley, 2003).

Expectations for high school students are very different from those for college students. Conley (2006) found through various observations that the required coursework and associated assignments did not require much regarding cognitive engagement. When writing reports and essays, students believed that their opinions were adequate and appropriate to justify their main points. Also, many of these students were unwilling to solve problems that appeared vague or could have more than one answer or solution. For example, students could not discuss or analyze texts for drive, inspiration, or reasoning, nor could they assess historical context. Students who accepted learning as such appear to only complete rote tasks that do not require critical analysis or understanding.

Research conducted in a national report by the Center for Educational Policy Research and Standards for Success, found the required assessments for high school graduation were in poor alignment with preparing students for college success (Conley, 2012). Conley (2006) identified behaviors that are crucial to collegiate success. One must

be able to think critically, accept critical feedback, be accepting of the possibility of failure, and have an ability to cope with frustrating and vague tasks and have or develop an inquisitive nature. Many students leaving the nation's public high schools are lacking in these skills. Teaching students the skills necessary to enhance learning can contribute to their persistence in learning (Chemosit, 2012).

A College Board sponsored study indicated that grade inflation by high schools has also been a contributing factor to the number of students who are academically unprepared or ready for college (Godfrey, 2011). The pressure to succeed at the expense of achievement has been an issue that has concerned many educators and school leaders. The recent revelations regarding school leaders asking educators to pass students, change test responses, test scores, and in some cases, demanding that educators do whatever it takes to make sure students are passing, are leaving many teachers and researchers to question the validity of student achievement gains (Chiang, 2009; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). Godfrey (2011) found that grade inflation has steadily increased over a 10-year period, and teachers often felt pressured to inflate grades because of the increased competition that students face in college admissions.

High School Reform Movement

Some historians mark the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling to ban segregation in public schools as the beginning of education reform in the United States. During the last half of the twentieth century, the United States saw many education reform efforts come and go. Typically, these efforts were a result of some national crisis, such as war, economic depression or downturn, or a movement of

scientific or technological competitiveness serving as an impetus for the new reform. The goal of the high school reform movement is to have graduates who are ready for the academic challenges and expectations of college (Abraham, Slate, Saxon, & Barnes, 2014). Examining initiatives that began with President Clinton's Improving America's Schools Act and President Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to the current Common Core initiative, the United States is still grappling with school reform in which the policies attempt to ensure that students are academically ready for college (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014). The intention of the NCLB Act was the increase student achievement and close the achievement gap nationwide (Scott, 2007).

Approximately 3.5 million high school students are projected to graduate in 2016 to 2017 (NCES, 2017). This projection is an increase from the estimated 3 million students who graduated in 2008 (NCES, 2011). Of these approximately 3 million graduates, two-thirds began their college careers; however, it was discovered that many of those first-time enrolled students were unprepared for the rigor of the college curriculum because of watered down curriculum and expectations (Hill & Maas, 2015). With the economic recession of 2008, more students recognized the need for a college degree, therefore, boosting enrollment at 2-year and 4-year colleges. The graduation rates from these institutions are lackluster, as students are not matriculating through academic programs and are withdrawing before earning a degree. This action has left constituents, stakeholders, administrators, and public policy makers to conclude that students do not possess the educational preparation for college-level work (Pike et al., 2014).

In the past two decades, there have been several types of reforms and programs implemented to address college readiness, more specifically for low-income, immigrant, minority, and urban populations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). Some of these reforms include: a) school restructuring, the implementation of a more academically rigorous curriculum, b) federally funded mentoring programs, c) accountability policies such as high-stakes testing, and d) a focus on defining college readiness and implementing programs that address the aforementioned reforms, especially programs that target specific groups such as low-income, minority, and immigrant youth (Hill & Maas, 2015; Musoba, 2011; Roderick et al., 2009; Roderick, Coca, Nagaoka, 2011; Sondergeld, Fischer, Samel, & Knaggs, 2013; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2008).

The lack of readiness for college is difficult to address as it would require that students have access to more rigorous and appropriate curriculum. Many reforms in the past 20 years have discussed restructuring the school in specific ways so that they ensure academic success as well as increase academic rigor and social support (Hill & Maas, 2015). Many of the reforms that addressed college readiness included increasing academic rigor, aligning curricula with college entry requirements, and increasing academic and social support systems.

Several studies in the last decade have identified the disconnected expectations between what secondary educators and college professors' expectations are regarding student preparation for the first year of college (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013; Venezia et al., 2008). Most high schools have long provided upper-level math and English courses that provide a more challenging curriculum such as Dual Enrollment, Advanced

Placement (AP) International Baccalaureate Program (IB) courses. These courses are specifically designed to be more demanding and foster the analytic skills that college students are required to have to support academic success in college. With the push to increase student participation in dual enrollment, AP, and IB programs, many school districts offer open enrollment to any student who wishes to take these advanced classes without a teacher or administrative recommendation (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013). High schools seek to improve reputation by showcasing enrollees in such classes. The motive for this initiative is to empower students to have access to courses that often lead to higher success rates in college (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013; Winebrenner, 2006). Likewise, the College Board, the entity that oversees AP programs nationally, reported that 30% of all graduating high school students participate in the AP program and only about 20.1% succeed in scoring three points or higher, required by colleges to earn credit for the course (College Board, 2014).

There is little support for students who have chosen to enroll in these programs, without teacher recommendation or academic history to substantiate the ability to succeed, is often difficult because of the noted lack of academic preparation for such courses at the lower grade levels. Some high schools have offered programs like the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) to support students without the academic background to be successful in this rigorous course work (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009). However, these programs are usually not sustainable because of budget restraints in public education. Like AVID, GEAR UP is another federally funded program in which students are provided additional, supplemental activities that promote

college readiness. Sondergeld et al. (2013) found that students who take part in GEAR UP at an inner-city high school with large numbers of educationally disadvantaged students outperformed nonparticipants in all college-readiness measures. Indicators measured in the study included attendance rate, graduation rate, grade point average, and college enrollment. In addition to these supplemental programs, access to programs such as AP and the IB program has had a positive academic effect as the national average student performance on tests used for college admissions has increased along with the number of students taking the test each year (ACT, 2014). The ACT, which for decades has been used as a measure of college readiness, reported that over 57% of all 2014 graduates took the ACT with 26% meeting the four benchmarks tested. This was an increase of 10% since 2010. The rise in students taking the test may be indicative of intensification in the academic rigor; however, at some postsecondary institutions, 3 out of 5 students still require remedial courses upon enrollment (Bailey, 2009). For first-year enrollees, this estimate can represent nearly 40% enrollment in remedial courses (Perin, 2013; Sherwin, 2011).

An analysis of high school reform and college readiness must include an approach that promotes racial and socio-economic equity in standardized testing. Researchers have found that the use of standardized testing as a measure of implementing college readiness curriculum did not impact educationally disadvantaged groups such as African-American, Latinos, or lower socio-economic students (Musoba, 2011). It was also determined that high school exit exams and other standardized testing did not consider the specific needs

of these groups that may have different experiences in education as opposed to students who attended resource-rich high schools.

Along these same lines, researchers examined different ways of assessing college readiness (Roderick et al., 2009). They evaluated the three most recognized approaches used by colleges to define college readiness as, grade point averages, achievement scores, and coursework. Findings indicated a significant gap in readiness for minority and low-income socio-economic groups. Although all three approaches were deemed valid, students in the low-income and minority category benefited the least. These groups were also considered to be in the most need of participation in a college readiness program.

Policymakers at both the state and national levels are looking for ways to address the academic readiness of high school graduates. On the national level, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2013) released an initiative identified as the "Common Core State Standards" (CCSS). These standards were created in response to the unsatisfactory academic progress of students across the nation. Additionally, students were lagging their international counterparts, and the remediation at college levels was high (CCSSO, 2013). Common Core State Standards were implemented to make sure that high school students throughout the country have the knowledge and skills needed to achieve success in college and career. Academic Benchmarks (2015), 46 states, along with territories of the United States, Washington D.C. and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have implemented CCSS (Academic Benchmarks, 2015; CCSSO 2013). Texas, Alaska, Nebraska and Virginia are states that identify as "nonadoption" states that

have opted out of CCSS adoption (Academic Benchmarks, 2015). With the implementation of CCSS, threes states, Indiana, Oklahoma, and South Carolina, all withdrew from participation in CCSS in 2014.

Georgia state policy makers are seeking ways to improve the progress of the education of students within the state. For most of the history of the state utilized in this study, education has operated as part of local governance, with local school boards responsible for decision making regarding funding and operations for the school and district. Consideration of the data reflects serious concerns for the progression of the state's students. In 2007, the Governor's office of the state of Georgia developed a state strategic plan to improve social and academic collegiate experience. The most notable aspect of the project includes the Complete College Initiative (GOSA, 2011). In August 2011, the state governor of Georgia announced the initiative which would provide concrete steps for addressing the issue of college access and completion. Governor Deal said students were leaving high school and attending the state's colleges and universities but were withdrawing before degree completion. With the one million dollars, the state of Georgia received from Complete College America, several strategies were initiated to address the needs of college students (GOSA, 2011).

One early outcome of the national and state initiatives is a move towards allowing students to have access to college-level classes at an earlier age. Throughout the country, postsecondary institutions have experienced an increase in early college academies and greater access for students to participate in dual enrollment programs (Allen & Dadgar, 2012; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Speroni, 2011). While in the dual enrollment

programs, students get the chance to enroll in college-level courses earning an associate degree at completion. The formation of the P-16 council has created opportunities for public school educators to have an open dialogue regarding the college and career ready standards. Enrollment in these courses is typically not contingent upon SAT or ACT performance but rely on other factors determined by the local school districts. Early results indicate that students who participated in such programs were having greater academic success at the college level (Maloney, Lain, & Clark, 2009).

Early access to college-level courses is not the only result that policyholders seek (Allen & Dadgar, 2012). In addition to student enrollment, the goal is to encourage completion. Enrolling in college should not be the climax of a student's educational career. High school reform initiatives are the first step in assisting students to reach college completion. Having early access to rigorous classroom curriculum is vital in ensuring that students are scholastically prepared for college work. Schools may further explore other measures to help students complete their college degrees. Additionally, high school reform policies should include closing the gap on various, ethnic, socio-economic, and gender groups (Gilkey et al., 2011; Markow & Pieters, 2011)

College and Career Readiness Indicators

A growing body of research regarding what contributing factors determine career and college readiness and success have determined that grade point average and standardized tests are not strong predictors of college success (Crisp, Nora, & Taggart, 2009; Maruyama, 2012; Porter & Polikoff, 2012). The emphasis of the research has changed directions in recent years from academic rigor to the improvement of critical

thinking skills among other skills and knowledge. Researchers recommended that students receive instruction from a curriculum designed specifically designed to support rigor and they should be tested with assessments developed by outside entities to help ensure the validity of the assessment (Rainwater, Mize, & Brooks, 2008). An academically challenging education is not determined by courses taken within a term, but more so by the number of courses that have prepared students for postsecondary work. In addition, administrators and teachers alike should be given the opportunity to receive professional development that supports the curriculum, the standards, and the assessments (Rainwater et al., 2008; Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, & Coles, 2009).

More recently, scholars have identified the need to supplement a rigorous traditional education to include a curriculum that includes teaching 21st Century skills (Carnevale, 2013). Carnevale identified the types of skills and knowledge necessary for today's youth to qualify for jobs of the future. These 21st century skills include competition-based requirements such as productivity, innovation, quality, customization, consistency and social responsibility. Bae and Darling-Hammond (2014) added to this list of competencies that teachers should foster and develop within their students to include, various forms of communication, successful collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, and the applying new knowledge. These skills and competencies would be developed through the curriculum with rigorous courses, such as AP, IB, or dual enrollment programs.

Researchers continue to emphasize the value in offering students these higher-level courses so that they are groomed for academics at the college level as career

requirements and expectations (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Roderick, et al., 2009). The emphasis on critical thinking skills, oral and written communication for both college readiness and career readiness demonstrate the shift away from separating students into college preparatory tracks and vocational education tracks preparing all students in similar ways and providing them with the same educational opportunities.

The Common Core Standards were designed to ensure college and career readiness skills for all students (Rothman, 2012). Rothman (2012) held that the application of the standards would support the development of these skills that would enable students to enter postsecondary institutions without needing remediation. Conley's (2012) research is often cited as the most comprehensive on career and college readiness (Darling-Hammond et. al, 2014). Conley's (2012) work focuses on transition knowledge, learning skills, key cognitive strategies, and content knowledge, which outlines not just the types of skills and knowledge that students should develop but how they should apply these skills, to other skills such as time management and transitions from high school, college, to career.

State Curriculum Alignment and College Readiness

The studies all stress the importance of high school students acquiring specific skills centered on specific knowledge, skills, and abilities (Carnevale, 2013). However, to assess academic and career readiness, student skills, and intellectual abilities must be quantifiable, meaning there must be standards that are measurable for educators. There have been two opposing views discussed when assessing student readiness for college. The traditional view argues that grades or grade point average (GPA) demonstrate

achievement by the student; therefore, warranting acceptance into college. This view incentivizes college acceptance as payment for hard work (Geiser, 2009). Students are encouraged to take academically challenging courses and college-level preparatory work. Students who choose to take the more rigorous curriculum typically perform well if the curriculum is academically challenging (Campbell, 2005). The contrasting view holds that student evaluation should not be based solely on what students have learned in secondary school, but this should include the ability to acquire knowledge, hence making skill assessments like the SAT highly relevant (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2012).

Having the autonomy to implement Common Core State Standards has presented colleges with challenges to admissions (Kober & Rentner, 2012). Postsecondary institutions are having a difficult time determining admissions requirements to their institutions. Thus, many researchers have worked towards identifying academic and career readiness criteria and predictors (ACT 2006, 2007; Adelman, 2006; Brown & Conley, 2007; Geiser & Studley, 2002). Although the terminology is considerably new, colleges and institutions of higher learning have always worked diligently to determine what this means when reviewing applicants and admission requirements. Part of this work has involved defining the term "readiness for college." Coming to an agreement regarding this definition has been the focus of multiple studies (Brown & Conley, 2007; Conley, 2012; Geiser, 2009).

Common Core State Standards and College & Career Readiness

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across many states have also been linked to college readiness and alignment with academic expectations of students in higher

education. CCSS standards were reviewed and developed by educational experts that included postsecondary faculty along with a partnership of the American Council on Education (King, 2011). Rothman (2012) stated that in developing the common core standards, college readiness remained at the forefront of the CCSS objectives. Those objectives include a focus on reading, writing, and mathematics standards. In reading, emphasis on the ability to read and comprehend complex texts, college-level texts, is advised. A reduction in the approach to traditional narrative style writing is replaced with informational and explanatory writing.

The Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium was created to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of the CCSS (Nichols-Barrer, Place, Dillon & Gill, 2016). The purpose of the PARCC was to develop an assessment which would measure whether students were on track to college academic success. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) was created to measure student's proficiency based on state curriculum standards. The goal of the study commissioned by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education (MEOE) was to evaluate whether the PARCC and the MEOE could demonstrate whether common core aligned assessment could identify which student were prepared for college success. The study revealed that the PARCC and the MCAS could adequately predict college success. The study was based on first-year grades in mathematics and English language arts (ELA). Scores in the mathematics and ELA course revealed a positive correlation with student college outcomes.

Studies suggest that much of the postsecondary mathematics skills necessary for college readiness is taught in grades 6 through 8 (Rothman, 2012). However, a study of the ACT college readiness mathematics standards and college achievement in mathematics revealed that students who took a minimum of 3 years of high school mathematics and scored a minimum 22 points on the assessment were more likely to pass their first college level mathematics course (Harwell, Moreno, & Post, 2016).

The CCSS initiative has reshaped the policy of U.S. education since 2001 (Hartong, 2016). Implementation of CCSS has increased expectations of college readiness for high school graduates. The push towards achievement versus ability had initiated and led to many states to implement statewide assessments with the College and Career Readiness Standards. Brown and Conley (2007) identified the link between high school assessment content and the established objectives and standards identified by the average American research university. These standards were identified as being minimum necessary functioning skills for incoming first-year students. Study findings revealed that in areas that can be categorized as basic, high school assessments were directly associated with the preparation and education knowledge necessary for college success. However, in areas requiring higher cognitive development and function, there was a large incongruence (Brown & Conley, 2007). This study reiterated what most educators have already concluded that some form of alignment does exist between high school education and at least a small portion of college readiness skills.

Aligning state assessment systems to the rigorous curriculum is fundamental to creating graduates who are academically prepared for a postsecondary level education

(Welton & Martinez, 2014). To increase the rate of student readiness for the collegiate environment, America's public high schools should ensure that the content, skills, and knowledge that they are teaching are essential to college success. The goal of the Georgia College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) and Success Center is to identify the necessary skills students need to be acquainted with to be academically successful in first-year level coursework offered at colleges and universities (Mishkind, 2014). The state definitions align with the other research recommendations discussed in this review and provide a sufficient curriculum for student college readiness.

Predictors of College Readiness

The predictors of college success have been difficult to ascertain as researchers have yet to identify definitive predictors of success. However, two conventional predictors of college success; national standardized test scores and grade point average are often used. This chapter investigated research in standardized test scores, grade point average and first-year remediation as predictors of college readiness.

ACT and SAT Scores

Researchers consistently debate the appropriateness of the use of ACT and SAT scores to determine college readiness (Liu, 2011; Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Admission offices use the results of the SAT or ACT along with GPA as a predictor of student academic achievement college. As mentioned earlier, the validity of these test results calls into question as true predictors of college readiness. The College Board found that the validity of the SAT is constantly being examined. In 2006, the College Board (2012) conducted a multiyear study, involving over 200 hundred colleges and followed several

cohorts of students throughout college. This allowed the College Board to collect longitudinal data. These College Board studies have found that the SAT can predict students' GPA for the first year, in addition to the fourth-year cumulative GPA. There is still lots of controversy surrounding the use of the standardized test scores like the ACT or SAT as a predictor of college achievement.

Similarly, the ACT has been called into question regarding its predictive validity and its appropriateness. Like the SAT, researchers have found that coupled with the student's high school GPA, and the ACT does serve its intended purpose. Researchers who studied the GPA of first-year college students found that high school grades and ACT scores can be considered equal if the institution desires that admission criteria reflect predicted academic performance in the students' first year (ACT, 1998; Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008). As part of a study on college retention, students who enrolled for the second year, Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, and Le (2006) believed high school grades and ACT scores should be viewed with the same weight ideally to obtain a more reliable picture of the applicant's projected success. In another study, when researchers analyzed the last semester grade averages of those who earned a degree, they determined that high school grades should be weighted more than ACT scores when a college or university wants to obtain a more accurate picture of the students projected success (ACT, 2008). Lastly, Bettinger, Evans, and Pope (2013) indicated that the English and Mathematics subject area tests for the ACT are highly predictive of college performance, while the Science and Reading subtests did not provide any additional predictive indication supporting college performance. Radunzel and Noble (2012) found

that the ACT composite score and high school GPA were satisfactory predictors of long-term college success at 2- and 4-year institutions. However, the study also noted that long-term academic success in college was predicted by viewing the two variables of high school GPA and standardized test scores; the study concluded that neither was a good predictor of college success on its own (Radunzel & Noble, 2012).

In forecasting a student's capacity to complete college, a consideration of ACT and SAT scores is relative. As educators continue to work towards preparing students for postsecondary education, Belfield and Crosta (2012) pointed to the importance of having a solid high school GPA. Moreover, they found that high school GPA can strongly indicate the grades a student will achieve in college. More importantly, GPA can also be used to indicate how many courses a student will take per term. Thus, high school GPA can predict how long a student will take to graduate from college. These findings indicate that although relatively high ACT and SAT scores will ensure college admissions, the connection between these test results and college level GPA is not as strong as that of high school and college GPA.

High School Grade Point Average vs. Standardized Testing

The grades earned while in high school have often been regarded as an unreliable source to predict college readiness and garner college admission. Given that high schools across the nation have varying grading scales, the use of more rigorous standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT has been a more uniform way to measure student ability and achievement (Geiser & Santelices, 2007). However, there has been decreasing emphasis on standardized tests as admissions criteria. For example, at the recommendation of the

Board of Admission and Relations with Schools (BOARS), the University of California system made changes to their admissions process (Geiser & Santelices, 2007). Many standard policies and practices for undergraduate admission were amended to determine eligibility. Admissions officers and the BOARS also amended its Eligibility Index, a numerical gauge that establishes minimum grade point average earned in high school and the minimum assessment scores that a student attains for consideration of admission to the UC system. These changes fixed approximately three-quarters of the weight to high school GPA and one-quarter to standardized tests, thus enhancing the GPA as a primary indicator of academic achievement in the admissions process (Geiser & Santelices, 2007).

The change in the index significantly altered who could get accepted into UC. The BOARS' analyses demonstrated that the increased consideration of grade point averages in the admissions process was a valid predictor of student success beyond the freshman year. Elimination of affirmative action programs as part of the admission process prompted BOARS to place more emphasis on the greater dependence of GPA in college-preparatory work. Conversely, the previous dependence on standardized test over GPA had an adverse impact on minority students and those of lower socio-economic status (Geiser & Santelices, 2007).

In a similar move, the admissions committee for the University of Texas at Austin was also identified as having placed more weight on high school GPA than on standardized test scores during the admissions process (Niu & Tienda, 2010). Thus, underrepresented minorities such as African-Americans and Latinos would see increases

in admissions eligibility, demonstrating that admissions committees understand the importance of high school GPA in admissions considerations. The authors identified utilizing class rank over standardized test scores as having a high correlation with predicting academic success in college.

The challenge for college admissions officers has been predicting which factors are more likely to correlate with persistence and retention. High school GPA and standardized test scores have been identified as the two primary predictors of student persistence in college (Edmunds, 2010; Geiser & Santelices, 2007). Edmunds (2010) examined the rate of student persistence and retention at the University of Alabama. High school grades were found to be the variables that frequently had a significant impact on "the likelihood of persistence and graduation" (p. 112) for all the different groups considered in the study. In addition to standardized test score and GPA, other independent variables included in the study were, intended major, residency, cohort year, and race. Edmonds (2010), identified the significance of high school GPA and readiness in predicting college academic success as well as persistence. Overall, the goal for college admissions officers and higher education leaders has been to improve the rate of retention and persistence through to degree attainment.

Remedial and Developmental Education

Remedial and developmental education is intervention specifically targeted toward addressing the issue of readiness for first-time undergraduates (Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2014). In 2012, an average 32.6% of first-year undergraduates reported taking at least one remedial college course (NCES, 2015). The percentage of students who

reported taking remedial courses based on enrollment by institution reported 40.4% for public 2-year college and 29.8% for public 4-year college. The limitation associated with compiling data on the percentage of first-year undergraduates enrolled in at least one remedial course is that it is difficult to obtain because researchers generally must rely on student self-reporting versus using transcript data (NCES, 2016). Colleges and universities generally do not identify remedial courses on student transcripts. Thus, the percentage of students enrolled in remedial coursework is believed to be much higher. Oher studies place these figures for students taking at least one remedial course between 40% to as high as 60% (Perin, 2013; Sherwin, 2011). The NCES (2013) data collected from institutions in 1999-2000, 2003-04 and 2007-08 revealed that the current rate of first-year undergraduate enrollment in a remedial course is slightly higher than it has been in past (NCES, 2013). The percentage of first-year undergraduate students attending public institutions enrolled in at least one remedial course in 1999-2000 (28.8%), 2003-04 (22.1%) and in 2007-08 (23.3%) (NCES, 2013). These figures were lower than the 32.6% reported in 2012 (NCES, 2015).

Further studies have also found that student enrollment in remedial programs is increasing (Koch, Slate, and Moore, 2012). Indicators revealed that students who are provided with remediation are not necessarily successful. However, studies reveal that students who do not take remedial courses and are considered under-prepared are more likely to drop out of college (Bettinger & Long, 2005). Additionally, the longer a student remains in remediation program or take multiple remediation courses, increases the chances of dropping out (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). Students enrolled in

remedial college classes do not usually earn any college credit for coursework completed at this stage (Levin & Calcagno, 2008; Super, 2016). In addition to time spent taking these noncredit bearing classes, students are also paying full tuition for these remedial courses (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; Super, 2016).

A longitudinal study based on the outcomes of remedial course taking at U.S. public 2- and 4-year institutions, revealed a connection to degree attainment and successful completion of remedial courses (NCES, 2016). The success rate varied between 2-year and 4-year institutions. The remedial course completion rate at 2-year institutions revealed a 49% completion rate, while the completion rate at 4-year institutions was higher at 59% (NCES, 2016). Gallard, Albritton, & Morgan, (2010) addressed this issue of outcomes when researching the effects of a supplementary tutorial program on students who required remediation. The researchers found students requiring remediation received tutoring services from an on-campus academic support center, passed courses at higher rates and returned to the same college for subsequent years at higher rates. Students who benefit from these programs and succeed academically also have the potential to positively contribute to society. These advantages include higher rates of employment and consumer spending, which positively contribute to the local and state economies.

To address skill deficiencies, a study of remedial students identified student learners as “high skill” and “low skill” remedial learners (Bahr, 2012). Bahr defined two types of students who require remediation: 1) those students who reach a lower initial skill level and 2) those students who attain a higher initial skill level. Bahr identified a

structural gap in the educational system where the lower level students were not staying in the system long enough to see if remediation was successful. The lower skill level students were usually discouraged because of a “skills-gap” in college-level skill competency and resorted to withdrawing before degree attainment (Bahr, 2012).

Many legislators and organizations are seeking a single method for delivering developmental education (Edgecombe, 2011; Koch et al., 2012; Saxon, 2013). Wilson (2012) suggested that state policies that govern developmental education policies align with K-12 education to help the student be better prepared for college and career. At least 35 states have established policies about developmental course placement in academic programs. Diagnostic tests such as COMPASS or ACCUPLACER are used to assess writing, reading, and math skills (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2014). Depending on the state (which individually establishes their own cutoff scores), students can either enroll in programs during high school or the summer before college to improve their skills and be more prepared for college.

Developmental education reform has become an issue for institutions of higher learning because of increasing attrition rates (Hassel et al., 2015). Legislatures from Florida, Washington, Colorado, Connecticut, are mandating reform. Mandates into degree-credit bearing courses are being pushed. The Florida Legislature passed Senate Bill 1720 [SB1720] stating that institutions of higher learning redesign developmental opportunities. The bill recommended that developmental courses be taken at the option of the student, not as a requirement of the institution. Students who completed high school after 2008 are exempt from testing and placement exams. Advisors are to counsel

students to move into the credit bearing courses, with developmental content that is limited only to the students' major.

Some of these state developmental reform measures offer no clear policies or procedures for delivering remedial programs, only mandates (Hassel et al., 2015). Some states offer remedial programs only at 2-year institutions. However, a study of 2-year college students enrolled in developmental education courses revealed that students who are required to take a remedial mathematics or English course significantly reduced the probability of successfully completing college (Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin & Vidgor, 2015). Funding for offering remedial programs has decreased in many of the state 4-year institutions (Wilson, 2012). As a result, America's College Promise proposal introduced a tuition-free initiative for qualified students to expand access to educational opportunities, improve employability skills, and build the economy across the United States (Palmadessa, 2017). Simultaneously, higher education systems and states have looked to cut costs for remedial programs at community colleges (Parker, Bustillos, & Behringer, 2010). At a time where colleges are seeking to reduce the cost of remediation programs, Goudas and Boylan (2012) identified the need to address the efficacy of remedial courses offerings. The researchers believed the goal of remediation should be to allow the underprepared student the opportunity to be equivalent with students who do not need remediation.

To support students who may need supplementary academic assistance for various reasons, most institutions offer programs to address these gaps (Valentine et al., 2009). Additionally, Barnett et al., (2012), in studying eight different developmental programs

found that first-year student participants could pass remedial courses during the summer program and sign up for English as well as mathematics courses sooner than non-Summer Bridge program participants, which is believed to contribute to student retention and later academic success. Along these same lines, researchers found that student participation in the Summer Bridge program has a correlation to higher rates of college graduation (Murphy, Gaughan, Hume, & Moore, 2010). To effectively improve retention and decrease the rate of attrition Tinto (2012) identifies the inclusion of summer bridge programs as one of the conditions colleges need to enable students to successfully complete college. While studying a program at Georgia Institute of Technology, Murphy et al. (2010) found that the program addressed academic remediation along with a social component in which program coordinators and facilitators made students explicitly aware of the different challenges faced at the selective college.

Additional researchers, Sherwin (2011) and Perin (2013), stated that over 40% to as high as 60% of students entering the community college system need about a year of remedial reinforcement. Summer Bridge Program coordinators and facilitators work to resolve academic remediation issues, and social orientation concerns unique to attending college. These problems are very different from the experiences of secondary students.

Social and Emotional Adjustment Among First-year College Students

Academic skills and content knowledge are critical factors in student achievement. In addition to the academic abilities necessary for student success, college students must use other critical skills necessary to for college achievement and success. These skills include noncognitive factors and skills crucial to student success that are not

identifiable on achievement tests or reflective of a student's grade point average (Guerra, Modecki, & Cunningham 2014; Ponce-Lugo, 2017; Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2014). Academic-related skills are defined as behavioral cognitive, and effective tools necessary to successfully complete tasks, goals, and meet the academic demands of collegiate studies (Robbins et al., 2004). These skills include study skills and habits, time management, and coping skills (Thomas, 2016). The evaluation of psychosocial and study skills as predictive factors in college outcomes revealed that academic-related skills were found to be strong predictors of college persistence (Robbins et al., 2004).

Academic success and persistence may be predicated on a student's emotional and social competencies, as well as academic achievement. Noncognitive skills derived from behaviors that lead to learning and achievement in college. Farrington, et al. (2012) identified these factors as sets of skills, behaviors, skills, strategies, and attitudes and strategies that are critical to academic performance. Academic skills and content knowledge are considered to vital to success in the workplace but have been identified in recent studies as not being present in the individual joining the work force.

Social and emotional learning are critical to becoming a successful college student. Inquiry into the impact of emotional intelligence (EI) on college success and retention discovered that independence and assertiveness were found to have a statistically significant negative correlation to first-year academic success (Willis, 2014). College support services primarily focus on academic preparation and financial support (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Higher education practitioners were advised to intentionally foster EI characteristics and skills among first-year students. Goal

fulfillment, assertive communication, and time management were identified as being essential emotional skills necessary for academic achievement and retention for first-year students (Nelson & Nelson, 2003; Thomas, Cassady, & Heller, 2017; Willis, 2014).

The transition to college can present new challenges for students who face being on their own for the first time. Often colleges and universities have included mandatory orientation programs to assist students with this transitory period. Student participation in orientation or first-year programs is likely to influence their adjustment to the college experience and ability to become acquainted with support opportunities (Credé & Niehorster, 2012).

The Impact of College Attrition

Attrition is a concern for many postsecondary institutions as the goal is to increase student retention continually. Charged with tracking enrollment nationally, the National School Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC] (Shapiro et al., 2014), reported that from 1993 to 2013 over 31 million college students entered then withdrew without earning a degree. Students who earn the least credits per term are the highest risk of attrition (Hickman, 2011). First-year students who do not integrate academically and socially, often feel disengaged and removed from the college experience. Retention research recommends using college advisors to create effective outreach initiatives to reach first-year students.

The high costs of low completion rates result in loss of income for the student and a loss of revenue of the state and federal government. Schneider and Yin (2011) conducted a longitudinal 5-year study and found that on average, the long-term cost of

student attrition resulted in a $3.8 billion loss in potential income and a $730 loss in federal and state tax revenue. Schneider (2010) found that about 30% of students who begin their postsecondary education each fall, do not return the following year. Along these same lines, Schneider and Yin (2011) found that approximately 60% of students earned an undergraduate degree in approximately six years.

Museus and Quaye (2009) described how socioeconomic issues which include racism, poverty, the absence of support from family, and limited opportunities for supplemental learning, were all factors that inhibit college completion. Museus and Quaye (2009) found that when a student's culture, composed of both racial and ethnic culture and neighborhood or home culture, is very dissimilar to the college culture, most likely middle-class and White, then a student is less likely to persist to graduation. Similarly, researchers also found culture to be an important consideration in studying college persistence (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). First-generation college students can of find it difficult to successfully integrate highlighting a what Stephens et al. (2012) identify as "cultural mismatch" (p. 1179), in which the social, neighborhood and home environment of the students are different from the environment at the college. This difference often does not encourage or support first generation students to continue to college graduation. Lastly, in studying income levels and college persistence, Bailey and Dynarski (2011) found growing gaps between students of varying income levels who enter, persist in, and complete college. Bailey and Dynarski (2011) found that these gaps have steadily increased since the late 1970s. In summary, these researchers provided many reasons as to why the nontraditional college student or the

first-generation college student may not academically succeed in college, regardless of the level of success in high school.

Therefore, attrition is a great concern to multiple stakeholders that includes college faculty, parents, college administrators, high school teachers, and the college students. This financial cost of students leaving postsecondary institutions before completing degrees is in the billions (Schneider, 2010). Between the years 2003 and 2008, states allocated approximately $6.2 billion to colleges and universities; these funds were part of state subsidies that supported first-year students (Schneider, 2010). Additionally, nearly $1.5 billion in grant funding went to first-year students who failed to enroll for their second year of college (Schneider, 2010). These numbers have increased significantly as the cost of education has also increased (see Table 3).

Table 3

Costs Incurred by First-Year Attrition

Description of Costs Incurred by First-Year Attrition	Amount
State subsidies through appropriations	$6.2 billion
State grants to students	$1.4 billion
Federal grants to students	$1.5 billion

Note. Schneider, M. (2010). Finishing the First Lap: The Cost of First Year Student Attrition in America's Four-Year Colleges and Universities. *American Institutes for Research*.

The cause of student attrition is difficult to identify. Student departure can be based on several factors that can influence a student leaving school. Certain technical fields are continuously diminishing in graduates. Additionally, researchers have cited other factors such as race, income, and first-generation status that contribute to reasons that students do not persist in college and do not make it to graduation (Bailey &

Dynarski, 2011; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Stephens et al., 2012). College attrition can financially impact all involved. Attributable to this and other reasons outlined in this chapter, college support is necessary to address the many issues that can contribute to college attrition.

Purpose of Qualitative Case Study Design

This chapter will provide a review of literature in support of the use of the case study design in qualitative research. The rationale for selecting a single exploratory case study approach was to discover the perceptions and beliefs of former undergraduate students, who all graduated from the same high school located in the Southeastern United States, who have since withdrawn from a college or university before earning a degree. The specific group of individuals included in this study allows for a close examination of qualitative data provided within the specific context of early student withdrawal (Zainal, 2017).

According to Yin (2009) when conducting a case study, the researcher depends on various sources of data to cultivate a thorough comprehension of the case being studied. A case study approach should be when the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why". The various data in the context of this study include the individual real-life experiences of participants (Yin 2009; Zainal, 2017). The basis for using a qualitative case study approach stems from the desire to discover the essence of human experiences (Van der Mescht, 2004). A case study is designed to explore the individual or a group for a specific period. The leading characteristics of this approach is that is interpretive in nature, includes a purposeful selection of participants, attempts to honor data equally,

giving value to participant responses, and capturing the lived experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 1994; Van der Mescht, 2004).

Qualitative Analysis in College Attrition Inquiry

Meyer and Marx (2014) used qualitative methodology that involved narrative inquiry and dialogue to understand participants' realities and social truths. The researchers examined the experiences of four undergraduates who dropped out of the undergraduate program. Hurst, Baranik, and Daniel (2013) utilized qualitative methodology to identify college student stressors utilizing themes: the environment, academics, lack of resources and relationships. To locate peer-reviewed articles to support their inquiry, Hurst et al. (2013), narrowed the time-frame for their literature review to 2000-2012 to focus on relevant stressors. The researchers reviewed 40 qualitative articles. However, the researchers contended that their review contributed to the body of literature by identifying trends in the qualitative student stress research (Hurst et al., 2013). Conversely, Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud (2013) implemented the use of a longitudinal survey to examine the causes of college withdrawal. Dwyer et al. (2013) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to study the effects of gender roles and debt on completing college. Utilizing data collected from the longitudinal survey, Dwyer et al. (2013), made use of the event history models to assess the relationship between debt and college completion.

For this focused inquiry, the event being studied is the impact of readiness received from the local high school and what the subjects believe influenced their decision to depart college prior to degree attainment. The use of a qualitative method

provided richer details into the responses of study participants. This is important for the current study because the purpose of the study is to identify detailed explanations around the participants' experiences. A case study design was therefore used to explore the views of people who have experienced that event; in this case, early student departure.

Summary

Researchers have spent more than four decades trying to develop reasons and theories to understand the event of early student departure. Additionally, educational reforms at the high school level have been implemented to improve college readiness. The literature presented in this chapter supports the argument that the lack of academic readiness, in addition to a lack of social assimilation within the collegiate environment all contribute to the large numbers of college students who will decide not to return each year. Tinto's student integration model, which suggested that students enter college with qualities and characteristics developed from familial influences and their K-12 educational experiences; academic integration without social integration increases the likelihood of leaving school early. Bean (1980) supported Tinto's theory regarding the environmental effects such as social status and race that lead to early student departure.

Though both theorists offer valid explanations as to the reasons that lead to this event, there are still gaps in the literature in how educators, policymakers, university administrators and all other stakeholders can decrease the rate of attrition happening at colleges and universities nationwide. Though the examination of the literature highlights the investigative based research of readiness, college attrition, and remediation, the reviewed literature suggested a gap in the literature regarding of the students' perception

of readiness. Chapter 3 describes the research design, with a focus on data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of college students who withdrew prior to degree attainment. In this chapter, I present the methodology used in the study. This chapter includes the rationale for using a qualitative case study design along with the research question. This qualitative case study provides the stories of individuals who have experienced early college departure. A qualitative research tradition was selected because of the type of social event being studied (Yin, 2009).

The problem this qualitative case study explored is the possible lack of readiness of high school students for the academic challenges of the collegiate curriculum and whether this lack of readiness contributed to early withdrawal. Qualitative research is a naturalistic approach selected because this approach allows for the study of things in their natural setting. The qualitative case study approach was used to investigate the problem of whether college readiness influenced a student's decision to leave or depart before completing a college degree. Studies conducted by many researchers, (Edgecombe, 2011; Koch et al., 2012; Perin, 2013; Saxon, 2013) indicate that there is a need for understanding the college dropout experience and identify root causes that factor into a student's decision to withdraw from an institution of higher learning. This study specifically identifies participants' perceptions as to what academic barriers and social inadequacies led to the departure from school.

In this chapter, I address the reasoning and design for selecting the qualitative case study method for this research study. This chapter includes the following: research question, research design and rationale, role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment and participation, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical protection of participants,

Research Question

The objective of this study was to investigate the beliefs and perceptions of former college students regarding readiness in high school and the decision to depart before earning a college degree. The following research question was developed to guide the study: What impact did college readiness in high school have on students' decisions to withdraw from college?

Research Design and Rationale

Through a qualitative method with the case study design, I investigated the perception of students who have withdrawn from college or university before completing their degrees. In contrast to quantitative methodology, which focuses on collecting data through multilevel analysis, qualitative analysis incorporates various units of analysis to explain a specific event or behavior (Jee-Seon, 2009). The qualitative method provides richer details into a study participant's responses. This is important for the current study because this study was designed to gather detailed explanations around the participants' experiences.

I used a case study design to explore the views of people who have experienced early student departure prior to degree attainment. The case study design was selected to

gain knowledge about a specific individual, group or community. The research question was also a determining factor in choosing a case study design. The use of other design approaches such as the narrative and ethnography would have been appropriate; however, would not have been as effective. Although researchers use ethnographic studies to explore the significance and value of the group, these studies also focus on the contextual understanding of a specific group. The narrative approach relies on the use of stories as data. These stories are usually in the form of biographies, autobiographies, and oral history (Merriam, 2009). Though the participants shared their college experiences and their perceptions of why they withdrew, the data is not presented in story form. Critics may deny the reliability of case studies; however, they are used in many disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, public administration, accounting, education, evaluation, public health, business, and marketing.

The use of the case study design in this research study proved to be very beneficial. Semistructured interviews provided a depth of understanding over breadth (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Additionally, using open-ended interview questions allowed for a rich description of the former students' perspective and opinions (Merriam, 2009). I have sought to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of students regarding levels of academic readiness before entering college, in addition to understanding reasons for withdrawal before degree completion. The qualitative approach enables and supports meaning being formed and developed by the individuals based on student interpretations and as it fits within the context of student experiences (Yin, 2009).

In exploring the reasons as to why students chose to withdraw from college, there is an opportunity to identify the specific details and contexts that contributed to students' decisions to drop out. Quantitative methodology may provide the reasons, but the level of detail would not be adequate to respond to the research question. To effectively study how best to prepare students for the academic challenges of college as well as the college experience, it was necessary to utilize an evolving qualitative approach to inquiry, collect data in a locale familiar to the study participants, and remain considerate of the study participants; I employed data analysis techniques that were inductive and established patterns or themes. A qualitative case study design was the desired approach intended for this study. Therefore, examining the real-world causes that affected a college student's decision to withdraw before earning a degree was determined to be the best course of action for this study. I conducted an in-depth study using a qualitative research methodology that offers greater latitude in selecting topics that are typically constrained by other research methods (Yin, 2011).

The research design of a case study was derived logically from the problem of the study: that there is a lack of inquiry into methods to best prevent students from leaving college before receiving a degree. The qualitative research approach is effective in establishing construct assertions based upon emergent themes derived from in-depth interviews with the selected participants (Creswell, 2003; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). In utilizing a qualitative methodology, I had access to greater details about participant experiences than in a quantitative study (Yin, 2011).

For this study, I explored reasons participants chose to withdraw from college prior to degree attainment. The goal was to represent the perspectives and opinions of the case study participants and investigate the specific background and contexts in which the participants decided to withdraw from college early. Lastly, rather than using a single source of evidence, 13 participants were selected as multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). The qualitative case study approach allowed me the opportunity to preserve the significant details and facets of the experiences that led the participants to withdraw from college prior to degree attainment (Yin, 2009).

Context of the Study

The context of this qualitative study was one local suburban high school located in the Southeastern United States. The school is one of 11 public high schools in the local district. The Georgia Department of Education (2017) reported having a total of 181 school districts statewide. As part of a metropolitan region, there are 23 other school systems, (18 county and 5 city school systems).

Based on the fiscal year enrollment (FYE) 2015 data, total enrollment for the local high school was 1,386 students. Demographic data identified the student enrollment figures of African-American (56%), Caucasian (28%), Hispanic (11%), Asian (3%), and Multiracial (4%). This information can be compared to the system demographic data makeup of African-American (52%), Caucasian (32%), Hispanic (9%), Asian (3%), and Multiracial (4%). In 2008, the student population was 2097, which exceeded the building capacity of 1500 students. The student population decline from 2008 to 2015 was due to the opening of a neighboring high school in the fall of 2013. The state reports indicated

that 71.8% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged (GaDOE, 2014). The school graduation rate for FYE 2015 revealed an 81% graduation rate and 84% for the school system (GaDOE, 2017). The state average for the same year resulted in a 78.8% graduation rate. The number of students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch for FTE 2015 was 47.44%, and 21% of the student population was served under "remedial education" (GaDOE, 2014).

Beginning with the freshmen class of 2008, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia student graduation requirements shifted from *college-prep* and *technology/career* programs of study to a *high school* diploma graduation requirement (Georgia Career Information Center [GCIC], 2017). Students entering 9th grade in 2008 and after had the option of receiving their high school diploma, high school certificate, or special education diploma. This change in graduation requirement eliminated many technical and vocational opportunities available within the school for students who were not interested in attending a traditional college or university.

Role of the Researcher

I was aware of how being a high school instructor may influence my interaction with the participants and my interpretation of the data. I have 20 years of experience in the field of education. I am certified in social studies and have taught primarily junior and senior level students. Furthermore, as a teacher who has also served in a leadership capacity and has worked directly with graduating seniors for the past 13 years, I have a greater awareness of the high-level college withdrawal that graduates have experienced.

As an independent investigator for this qualitative study, I was solely responsible for data collection. Additionally, I developed the research question based on an examination of literature that relates to college attrition and the connection to college readiness. My role was to serve as an instrument for interviewing participants and collecting data. The goal is to effectively communicate with study participants, focusing on what contributed to early departure (Merriam, 2002).

As an instructor I had access to recruiting local high school graduates in to be participants. I maintained correspondence with the local high school graduates via social media. These former high school students could communicate with other graduates about the study and assist in recruitment (snowball sampling) of other graduates. There was no official relationship with the participants of this study. All participants were former students and graduates of the local high school. However, maintaining personal distance ensured objectivity for data analysis. The participants no longer had any connection to this local high school. All participants had since withdrawn from college or university before the completion of a degree.

Participant Selection

In qualitative sampling, the focus is typically on small samples or even single cases (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). To obtain an understanding of the perceptions of students who withdraw from college before completing degrees, participants for this study was selected using criterion sampling.

Criterion-based sampling is utilized to determine the perceptions of students who choose to withdraw from college or university before degree attainment. Patton (2002)

asserted that criterion sampling comprised of selecting cases that meet some fixed condition of significance. This type of purposeful selection allows researchers to maximize what is learned. Additionally, Yin (2009) further specified the use of the criterion-based selection of participants all for information-rich cases. Like other forms of qualitative research, this method searches for meaning and understanding of the experience with the interviewer as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. All participants were deliberately selected based on meeting the predetermined criteria outlined in this study. A criterion sample would work well with the participants included in this study because they represented individuals who have experienced the same event. For purpose this study, the event being explored is early college withdrawal. The study also utilized purposive sampling for the selection of participants.

The participants for this qualitative study included 13 graduates of the local high school. The participants went on to enroll in a 2-year or 4-year college during the years of 2008 to 2015; additionally, participants chose to withdraw before earning a degree. I selected a purposive sample for several reasons. First, participant recruitment was better facilitated via this technique because I am an instructor within the district from which these students graduated. Also, there is an emphasis in studying student experiences at this high school within this specific neighborhood. During the analysis, there was the potential to make connections between the students' experiences and the students' responses. Guest, Bruce, and Johnson (2006) identified purposive sampling as the most commonly used form of nonprobability sampling. The researchers also define *saturation* as "…the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data" (p. 59).

Therefore, after conducting 13 interviews with the participants, I achieved data saturation.

The participant sample was diverse in gender, ethnicity, and college type and consisted of students who received a college prep diploma and enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year institution. The selection process required that participants met specific criteria. The first criteria require those study participants be graduates of the local high school between the years 2008 to 2015. This allowed me to obtain current and relevant data. Next, participants were required to have completed a minimum of one college semester of full-time enrollment at a college or university. All participants were enrolled in college full-time. Lastly, all participants must have withdrawn from the college. None of the participants had a formal employment connection or affiliation with the district or local high school. Lastly, the participants selected were not minors; therefore, alleviating the necessity of having to seek parental permission. The age range for study participants was 19 – 28 years (Median = 24; Mean = 23.6 years). Table 4 provides the demographic status of the participant group by gender, age, and race.

Table 4

Participant Demographics

Demographics	Number
Gender	
Male	4
Female	9
Age	
18 – 21	5
22 – 25	4
26 – 30	4
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian	1
Hispanic	1
Black or African American	11

Recruitment and Participation

Graduates of the local high school who subsequently withdrew from college prior to degree attainment were selected to participate in this qualitative study. The participants included in this study were former students who were identified as having withdrawn from the college.

Initial contact was made through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In a cooperative effort, others shared the post with my permission. An email correspondence was established specifically for communication with study participants. Additionally, the social media post contained a phone number specifically for interested study participants. All participants were pre-screened for qualification.

As the initial step to the data collection process, participants were first contacted via email correspondence. Through the first correspondence I thanked them for their participation and described what the study would entail. Included in this correspondence

were additional contact information and available hours. Each participant made initial contact with me via email communication, phone or through text messages. The email correspondence further described that they would be receiving an email correspondence from DocuSign, the second email correspondence, which would contain the Walden Consent Document. At this point, each participant was assigned a study identification number. They were instructed to review the report. If participants were still willing to participate, needed to electronically sign the consent form that would automatically include the date sign. Once signed the document would automatically be returned. I then printed and signed the consent form for my records. The third correspondence included a copy of the interview questions for the participants to review before their scheduled interview.

All participants were given the opportunity to select the interview format of their choosing: in-person, video conference, or teleconference interview. Eleven of the 13 interviews were conducted using a free conference call service provider offering both video and teleconferencing recording features. Through the conference call service, each participant scheduled an interview time based on his or her availability. Although each participant had the option of being interviewed via teleconference or video conference, all 11 participants chose the teleconference option. Participants were given a conference phone number to call with a specific access number. This access number allowed the participants to enter a virtual meeting room where they were interviewed without the pressure of an in-person meeting or a video recorded interview. Interviews were scheduled to conduct the recorded teleconference. Once we began the recorded

teleconference interview, I reviewed the purpose of the study, confirmed that they had read and signed the Walden Consent Document, and asked if they were still willing to participate in the study. Upon confirmation, I proceeded to the preliminary questions, specific interview questions related to the research question, and asked if they needed any clarification.

Two interviews were conducted using an in-person format. Both participants selected a public location and time that was convenient for them. The in-person interviews were conducted at a neutral location that provided sufficient privacy to respond to questions that might involve personal information. Additionally, there was no fear of coercion or intimidation. A digital memo recording device was used to record the interview. I selected this method of recording because I could immediately label, save, and download the recorded interview for future transcription by a professional service.

All digital files were marked with the participants' study identification number and stored. All files were downloaded for transcription by a service provider familiar with the education sector. Recorded files were transcribed verbatim and identified by a professional transcription service and study participants were assigned an identification number. During all interviews, I took detailed field notes. Field notes were further supported by digital recordings of the interviews.

Interviews were scheduled to take 30 to 45 minutes; however, participants were given the opportunity to respond for an unlimited amount of time. Interview times ranged between 17 to 39 minutes. The length varied based on participant response and details provided for each response. The average interview length was 26 minutes. This is a

variation from the anticipated interview length of 30 to 35 minutes. On two occasions, participants had additional information they wished to provide to a previously asked question. The conference call service provided, as the host, the ability to re-establish recording the conference call. I identified the participant by identification number during all recordings.

During this meeting, I reviewed the procedures, benefits, and confidentiality of the study. I reiterated that involvement in the study was voluntary and that if at any time, they wished to discontinue participation in the study that they were not obligated to remain. There were no participants who withdrew from involvement in the study during the in-person or teleconference interview.

The nature of the research study made it a challenge to find participants willing to discuss such a sensitive topic. Although the number of participants involved 13 respondents, reaching this number was a considerable feat. The initial participant pool reached 45; however, discussing the matter of withdrawal proved to be a difficult topic for those who could have qualified become study participants. During the prequalification stage, there were instances of possible participants failing to respond to contact following initial contact. One of the potential participants expressed having no interests in discussing her college withdrawal experience. During the pre-screening process, a few potential participants expressed feeling disappointed by their decision to withdraw from college. Additionally, there were potential participants who were unwilling to participate in the study.

Interviews

Securing the 13 participants and completing the interviews took approximately 11 weeks. Participants received, signed, and returned the consent form at which point a date and time for conducting the in-depth in-person and teleconference interviews was scheduled. Having the ability to engage participants in thoughtful conversation about their experiences is fundamental to understanding the subject when conducting qualitative interviews (Hatch, 2002). The interview was guided by the leading interview questions and sub questions (Merriam, 2002). The discussion remained open-ended in the conventional sense, but a specific set of questions was utilized as a guide (Yin, 2009). Participants identified facts as well as their opinions about the decision to withdraw from school. The types of questions used in this study were simple descriptive and interpretive questions. Descriptive questions were used to describe characteristics of the population being studied, while interpretive questions were used to provide study participants with additional opportunities to discuss their perspective and insight into the problem (Merriam, 1998).

Interview questions used in this study were based on the research question discussed in previous chapters. As part of the interview collection process, descriptive data were obtained from participants to record participant age, high school graduation date, start date of the first college semester, number of courses completed, and final semester of attendance. The interview consisted of nine open-ended questions and seven additional subsequent questions. The interview protocol form is in Appendix A. Through the use open-ended questions, it was my desire to create a level of comfort with the

participants so that they may be forthright and honest with their responses. All participants received the list of interview questions for their review, before their scheduled interview. Probing or follow-up questions were included to elicit, richer, deeper responses. Guided interview questions were structured to ask specifically explored the participants' perception of readiness and the impact if any, readiness attributed to their decision to leave college prior to degree attainment. Utilizing this guided method, I was free to add to the query by asking additional questions to further probe participants to elaborate some of their responses (Patton, 2002). To ensure that data would not be lost during the interview process, all interviews were digitally recorded. The video conference interview format was not selected by any of the study participants. Maintaining anonymity was of concern to the participants, thus selecting the video conference format was not an ideal option. The interviews were conducted in a quiet location, free from distraction. The goal was to have as many of the interview questions memorized as to help maintain a fluid conversation and eye contact with the interviewee. Although the goal as an interviewer was to record as much pertinent information as possible, using the digital recording format ensured that no response would be missed or misinterpreted.

Interview Protocol Adjustment

As I began the study interview process, it became apparent that certain questions were repetitive in nature. Within the high school readiness questions, the subsequent questions "a" and "b", are asking the same question, "How successful do you believe your high school was in adequately preparing you for the academic challenges of college?". It became apparent that the participants' response to the primary question

resulted in the same response as the probing questions. Therefore, I eliminated the two probing questions from the remaining interviews.

Data Analysis Procedures

The research question established for this study was designed to elicit data that would help me understand the relationship between readiness in high school and its relationship to students deciding to depart before earning a college degree. Through this process, established patterns emerged.

The guide used for coding followed Creswell's (2012) assertions that data analysis in qualitative investigation consists of reviewing and consolidating the data for analysis, then organizing the data into emergent themes through coding and summarizing the codes, and lastly presenting the data in discussions, figures, or tables. The decision regarding coding played a significant role in shaping what I could conclude from the analysis of data (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The digitally recorded data collected from the individual interviews were then forwarded to a professional transcription service company. Upon interview completion, I summarized the main points of the interview and coded the data. Coding involves connecting the data to ideas, and thus, linking all data to the same idea (Richards & Morse, 2007).

To begin the data analysis, I reviewed the professionally transcribed interviews. I looked for reoccurring phrases and patterns. Each time distinct words and phrases were repeated, I highlighted this information. I was searching for the connections within their responses. These connections then became the themes to determine if there were any commonalities in the perceptions and beliefs regarding academic readiness.

The responses from the case study participants were sorted and analyzed to develop themes. To ensure that the data would reflect an orderly system of records or database, the data was collected by grouping participant responses into common themes. The top three possible themes that I assumed would emerge from data include; *readiness*, *remediatio*n, and *withdrawal*. Data analysis uncovered six themes which were causes of early college withdrawal. The leading themes were identified as the following: (a) lack of preparation in high school; (b) lack of maturity; (c) lack of guidance from high school staff; (d) ineffectual college support structure; (e) mandatory enrollment in remedial courses; and (f) lack of nonacademic support services. Bernard (2017) believed that analysis "is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there in the first place" (p. 452). I also identified themes that could be situated within each of the top-level codes, which required analysis and interpretation to address the individual research question.

Trustworthiness

To effectively improve the trustworthiness of this qualitative study I followed the qualitative data analysis checklist established by researchers, Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, and Kyngäs, (2014) and the five stages of data analysis as identified by Yin (2011). The three phases of content analysis study include preparation, organization, and reporting. The preparation phase included identifying the data collection method, sampling method, and selecting the unit of analysis. I determined that conducting in-depth interviews would be the most suitable data for my content analysis. Participant selection, data saturation, and identification of the unit of analysis were determined

during the preparation phase of the content analysis. The organization phase includes the identification of concepts and categories, the degree of interpretation within the study and how to check the representativeness of the data as a whole. The final phase, reporting the results include the transferability of the results, identifying similarities and differences in participants' response, and is there a full description of the analysis process. The researchers determined that improving the trustworthiness of analysis must include the three phases.

The three phases of data content analysis support Yin's (2011) five stages of qualitative data analysis which include; gathering data, grouping data, theme placement, assessment of the data, and establishing a conclusion. The process of regrouping ensures a thorough investigation of the data collected (Yin 2011). Interviews are considered an essential source of case study evidence (Yin, 2013). Results of the interviews provide insight into the perception of readiness and the college experiences. The interviews focused on behavioral events and are considered verbal reports only. As such, the reporting of the participants' responses could call into question the problems of bias and poor recall.

To effectively understand the depth of knowledge that comes from devoting extensive time to being in the field and probing participants during interviews, a goal was set to obtain detailed and profound meanings regarding their experiences (Yin, 2013). Reliability refers to the researcher utilizing the interview guide in a consistent and similar manner to create the comparable results when replicated the interviews of the different participants.

To ensure validity, I employed the process of reviewed field notes and used both a digital recording device and a recorded teleconferencing tool to verify or corroborate evidence of the facts reported in the study. The procedure I used to affirm validity within the review of the data was member checking. Member checking is used as a strategy to determine the accuracy of data collected during the interview (Harper & Cole, 2012). Member checks allowed the participants to validate the accuracy of their responses is critical to minimizing distortion. At the conclusion of the interview process, participants had an opportunity to review the transcription and recording of the interviews. I contacted each participant to discuss and review the responses given during the initial interview. Participants were asked if there was any response they wished to extend or would like to change during a scheduled member checking session (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann, 2011; Harper & Cole, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). However, none of the study participants expressed the need to alter any of their initial responses and affirmed that the initial interview responses were accurate. This final step was used to help reduce the possibilities of error and bias.

To increase the reliability of data collected for this qualitative case study, maintaining a chain of evidence was necessary (Yin, 2009). Interviews were using field notes, a digital recording service, a digital recording device, and then transcribing digital recordings. Therefore, after the completion of the member checking sessions, the data collected were separated into groups, regrouped into themes, and assessed, resulting in deductions developed by using the five stages of data analysis (Yin, 2011).

Case study findings are more accurate when based on multiple sources of data (Yin, 2009). For this research study, saturation was achieved after the completion of 13 interviews. Validity is determined by data saturation in a qualitative study. Data saturation occurs when there are no substantial contributions to the research uncovered (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Attaining data saturation is evident when there is sufficient information gathered for data analysis (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Any discrepant data were noted, analyzed, and explained as exceptions to the larger and more dominant patterns found in the analysis of the data.

Ethical Protection of Study Participants

This qualitative case study has complied with all Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) rules and regulations regarding the use of study participants as required by the federal government. Permission was obtained from the Walden University Institutional Review Board to begin to process of data collection on September 30, 2016, approval #09-30-2016-0137743. Before any scheduled interviews, all participants received, via email correspondence, an informed letter of consent specifying the purpose for study, the reason for the interviews and any possible risks that may be involved in participating in the study. For increased confidentiality, the names of the participants and name of the school were not included in this study. All participants were given a study participant identification number to protect their identity (Creswell, 2009). The participants were informed that involvement in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw from participating in the study at any time. All data collected are securely kept by me and were only used for this research. I was solely responsible for

handling all study related material including; conducting interviews, keeping written field notes, and digital recordings. The use of a professional transcription service was necessary and used for the sole purpose of transcribing the digital recordings gathered from the interviews to ensure accuracy of the field notes. All letters of consent and hard copies of data collected are kept in a locked and secure file cabinet to protect the security of the participants; all data is stored in a password safe electronic file. Additionally, this information is backed up and stored in a separate password safe portable hard drive accessible by me alone. All data collected will be kept for a period of 5 years and then destroyed. After the completed interviews, study participants received a digital copy of their interview recording, transcripts, field notes, and signed consent documents via email correspondence. At the completion of the study, an additional thank you letter, a summary of the study findings, and a final copy of my doctoral study will be forwarded to all study participants.

Summary

In this chapter on the study research design, I have presented the reasons for choosing a qualitative case study as an attempt to understand the relationship between college readiness at the high school level and its relationship to college students deciding to withdraw before earning a college degree. The participant selection process, ethical protection of the participants, criteria for selecting participants and my role are outlined in detail in this chapter. I conducted formal interviews with former students who have withdrawn from their college or university before the completion of a degree as part of the data collection process. The validity of the study is based on the recorded field notes,

member checking of the recorded and transcribed interviews to ensure proper analysis of the recorded and reproduced interviews, as well as the inclusion of descriptive data to determine study participation eligibility. Chapter 4 will present the qualitative interview data, descriptive participant demographic data, and findings of the study. Chapter 5 will include interpretation of the findings, implications, recommendations, and researcher reflection.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a better understanding of why students from one local high school withdrew from college prior to degree attainment. I gathered an in-depth understanding of early student departures through the data collection process. I posted a request to participate in an educational research study of college withdrawal. Those interested in participating in the research study contacted me through an email that was created for the sole purpose of contact with prospective participants. I shared an overview of the proposed study with participants during the prescreening process. As stated, participation in the study was voluntary and confidential.

The objective of this study was to investigate the perceptions of former students regarding college readiness at the high school level and the decision to depart before earning a college degree. The central question that guided this study was the following: What impact did readiness in high school have on students' decision to withdraw from college? In this chapter, I detail the demographics of participants, the data collection process, data analysis, the results and identification of themes, discrepant cases, and evidence of quality.

Setting

College Enrollment Background

This study included 13 participants. All study participants were graduates of the local high school. Study participants graduated between the years 2008 to 2015. Study

participants were enrolled in 2- or 4-year institutions. Many study participants withdrew from college within the first year of attendance.

Patterns of enrollment are often difficult to obtain (Tinto, 1993). Colleges can track entry but identifying when a student departs presents a challenge for the institution. Institutional data was difficult to obtain at a state or national level and is particularly difficult to track for part-time students. All participants were enrolled full-time before dropping out; however, two of the participants withdrew and re-enrolled. During the study interviews, participants also identified the reasons why full-time enrollment was chosen, as displayed in Figure 2. Some participants described having more than one reason for full-time attendance. In Table 5, I provide an overview of the number of college semesters completed by respondents as disclosed through the study interview.

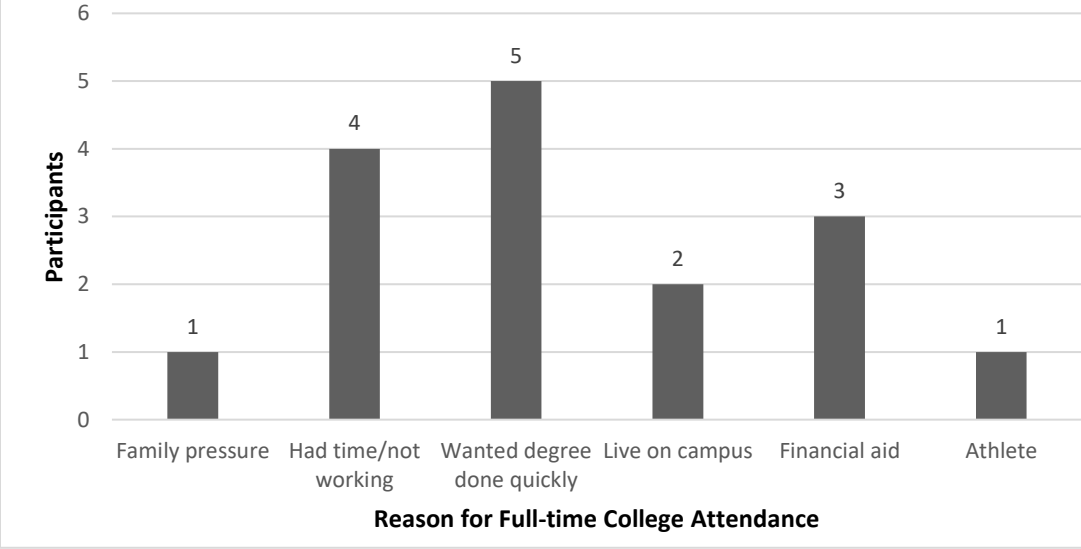

Figure 2: Reasons participants chose to enroll in college full-time. Adapted from study coding.

Table 5

Number of College Semesters Completed

Semesters Completed	Number of Participants
1	3
2	8
3	1
4	1

Phases of Data Collection

I used the participant response analysis outlined in Chapter 3 for identifying patterns, themes, and clarification statements made by the study participants. Data collection procedures were guided by Creswell's (2012) approach to coding, reviewing, and consolidating the data for analysis in a qualitative investigation.

As part of a systematic approach, I labeled each interview transcript with a study participant identification number. There was an opportunity to begin analysis after the ninth interview. The remaining four interviews were included in the data results spreadsheet for inclusion and further analysis of participant responses. Upon completion of each interview, I transcribed interviews, using a third-party affiliate, into a word processing document and analyzed each interview within 2 days.

I recorded interviews using written field notes, a digital recording device for in-person interviews, or a recorded teleconference application for teleconferenced interviews, and professional transcription of all digital recordings. Later, member

checking allowed the participants to review the results of the study (Harper & Cole, 2012). I used member checks to verify the accuracy of the data collected for each study participant. Pre-interview questions were used to record descriptive data obtained from participants including participant age, high school graduation date, start of the first college semester, number of courses completed, and final semester of attendance. I created the data set by organizing the questions into columns onto a spreadsheet. Each interview represented one row in the data sheet allowing for each question to be examined for themes. Common ideas and terms were noted as part of the analysis to look for commonalities within subject narratives. When a theme began to emerge, it was recorded and tracked for how many participants made comments that fit into the theme.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding was used to analyze participant data. This method identifies meaningful information through data collection and organizes findings into themes and categories. Themes are then integrated into an exhaustive description. Transcripts were read several times and compared to written field notes to obtain an overall insight into significant phrases or terms that directly pertained to the experiences of the study participants. Several overarching themes emerged throughout the data analysis. Overall, participants identified six leading causes that led to their decision to withdraw from college before degree completion. Leading themes were the following: (a) lack of preparation in high school, (b) lack of maturity, (c) lack of guidance from high school staff, (d) ineffectual college support structure, (e) mandatory enrollment in remedial courses, and (f) lack of nonacademic support services.

Many participants felt that high school did not adequately prepare them for the academic expectations of college. This included various reasons such as giving them necessary study skills, note taking and writing a college paper, critical thinking skills, and having a higher-level understanding of the academic content. The participants felt that their instructors and counselors did not discuss what would be expected of them, both academically and as individuals, to be successful in college. Examples of personal accountability included the need to be responsible for getting work and assignments submitted on time, self-motivation to study, and ensuring time management.

Throughout the narratives, participants discussed not being socially and emotionally mature enough to be successful in college. There were significant differences in the autonomy of transitioning from being a secondary learner to a postsecondary learner, and some expressed that they were not emotionally mature enough to handle these changes. Across the narratives, participants indicated that there was a disjuncture between their level of preparation in high school and the expectations of their professors.

Results

Theme 1: Lack of Preparation

For this study, the various reasons participants identified for feeling underprepared are discussed as separate themes. The first theme described whether study participants believed they were prepared for the college. Further probing of the data identified why participants did not believe they were prepared for college. Overall, many of the participants believed that they were prepared for college. There was the belief that the path through high school should have made them “college ready.” However, many

noted the stark contrast between the level of rigor for college prep coursework completed in high school, such as advanced placement courses, and the academic rigor of college-level courses. For example, P4 discussed taking an Advanced Placement (AP) course while in high school but expressed disappointment at receiving a failing score on a first written college assignment. The participant shared how she believed enrollment in the AP course did not sufficiently prepare her for college-level writing.

A lack of readiness was identified as being one of the leading factors contributing to early student withdrawal. When participants expressed how well they believed their high school prepared them for college, the leading response identified lack of preparation on the part of their high school as a factor. Eight of the 13 said they were not adequately prepared for college during their time in high school. P1, P4, and P11 expressed that they did not anticipate how challenging the writing expectations of their college professors would be, and how these expectations were vastly different from high school level writing. Five of the 13 participants stated that they were somewhat prepared.

P7 described being "somewhat" prepared; however, she noted that she experienced academic challenges. She described how her college courses were more rigorous than expected. P3 and P8 also identified themselves as being "somewhat" prepared for college. Both participants withdrew and re-enrolled at a second institution to complete their education. P8 initially enrolled at a 4-year university, withdrew, and re-enrolled for a second attempt at a 2-year institution. P3 began his studies at a 2-year institution, full-time, withdrew, later enrolled at a 4-year institution part-time. Overall

participants included in this study believed they were not sufficiently prepared for the academic rigor of college-level work.

When participants described how the high school could have better prepared them for collegiate studies, various responses emerged. Five participants mentioned the need for more skills that would make them successful in college. P8 and P9 shared similar responses about having proper study skills and strong writing ability as two qualities that would have effectively changed their decision to withdraw. Some of the skills identified included note taking, essay writing, college-level projects, time management, and increasing academic rigor. P6 and P4 discussed learning to manage their time and that high schools needed to ensure students met assignment deadlines. Six participants mentioned more rigorous academic expectations were needed at the high school level to prepare them for college-level work. Again, P4 and P6 shared similar responses expressing how they believed that they lacked critical thinking skills needed for college-level studies. Overall, participants believed they were lacking the skills necessary for academic success at the college level.

Participants defined college readiness as having the ability to meet deadlines, which could be combined with the skills necessary to complete college-level work. P13 defined college readiness as having specific skills: “Having the skills I needed to handle college learning. Note taking, writing, oh boy the writing, and study skills.” Similarly, P11 expressed feeling like he should have entered college ready for college-level writing. Five participants specifically identified themselves as having insufficient writing skills

and ability for college-level work. These participants were full-time students enrolled at a 4-year institution.

Eight participants described homework assignments given in high school as being too easy, and not academically challenging. These participants further described the need for improving the quality and rigor of homework assignments for high school students. Additionally, four participants believed that project-based assignments should be assigned with greater frequency.

The transition to an institution of higher learning presented participants with the reality of feeling unprepared for college-level work. Participants conveyed feeling "let down" or "disappointed" by the education that they received in high school. Earning a high school diploma should certify the attainment of a skill set that should enable students to successful adapt to the college academic experience.

Theme 2: Lack of Maturity

The second theme that emerged was identified as lack of maturity. Accountability and responsibility for their behavior as it related to the college experience was identified as a function of maturity the participants believed was lacking in their transition to college. Two participants discussed the need to be more self-reliant. Six participants specifically discussed not feeling mature enough to be in college. P1 found it difficult to manage college without the parental reminders to adhere to a schedule: "… it was a big thing, because I didn't have a parent there to tell me, 'You need to get up and go to class'." None of the participants believed that high school adequately prepared them for the level of work necessary to succeed as an adult in college:

> You get your work done on time and it's to your best of your ability and college readiness to me specifically means growing up into the next level of adulthood because I believe that's where it starts. I do believe that's where adulthood starts, in college and not many kids are really prepared for adulthood. I thought about withdrawing after my first semester. I felt like I couldn't do it. I just didn't feel like it was the right time. After that, I think I stayed for one more semester and I said you know, I just I'm not ready yet I'm just not mentally ready I'm just not ready at all. (P1)

P1 described not feeling academically prepared for collegiate studies; however, a major concern for her was with the challenges to adjusting to the responsibility of the college experience. She expressed having the urge to withdraw during her first semester. She went on to describe how she did not believe she was equipped the handle the transition from childhood to adulthood, as well as the transition to college.

P2 describes how the learned behavior of receiving "second chances" while enrolled in high school failed to teach her accountability and responsibility. She expressed feeling that she was not taught the importance of taking responsibility for her actions. P2 went on to explain how students play a role in their educational success by being held responsible for her actions. She expressed that her immaturity played a significant role in her decision to withdraw. She shared that at that time she was not sure if she would return:

> My high school was not successful in that field simply because like have said it before, just continuously taking working late, or allowing is to do work in class to

> catch up on work, and retaking test consistently. Instead of changing how they were teaching it. We were just being taught the same way and expected to learn something different. I feel like my school really failed me in that area of trying to teach me and to get me to be college ready. (P2)

The transition from high school to college presented a need for further self-examination into what it means to be mature enough to be "college ready." For the following participants college readiness also meant being ready for life as an adult:

> College readiness is being able to go to class, being able to complete things on time, meeting the deadlines, and excelling. I couldn't do any of that. I was distracted easily. I guess I wasn't ready. I didn't know how to be an adult. I didn't know how to be a student. I didn't know how to do anything. (P4)

> Personally, I don't feel that I was completely prepared. I had somewhat of an idea of what it was going to be like. There were certain things I expected, but initially I felt I was ready. After going through it and everything, there were some occasions where I did realize that maybe I wasn't as ready for college as I thought. (P8)

P4 and P8 described having similar experiences with the transition from high school to college. These participants believed that the transition to adulthood was unexpected. The participants did not anticipate the significance of being socially as well as academically prepared for the college experience. The participants expressed how being responsible for all aspects of their personal transition to the college experience was an overwhelming experience during their first semester:

> I honestly believe I was about 50% ready for college. I didn't exactly know coming out of high school that that's what I wanted to do. I knew I needed to do something, so I applied and luckily got accepted. (P3)

Participants described how being on their own for the first time presented them with new challenges with accountability. In addition to dealing with the academic challenges, participants also dealt with being responsible for themselves. They expressed the challenge of not having the support of parents or teachers to remind them of their personal responsibilities. P13 expressed wishing he had taken a “gap” year before entering college. He believed taking some time to become more mature could have been beneficial to his college experience.

The education system for the college student does not often provide for the social and emotional development of a student. The expectation is that all first-year students are automatically emotionally mature to handle the responsibility of college. First-year students may need time to acclimate to the college transitory process before taking on responsibilities for both living on their own and college-level work.

Theme 3: Lack of Guidance from High School Staff

When participants discussed whether they received any assistance from a high school counselor or teacher with the college application process, participants identified counseling discussions or interactions as covering similar topics. Topics shared by counselors were identified as financial aid, how to apply for college, and college selection. Three participants mentioned that high school staff needed to talk to students more about institutional expectations, and not just focus on scholarships and describing

schools. P10 shared, “I don’t feel like the information was put out there for us to know more about college, at the time.”

Eleven participants received some sort of counseling about college from school counselors. Five participants met individually with counselors. Six participants described being a part of a large group sessions. The topics discussed with counselors included college expectations, skills, and time management. P3, P5, P10, and P11 shared similar experiences with having met with their counselor in a large group setting and that this type of meeting did no encourage them to express any concerns they had with the application process and what to expect once they began college:

> No, I really didn’t talk to any teachers or anything like that about college. If we talked about college, it was more of like a class or group type thing like everybody get ready for college, put all your stuff in so you can get accepted. (P10)

> The only one [meeting] I can really remember is when an entire class would go to the counselor’s office at the computers and go to Georgia XXX. That’s the main thing I can remember. (P3)

Overall, participants who met with their high school counselors described their interactions as having little impact on their understanding of the application process. Additionally, the participants overwhelmingly believed that discussing the academic and social expectation of the college experience would have been of great benefit. Conversely, P7 and P13 shared that they did not meet with any high school counselors.

These participants shared that they received much of their assistance with application process from family members.

Theme 4: Ineffectual College Support Structure

Prior to institutional departure, participants identified themselves as taking various steps toward seeking assistance. Participants described meeting with advisors, receiving instructional assistance, such as tutoring and meeting with professors as means to receiving guidance and assistance with courses. Participants shared a time when they met with an instructor or advisor about wanting to withdraw from the institution. Six participants described meeting with a college professor. Four participants described meeting with a college advisor. One participant stated that she did not meet with any school representative before withdrawing from college.

Six participants described speaking to an instructor, academic advisor or other staff about challenging coursework. They described being overwhelmed by the workload and not doing well in their classes. Four participants met with an academic advisor to express their concern, including one participant who was required to do so because of their GPA. During advisement sessions, participants identified the workload as being "too difficult."

The experience with meeting with a professor was a dissimilar experience for P13 and P4. Participant 13 shared how a college professor tried to assist him with getting the help he needed to succeed; whereas P4 shared how a college instructor suggested that he leave school until his life was more stable (this was framed as a negative encounter). Finally, two participants expressed having never spoken to any college representatives

about wanting to leave. These participants expressed that they did not wish to share feeling overwhelmed by the courses and other expectations due to feeling ashamed.

Nine participants received some form of help with classes they were struggling in. Eight of those participants received help from other students, while one indicated having tutoring in an unsupervised lab. In all cases, there were no professors involved in the tutoring assistance program. P8 described the self-paced math class where there were two tutors in the room to help, but there were 30 to 40 students in the class, so time was limited. One participant received tutoring during group sessions and did not find this helpful. Four participants stated that they received no help or assistance whatsoever. Of those who did not receive tutoring, P4 described visiting the student success center only to discover there were no actual professors available, only teacher assistants and other students available for assistance. This participant decided that she would not return:

> Having a more supportive staff and professors. That probably could have helped in just being ready, able to handle the workload, just everything. (P8)
>
> I tried to meet with the professor. It just was not always possible. By the time I could schedule a meeting, we had already moved on to the next lesson. I also tried going to the writing lab, but still, there were just other students working there. No professors. No real help. (P9)

P8 and P9 expressed that having limited opportunities to meet with their instructors had an impact on their ability to receive assistance with the course. The frustration with the lack of access to an instructor for assistance was an area of concern. The participants did not feel like college was supportive of their academic needs:

> I saw my professor only when I was in class and we were taught just what we were supposed to know. I don't feel like I had the support. I'm guessing they [professors] think that I'm supposed to come prepared for this stuff because it was basic math to them. But it was something completely different for me… I should've been more prepared, and I wasn't. (P2)

> Some yes, some no. I had some professors that like I said, they were there to teach in class and that was it. Then I had some professors that really cared about people and the academics and did everything they could to help. Like I said, you could talk to them after class. (P3)

P2 and P3 shared differing experience with their professors. P2 did not believe his professor was supportive of his effort to seek assistance. He expressed understanding being academically prepared for college -level studies, but that there was little support to successfully complete the course.

Study participants expressed attempting to receive institutional assistance in the form of tutoring or meeting with a professor. P3 and P9 expressed that they experienced challenges when attempting to make an appointment. P3 shared how making an appointment with a professor was difficult because there was a 2 week wait for meeting with the professor. P3 expressed that the long wait before meeting with a professor proved to be challenging because the course had moved along one or two weeks by the time she could meet with the professor:

> I believe that there was a different schedule for tutoring with a professor but at that time if you did schedule an appointment, it may be two weeks from the day

> you signed up. By then, the class is so far ahead of where you were, it was kind of hard. (P3)
>
> I was in a math support class but that was like having a second math class. Tutoring centers had a couple of students in a meeting room, no professors or teacher assistants, just other students like myself. (P9)

Overall eight participants believed that support from the college depended upon the course professor. Two participants said they, in fact, felt they received the support of their instructors. Three participants stated they were not supported by their professors. One participant commented that it was because the professors assumed that as a student she was college ready, and two stated that the professors cared more about the money than the students.

Overall, the participants' responses to receiving help at the institution were equally divided. In hindsight, participants who did not seek any assistance believed it would have been beneficial to seek assistance. Participants expressed not understanding how the advisor could have assisted them with receiving help from the instructors, tutoring centers, or other resources.

Theme 5: Mandatory Enrollment in Remedial Courses

Mandatory enrollment in a remedial course was often met with frustration and confusion. Ten of the participants identified themselves as being enrolled in a remedial or "support" course. Eight of the participants were enrolled in a mathematics course. Two participants were enrolled in an English or writing support course. Four of the study participants did not take any remedial classes. Only one of the ten knew that the remedial

class was noncredit bearing. The remaining nine participants stated that they had no idea the courses were noncredit bearing until later in the term or after the end of the semester. Five of the ten participants felt that having to pay for a noncredit bearing class was unfair or wrong in some way.

Of the five participants who felt that having to pay was unfair, three participants specifically expressed having concerns about paying for a course that would not yield any credit toward graduation. Although the participants received federal financial aid, the concern was for the overall cost of earning a college degree. The participants expressed how these noncredit bearing classes would extend their time toward degree completion. For many the revelation came at the end of the semester when reviewing semester grades and credit earned:

> It was a disappointment. You're trying to pass the class. It doesn't affect your GPA It doesn't boost or lower your GPA and there's no credit for it. I paid probably $1000 for the class. I'm like, I just wasted $1000 for a class, to say now you're smart enough to go take a regular math class that you have to actually pay for and get credit for. (P5)

Sharing their thoughts on noncredit bearing courses, P5 stated, "I feel like it's a waste of money". Similarly, P8 expressed that payment for a noncredit bearing course should earn some type of credit. Both participants suggested that mandatory remedial courses should either earn a credit or be a college supported prerequisite:

> I don't really agree with it [noncredit bearing courses] because we're not getting credit for it but we're still being forced to pay for the class. Especially if it's

> [course] not one where we are not getting the help that we need to be able to be successful in the class. Even it was just a partial credit, some type of credit for it, something that counts toward our courses would be nice. (P8)

Five participants responded that they understood the reason why they needed to take the remedial class, but were frustrated that this was content that they should have been taught in high school. P11 shared similar views about remedial courses and that that their being academically ready for college-level course work was not their responsibility, but rather the responsibility of the high school:

> Well, I think it kind of affected me dropping out. When you think about it it's like I'm taking this remedial course, what's the point. I should have learned this in high school. I said it kind of breaks your self-esteem and it makes you feel like you are not academically prepared. (P11)

The leading sentiment regarding remedial courses focused on the fact that the courses incurred the same fee as credit bearing courses. It is worth noting that many participants expressed being unaware of the noncredit bearing designation for classes in which they were enrolled.

Theme 6: Lack of Nonacademic Support

To gain a better understanding of institutional retention efforts, participants shared whether they believed there was anything the institution could have implemented to help these participants remain in college. Although many of the responses were representative of previously discussed themes, participant responses offered further insight into previously establish themes regarding their institutional experiences.

Increased direct student- staff contact was identified as a method that could have led to persistence. P2 expressed having little to no opportunity to communicate with their instructor. These participants expressed primarily only receiving feedback on an assignment or assessment as the solitary direct form of communication they experienced with their instructors:

> I'd say better communication between me and my instructors, the guidance counselor that were there. Just being able to help me find different ways instead for just telling me to just deal with it. When it's like this is news to me. I'm coming out of high school coming to college it's a new feel. So I definitely want to say a better support and better communication between everyone who was supposed to help me get through school. (P2)

Participants indicated that they could have benefitted from more support with learning how to adequately adjust nonacademic aspect of being in college. P9 and P13 mentioned how family members were not supportive during their time in college and that they would have greatly benefitted from mandatory counseling. P6 described an incident on her campus where a student committed suicide. She believed that there were opportunities for support only for those who identified with a social group or participated in a campus organization:

> There was a student at the school who actually committed suicide--he jumped off a building, he jumped off the building… they have so many programs on campus. They have fraternities, sororities everything, people for the LGBT community. . . they have all types of things in the school. These groups have support. The school

> should have a program for people who are going through something, who need to really sit there and talk to someone. That's where I feel like something could have been done to help me stay. I feel like if they had a program like that in place, I feel like that can help lot of people. (P6)

P1 also shared that she was living independently and did not have any family support. She identified how there was a lack of emotional support for students on their campus and that establishing a mentoring program for first-year students would have helped her transition into the college community. Finally, another participant talked about the pressure her family gave her to stay in school and how that did not help her to be successful. Overall the participants felt that more institutional retention initiatives would have helped them remain in college.

Discrepant Cases

Although most of the participants conformed to the theme of readiness, there were two discrepant cases. Initially P7 and P10 expressed feeling underprepared for collegiate studies. As the interviews progressed, the participants stepped away from their original claim of feeling unprepared.

All participants were prescreened for this study; however, during the interview process two participants did not attribute leaving their university due to a lack of readiness. As the interview progressed, P7 identified herself as having health issues that derailed her ability to stay in school. When probed further, she stated that she did not believe under preparedness was the leading cause for withdrawing from school. She went on to describe a combination of having health issues and being unsure of her major as

leading causes for leaving the university. Additionally, she expressed not wanting to pursue college at the time and wanted to step away from her studies until she was certain that college was the best option for her. Participant 10 identified the college experience and not readiness as the reason for leaving his institution. As to whether he believed he was prepared for college, initially his response was that he believed he was "50 to 75% ready." As the interview progressed, he stated that he believed he was academically prepared for college. In this case, the participant later clarified that he did feel academically prepared but did not believe that he was prepared for the social and cultural college experience. His responses included accountability, maturity, and time management, which were similar responses expressed by other participants. Some departures are reflective of the student's integration experiences with the institution (Tinto, 1993). Successful integration is more likely to lead students to persist to degree completion.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, all participants received a digital copy of the recorded interviews and professional transcriptions. Participants were instructed to review the content of their interviews for accuracy. A member checking session was then scheduled to review interview response. Additionally, participants were asked if there were any additional comments they wished to add or alter in their initial interview responses. However, none of the study participants expressed the need to change any of their responses. Additionally, this process was used to help reduce the possibilities of

error and partiality. Data were treated with the highest regard for confidentiality. Study participants were reminded of confidentiality before data collection.

Summary

The central question which guided the scope of this study was as follows: What impact did college readiness in high school have on students' decisions to withdraw from college? The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of former college students on their level of readiness for the academic rigor of the college curriculum and the overall college experience. The study examined what participants believed prepared them for college and what was lacking in their academic preparation and how this lead to their decision to withdraw from college before completing or earning a degree. Overall, six leading themes emerged from the study: (a) lack of preparation in high school; (b) lack of maturity; (c) lack of guidance from high school staff; (d) ineffectual college support structure; (e) mandatory enrollment in remedial courses; and (f) lack of nonacademic support services. The results suggested that participants did not feel that their high schools prepared them for college-level work. Participants did not believe they were mature enough to handle the level of independence necessary to succeed at the college level. Lastly, participants recognized that the college experience did not meet their expectations. This belief is partly a result of a lack of college readiness initiatives received while in high school. This lack of college readiness motivated many participants to drop out of college.

Chapter 5 will further interpret the impact of college readiness and early college withdrawal. The interpretation of the findings will demonstrate an extended

understanding of the lack of readiness at the high-school level and the connection to early college withdrawal. I will further examine the continuing trend toward early college withdrawal. NSCRS (2014) presented findings that showed in over two decades the undergraduate degree attainment continues to decline (Shapiro, 2014). These results support and contrast the body of literature provided in Chapter 2 of this doctoral study and will be discussed in Chapter 5. In Chapter 5 I will discuss the interpretation of findings, limitation of the study, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Within Chapter 5, I review the study purpose, present the study's findings and interpretation, and discuss implications for social change, and recommendations. This qualitative case study was guided by a conceptual framework with the graduates of one local high school and the causes which led to the students' decision to withdraw from higher education prior to degree attainment. This chapter also includes the recommendations for action and further study into the social change that could benefit high school students, and stakeholders, such as instructors, counselors, and administrative agencies.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of former college enrollees concerning readiness for the academic rigor of the college curriculum and early student withdrawal. Study participants did not easily make the decision to withdraw from college. Based on the findings of the study, lack of readiness was determined to be the leading cause of early college withdrawal. Meeting college readiness requirements proved to be quite difficult for study participants. The academic rigor of college-level coursework proved to be challenging. Students faced failing course grades, limited tutoring opportunities, professor expectations, and minimally structured support opportunities. Participants' believed that the collegiate academic experience would echo their high school experience. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed feeling disappointed in themselves for not having lived up to their potential. The uncertainty after having withdrawn from college without a degree

continued to be of significant concern. Many study participants indicated having a desire to return to school in the future.

Understanding former college students' perceptions was essential in analyzing whether college readiness influenced the participant's decision to leave their institution. The rationale for this study was to search for insight as to what public school educators, as well as counselors, can do to better prepare high school students, both academically and socially, for the transition to college. This study is important as the findings can be used to increase college readiness and students' ability to earn a college degree. Assessing how teachers and counselors could impact student retention at the local level can serve as a national model as the nation continues to face increasing college attrition rates.

Interpretation of Findings

The key findings are interpreted in relation to the established research question and previously reviewed research as discussed in Chapter 2. The research question was designed to gain a substantive understanding to the perceptions and lived experience of students who chose to withdraw from college prior to degree completion. Tinto's (1975; 1993) theory of student departure formed the conceptual framework for this qualitative case study.

Nonacademic Factors

Student departure research identified lack of readiness and limited social integration as contributing to withdrawal (Tinto, 1993). Tinto found that the majority of those who withdraw early do so primarily for nonacademic reasons. Initially, I assumed

that the only factor the study participants would attribute for early withdrawal would be a lack of readiness. However, the findings of this study supported Tinto's research on early withdrawal because the study findings showed that there were nonacademic reasons that led the participants to withdraw. Nonacademic reasons participants identified in this study included social integration variables such as lacking maturity, limited high school guidance interaction, and ineffectual college support from staff.

Study participants also discussed the significant differences between their high school academic experience and their college experience. Tinto's (1993) theory of student retention is rooted in the belief that student persistence or departure is predicated on the student's ability to successfully integrate from high school into college. Tinto's student departure theory identified the connection between the interaction of students with the academic and social systems of the school. Participant responses included a discussion of the differences between previously held views about academic expectations versus social expectations, which included effective writing ability, as well as utilizing faculty advisement opportunities.

Academic and social integration of first-year students is essential to understanding Tinto's (2012) description of student commitment to the institution and willingness to remain enrolled. Overall the participants expressed having conflicting reasons for withdrawing; however, ultimately all participants made the decision to withdraw from school prior to degree attainment. The academic challenges were compounded by nonacademic challenges as well. Financial hardship, lack of maturity, and even illness were deciding factors that led to withdrawal. Tinto's (1975; 1993) theory of student

departure and Bean's (1990) explanatory model of student retention support the perspective of nonacademic causes of attrition. Therefore, the literature on social integration theory and the impact of the environment would lend credibility to the findings of this study regarding student departure.

College Readiness and Maturity

When operationalized in the literature, the definition of readiness has a focus on academic performance (Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Readiness may be viewed as having the bare minimum qualifications necessary for college academic success without remediation (Conley, 2012). Rothman (2012) reported that graduates are not prepared to meet the challenges of college.

Based on the literature, there is limited scholarly work with a focus on college readiness that also makes the connection to social maturity. Findings suggested that participants believed that the high school experience did not reflect the college experience, both socially and academically. This is indicated in conversations about having the ability to think critically, solve problems, and study independently. Some of the participants noted that the high school academic expectations were not aligned with collegiate expectations for academic achievement. Participants who chose to withdraw from school prior to completion did so because they believed that they were unprepared for the increased level of difficulty and higher academic expectations of college-level work.

The concept of social maturity and its effect on early college withdrawal was not initially included in the review of the literature in Chapter 2. Data analysis demonstrated

that participants identified with possessing limited social and emotional maturity. Participants described how they lacked the maturity necessary to effectively transition to college. Participants described how being responsible for their learning and actions was a new experience. Many struggled with independent integration into college life. Overall, participants believed that a lack of maturity and readiness contributed to the challenges they experienced during their first year of collegiate studies.

Support Services at the High school and College Level

The high school counselor is responsible for providing students with postsecondary academic and career support. This study does not include a comprehensive review of literature about the college application process. The interviews indicated that participants did not receive adequate college counseling while in high school. Participants who met with their high school counselors described their interactions as having little impact on their understanding of the application process. In support of college and career readiness and high school reform initiatives, researchers identified the impact of high school related practices in determining college access and the how these practices are attributed to the actions of counselors and resources devoted to counseling in the college application process (Roderick et al., 2011). Participants viewed the role of high school counselors as having limited involvement in the completion of the college application and limited in their efforts to disseminate information about the college application process. Additionally, participants expressed primarily meeting in large group settings and not on an individual basis with the counselors. One participant expressed that group discussions about the college application process were not as beneficial as having the opportunity to

meet face-to-face with their counselor. He did not wish to ask questions about the application process as to not attract negative attention from his counterparts while in a group setting. It is worth noting that the findings of this study also recognized that past interactions with high school counselors did not include a discussion about academic and social expectations of the college experience.

Social support including counseling, faculty advisement, and mentoring can contribute to the students' commitment to the institution, therefore having an impact on retention and completion (Tinto, 2012). To facilitate the transition from high school to college, colleges and universities have developed support programs to assist first-year at-risk students (William, 2016). Programs include orientation and seminars that could greatly assist students with better adjustment to college. Other initiatives include faculty led advisement, peer support, and mandatory academic advisement at the time of first-semester enrollment. Study participants recognized that meaningful support at the postsecondary level would have been of great benefit and perhaps could have supported them in their efforts to remain in college. Overall participants described limited advisement interaction and limited academic support with professors as reasons that contributed to their decision to withdraw.

Mandatory Remediation

High school graduates are choosing to attend college, however, a large percentage of them are not ready because they take at least one remedial course (Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Many students do not persist beyond the first year. As the high school to college transition has increased, students taking several remedial courses has increased as well

(Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Of the 13 participants included in this study, 10 identified themselves as having been enrolled in at least one remedial or "support" course. Postsecondary enrollment in a remedial course is a controversial topic (Bahr, 2008). Researchers determined that enrollment in remedial courses can be a waste of funds because they are noncredit bearing, demoralize students and faculty, and as a result, are harmful to academic standards because many students are arriving unprepared for college-level work (Attewell et al., 2011; Bahr, 2008; Clotfelter et al., 2015). Responses provided by the study participants are closely aligned with the literature. Participants described their frustration with mandatory enrollment in a remedial course. Findings support participants' views about noncredit bearing courses. These support courses were viewed as a waste of financial resources and waste of time that could have been used to credit bearing course (Super, 2016). Finally, some of the participants noted that although they understood why they had to take a remedial course, they believed that the content should have been taught in high school and that they believed they were not prepared for college level work. Findings were supported by the literature, which indicated that enrollment in remedial courses was associated with decreasing the likelihood of completion (Attewell et al., 2006).

The Southern Regional Education Board (2014) reported that 60% of first-year college students were required to take a remedial course in English and mathematics. Participants included in this study of early student departure reported taking a remedial mathematics course with greater frequency than any other subjects. The lack of readiness is identified as having a significant correlation to early college withdrawal (Southern

Regional Education Board, 2014). Participants expressed feeling "defeated" at working diligently in the remedial course only to earn no credit. Overall, the findings were closely aligned with the research that showed that students enrolled in remedial courses were discouraged because these students are most likely to achieve college-level competency at a lower rate, which led to withdrawal before degree attainment (Bahr, 2010). Additionally, these students were not staying in the system long enough to determine if remediation was helpful (Bahr, 2012). Similarly, many of the participants included in this study withdrew within the first year of enrollment.

Ineffectual Institutional Retention Efforts

Student departure theory is further supported by the findings of this study to include Tinto's (1975) theory of student college retention. Central to the theory of college retention is that student departure is founded on the student's ability to successfully integrate academically and socially into the college experience. Variables that were attributed the participants' ability to remain in college included the following: academic difficulties carried over from high school, transition to college life, separation from family and community. Findings highlight the significance of Tinto's academic and social integration identification of variables and how they can influence student withdrawal.

Findings of this study implied that participants experienced challenges to adapting to being on their own for the first time. According to one participant, being separated from family and being independent was met with apprehension and anxiety. The transition to college life was frequently associated with being unprepared for adulthood

(Willis, 2014). These included participants discussing time management, being organized, and self-motivation.

Based on Tinto's (1993) departure theory, the findings of this study also demonstrated that student persistence can be significantly impacted by nonacademic related factors. Social and emotional adjustment in the transition to college is marked by complex challenges. The adjustment to college involves more than academic or scholarly potential. Student social and emotional integration is important to student collegiate success leading to persistence to remain in school through to degree completion (Tinto, 1993). Overall, study participants acknowledged the significance of being more socially and emotionally prepared for the college experience (Willis, 2014).

Research based on Tinto's (1993) theory of college retention offers recommendations for institutions to address student retention. Retention programs have increased nationally; however, many of these programs lack support and need reform because they have failed to increase student retention (Tinto, 2012). This study did not identify student participation in any outreach or summer bridge programs before enrollment or during participants' first year of enrollment. To effectively decrease the rate of attrition and improve retention, Tinto recommended including summer bridge programs as a condition of first-year enrollment. Hickman (2011) recommended using college academic advisors to create outreach programs to reach first-year students. Hickman's study identified successful completion of the first-semester as a powerful predictor of student persistence. These findings are relevant for students facing first-year collegiate adjustment and integration. Along with Tinto (1993; 2010), Davidson and

Wilson (2013) argued that academic success in not dependent on academic integration alone. Retention and persistence is also predicated on positive social and emotional integration into the college experience as well.

Limitations of the Study

A specific population of graduates from one local high school was the focus of this study. The sample of study participants was limited by participants who were graduates of the high school and qualified as having withdrawn from a college or university. The sample size was limited to the convenience and availability of participants. I interviewed 13 former college students for this research. I allowed for flexibility with teleconferencing, video conferencing, and in-person interview options. During the interviews, participants described their perceptions of how they were academically prepared in high school and to link this to motives for withdrawing from college. At issue, could be whether study participants identified and made specific connections between readiness and the relationship to college withdrawal. This assumption could be considered as another limitation to this study. This is a possible a limitation because this study was designed to identify how academically prepared participants believed they were when leaving high school and the impact being prepared had on their decision to withdraw from college. Participant responses were limited or biased based on personal experiences. Another limitation was the participants' ability to ascertain how well they recall how they were prepared for college during high school. A limitation to this study is the number of years that have elapsed since graduating from this local high school. Lastly, participation in a study that is designed to gather very

personal information could have limited the participants' ability to be open and forthcoming with their responses.

Recommendations

Analysis of the 13 participants' lived experiences of readiness and early college departure, and the emergent themes have led to several recommendations for high school reform and improvements in college retention. These recommendations for successful retention at the high school level will require collaboration between high schools and institutions of higher learning. The goal should be to have graduates who are ready for the expectations and academic challenges of college (Abraham et al., 2014). High school and college staff should consider preparing students for academic and nonacademic challenges. This study suggested that students want more rigorous high school preparation and more support systems once in college.

High School Action

High school reform should also include measures that will strengthen accountability on the part of secondary education. Schools and school districts should develop a comprehensive teacher and counselor professional learning programs. The *No Child Left Behind Act* was supposed to raise achievement and close the achievement gap across the nation; however, this mandate has created incentives for states to lower academic standards (Scott, 2007). The goal of high school reform should be to graduate scholars who are qualified applicants for collegiate studies. Therefore, reform initiatives should include the following recommendations:

- Support improved graduation requirements, increase course curriculum rigor, and provide project-based learning opportunities.
- Create monitoring of ongoing college and career counseling.
- Provide quality professional learning opportunities for faculty and staff to increase student achievement.
- Establish a guidance system that includes career exploration, information, and advisement.
- Implement mathematics and literacy programs for underprepared students.
- Establish transitory and pre-college orientation programs.

Students entering college need to enroll in college without requiring mandatory remedial courses. High school can ensure that students graduate college-ready by focusing on academic rigor and college resources (Hill & Maas, 2015).

College Action

This study focused on the broad concept of early student withdrawal while examining which factors could have contributed to the students' decision to withdraw. Findings affirmed that experiencing academic difficulties were the primary reason for withdrawing; however, nonacademic factors emerged as factors that lead to many of the participants to withdraw from college. The following are recommended actions at the colleges for improving retention and the rate of college completion:

- Require enrollment in a transition program, such as a first-year seminar course.

- Provide professional development opportunity for faculty support for the first-year seminar course.
- Monitor student academic profiles at the end of the first semester.
- Examine second-year return rates.
- Allow governing boards to adopt policies that will hold college accountable for increasing completion rates.
- Require state-wide measures to assess degree completion.

Colleges can assist enrollees with the high school to college transition and retention efforts by offering program initiatives such as first-year seminars, required advisement, and tutoring monitored by college professors, not by other students (Welton & Martinez, 2014). Many of the participants expressed having limited or no interaction with college staff. Researchers support first-year seminars that provide opportunities for increased social and academic integration (Tinto, 2010).

Recommendations for Further Study

The qualitative case study contributed to the limited research that addresses the impact of college readiness and early student withdrawal. The study was limited to graduates of the target high school. Participants were primarily of African-American descent. Further research may include a purposeful sample that would include increased ethnic and gender diversity, and graduates from other high schools in the local school district. Final recommendations would be to conduct a longitudinal study in five years with the same participants to inquire as to whether any chose to return to college. Additional, I would consider a qualitative follow-up of this study to include in-depth

interviews with high school instructors, counselors, as well as postsecondary staff including college professors and academic advisors.

Implications

The findings from this study provided insight into the impact of readiness on early college withdrawal. The first implication is that secondary and postsecondary institutions should collaborate on measures to improve college readiness to reduce the need for mandatory enrollment in remedial courses. Findings suggest that improvements at the high school should more closely align with college work, expectations, and responsibilities. The results can provide research and empirical knowledge in the field of secondary readiness and postsecondary retention efforts that can guide institutions of higher learning toward decreasing student retention rates.

At the local school district, study findings may encourage educators, administrators, and all stakeholders to reform current practices with preparing students for college. The interview responses suggest a need for a rigorous secondary curriculum. Additionally, the findings suggest creating opportunities for additional support and resources outside of the classroom through internships. This feedback could be used to implement new teaching and mentoring strategies that would strengthen college readiness. Study findings could lead to an improvement of the local school system that has become very dependent on retesting, differentiated instruction, standardized assessments, grade inflation, and credit recovery. The results of this study may help to identify practices that do not emulate the academic integrity of coursework students will encounter at the collegiate level. Outcomes of this study may lead to professional

development for secondary instructors that could include instructional strategies that include a focus on college readiness (Hafner et al., 2010). Readiness policies at the high school could also include closing the achievement gaps amongst various socio-economic, ethnic, and gender groups (Gilkey et al., 2011; Markow & Pieters, 2011).

Many participants who chose to withdraw from school did so because of feeling unprepared for the increased level of difficulty and higher academic expectations of college-level work. When high school graduates matriculate to and attain a college degree, the benefits to the local and state economies become substantial. The benefits of degree attainment can lead to higher salaries, improved self-esteem, and higher rates of contributing to the local communities (Hamilton, 2010). People who complete high school and go on to earn a college degree, earn relatively higher incomes than noncollege graduates. Because of these increased earnings, these individuals then contribute at higher rates to local and state economies (Communities in Schools Georgia, 2011).

Conclusion

Former students who chose to withdraw from college within a year of enrollment served as the inspiration for conducting this study. The study objective was to investigate the perceptions of readiness at the high school level and the decision to withdraw prior to degree attainment. The results indicated that participants' perception of feeling unprepared for college attributed to their inability to transition to the academic challenges of college successfully, thus, leading to early withdrawal. Key issues identified by participants included a lack of essential study skills, weak writing skills, critical thinking, and understanding academic content. The participants felt that the teachers and staff of

their high school did not discuss what would be expected of them both academically and as individuals to be successful in college. Examples of personal accountability included the need to be responsible for getting work and assignments submitted on time, self-motivation to study, and ensuring time management.

Throughout the narratives, participants discussed not being socially and emotionally mature enough to succeed in college. Results of this study support the need for improvement and assistance with the transition from secondary to postsecondary institutions and the need for increased collaboration between these institutions of learning. Participants expressed that they did not feel prepared to handle the complexities of college life and that there were no transition programs available to increase readiness and academic success at the college-level.

The completion of this study of the causes of early college withdrawal has deepened my understanding of the increased need for initiatives for collaborative efforts including high schools and colleges. No student should leave high school believing their high school did not properly prepare them for the challenges of the college experience. Creating a foundation for college success based on collaboration with postsecondary institutions can effectively prepare students to successfully transition to college and persist through degree attainment.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Participant Name: _____

Interview Date: _____

Year Graduated High School: _____

Year/semester enrolled in College: _____

Year/Semester Withdrawn from College: _____

Overview: What perceptions do former college students have about college readiness?

1. Describe how well prepared you were for college?

2. How could your high school have better prepared you for your college courses? (e. g. rigorous courses, quality homework and or projects, additional tutoring, advisement, or discussions about college).

3. In your opinion, what defines college readiness?

4. How successful or not successful do you believe your high school was in adequately preparing you for the academic challenges of college?

    a. Describe examples of how you believe your high school adequately prepared you for college?

    b. Describe examples of how you believe your high school did not prepare you for the academic challenges of college?

5. When you were in high school, can you discuss a time when you had a conversation with a teacher or guidance counselor about applying for college? Did you have any concerns about the process?

6. While still enrolled in college, can discuss a time when you met with or had a conversation with an instructor or advisor about wanting to withdraw from school? What prompted you to speak to them?

7. Can you describe which subject or subjects were the most challenging? Was the course a general studies or remedial courses?

8. Did you receive any assistance with your courses, like tutoring?

9. Were you enrolled in any college preparatory or remedial programs during your first year of college? (If yes, continue to 9a-c)
    a. At the time, were you aware of whether these courses, were non-credit bearing at your college?
    b. What were your thoughts on noncredit bearing courses? Did this have an effect on your decision to withdraw?
    c. In which specific college, remedial or preparatory courses were you enrolled?

Subsequent questions (not open ended)

1. Were you enrolled at a 2-year or 4-year college or university?

2. Were you enrolled as a full-time or half-time?

    a. Explain your reason for being enrolled as a full-time or half-time?

3. Do you feel that you had proper support from your college instructors or staff?

4. When did you start thinking about withdrawing?

    a. Was there any one event in particular?

5. Were there other factors to your decision to withdraw from school?

6. Have you considered returning to college?

7. Can you describe what could have been done for you back then that may have led you to remain in college?

Appendix B: Preview Questions

Preview Questions Email

Thank you for agreeing to be a participant in this study of the college readiness and the connection to early college withdrawal. I have attached the interview questions for you to review at your earliest convenience. If you have any questions or need clarification of any interview question, please forward all concerns to XXXXXXXXXXX@gmail.com.

Thank you for your time.

Enédine André, Ed.S.
Walden University
Doctoral Candidate

Attached email:

Interview Questions

Research Overview: What perceptions do former college students have about college readiness?

1. Describe how well prepared you were for college?
2. How could your high school have better prepared you for your college courses? (e. g. rigorous courses, quality homework and or projects, additional tutoring, advisement, or discussions about college).
3. In your opinion, what defines college readiness?
4. How successful or not successful do you believe your high school was in adequately preparing you for the academic challenges of college?
    a. Describe examples of how you believe your high school adequately prepared you for college?
    b. Describe examples of how you believe your high school did not prepare you for the academic challenges of college?
5. When you were in high school, can you discuss a time when you had a conversation with a teacher or guidance counselor about applying for college? Did you have any concerns about the process?
6. While still enrolled in college, can discuss a time when you met with or had a conversation with an instructor or advisor about wanting to withdraw from school? What prompted you to speak to them?

7. Can you describe which subject or subjects were the most challenging? Was the course a general studies or remedial courses?

8. Did you receive any assistance with your courses, like tutoring?

9. Were you enrolled in any college preparatory or remedial programs during your first year of college? (If yes, continue to 9a-c)
    a. At the time, were you aware of whether these courses, were noncredit bearing at your college?

    b. What were your thoughts on noncredit bearing courses? Did this have an effect on your decision to withdraw?

    c. In which specific college, remedial or preparatory courses were you enrolled?

Additional questions

1. Were you enrolled at a 2-year or 4-year college or university?

2. Were you enrolled as a full-time or half-time?

    a. Explain your reason for being enrolled as a full-time or half-time?

3. Do you feel that you had proper support from your college instructors or staff?

4. When did you start thinking about withdrawing?

    a. Was there any one event in particular?

5. Were there other factors to your decision to withdraw from school?

6. Have you considered returning to college?

7. Can you describe what could have been done for you back then that may have led you to remain in college?

**Complete confidentiality*
**Please note that your name and name of the High school is never revealed.*

Appendix C: Teleconference Interview Script

Interview Script

Conference number: Access number: Host PIN: *91 to record

Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening

Interviewer:

- Before we begin, I would like to note that this interview is being recorded for accuracy, analysis, and for transcription (*91 to begin recording).
- Have you electronically signed and the Study consent document, dated _____2016?
- I will note for the record that I have received the signed consent document and have signed the document upon receipt.
- Are you ready to begin?
- This is Study Participant ID # __2016
- Today's date is: _____

Interviewer:

- I would like to formally introduce myself for the record. My name is Enedine Andre. I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University.
- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study of early college withdrawal.
- I would like to remind you that your participation in this study is voluntary.
- Neither the name of the high school or your name will be used at any time during this interview or the publishing of this study.
- You have been assigned a study identification number for all documentation.

- Are you still willing to participate?
- Are you ready to begin?
- Thank you. Let's proceed.

- Are you a graduate of High School X?
- What year did you graduate from High School X?
- What year did you enroll in college? Which semester?
- What year did you withdraw from college? Which semester?

Overview:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of former college students on their level of readiness for the academic rigor of the college curriculum and the overall college experience.

The study will also explore the perceptions of what you believe prepared you for college and what was lacking in your academic preparation and did this lead to your decision to withdraw from college before completing or earning a degree.

High School college readiness questions.

These questions are about your high school experience and how it relates to college readiness.

1. Describe how well prepared you were for college? (how well do you believe you were prepared)
2. How could your high school have better prepared you for your college courses? (e. g. rigorous courses, quality homework and or projects, additional tutoring, advisement, or discussions about college).
3. In your opinion what defines college readiness?
4. How successful or not successful do you believe your high school was in adequately preparing you for the academic challenges of college?
    a. Describe examples of how you believe your high school adequately prepared you for college?
    b. Describe examples of how you believe your high school did not prepare you for the academic challenges of college?
5. When you were in high school, can you discuss a time when you had a conversation with a teacher or guidance counselor about applying for college? Did you have any concerns about the process?

College Related Questions

The following questions are related to your experience as a college student.

6. While still enrolled in college, can you discuss a time when you met with or had a conversation with an instructor or advisor about wanting to withdraw from school? What prompted you to speak to them?
7. Can you describe which subject or subjects were the most challenging? Was the course a general studies or remedial courses?
8. Did you receive any assistance with your courses, like tutoring? If so, can you describe what type of assistance, in what subject area or areas of study?
9. Were you enrolled in any college preparatory or remedial programs during your first year of college? (If yes, continue to 9a-c)
    a. At the time, were you aware of whether these courses, were noncredit bearing at your college?
    b. What were your thoughts on noncredit bearing courses? Did this influence your decision to withdraw?
    c. In which specific college, remedial or preparatory courses were you enrolled?

Subsequent questions (not open ended)

1. Were you enrolled at a 2-year or 4-year college or university?
2. Were you enrolled as a full-time or half-time? Explain your reason for being enrolled as a full-time or half-time?
3. Do you feel that you had proper support from your college instructors or staff?
4. When did you start thinking about withdrawing? Was there any one event in particular?
5. Were there other factors to your decision to withdraw from school?
6. Have you considered returning to college?
7. Can you describe what could have been done for you back then that may have led you to remain in college?

End

- That is the last question I have for you today.
- Do you have any questions for me?
- Is there anything you would like for me to clarify?
- A copy of the recorded interview transcripts will be forwarded to you.
- You will also receive a copy of all study related documents.
- Thank you for your participation.