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Addressing the Completion Agenda by Improving a Community College's Student Retention Rates

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Student Retention Rates

by

Emily Hurst Bishop

MA, Ashford University, 2012

BA, Illinois College, 1999

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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December 2018

Abstract

A local community college is experiencing low level student retention. . The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of administrators, faculty and students regarding the low student retention rate. The participants for this qualitative case study included 6 former students who withdrew from the local community college before completing their degrees, 2 faculty members, and 2 administrators. The conceptual framework was constructivism. Research questions were designed to elicit perceptions of understanding retention issues in terms of adult learning and documenting the problem of retention. Data were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews and document review to answer the research questions. Interview data were coded, and 10 themes were identified. Themes included lack of socialization, cost of tuition, lack of online options, class scheduling, student self-discipline, quality of faculty, institutional support, high schools not preparing students for college, 2 year degree implications, and parental pressure. Document review showed that minimal efforts were present to track students or educate faculty regarding adult learning through the 2 year degree process. The key results showed that student retention was a problem that needed to be addressed at both the faculty and administrative levels. The themes resulting from data analysis served as the basis for creation of a 3-day professional development training project for faculty and administrators at the college. This study and resulting project might encourage positive social change for the students, faculty, administration, and college by improving retention rates and graduating more students into the workforce.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

This project study addressed the low retention rates for students at a local community college. My intent was to implement strategic training for faculty, students, and administrators in order to retain more students at the community college. This section of the study includes a problem statement, a section on the significance of the project, and discussions of the background, framework, research questions, research methodology and design, and types and sources of data.

Definition of the Problem

College retention rates were low at the local community college. The retention rate for full time students during the 2014-2015 school year was 66%. However, administrators and faculty members did not understand why the retention rate at this community college is so low. According to Windham, Rehfuss, Williams, Pugh, and Tincher-Ladner (2014), close to half of the students attending community college drop out before finishing their programs. At the local community college, leaders' lack of understanding is important because "retention plans must be tailored to a campus's needs, based on proven research, involve a wide range of campus constituents, and be planned with students' interests in mind" (Siegel, 2011, p. 8). This study filled the gap in practice created by this lack of understanding for this particular community college.

This project study provides the local college needed insights about how to retain students. Both locally and nationally there is a gap between college enrollment and college completion. At the national level, The American Graduation Initiate was

launched by the Obama administration its improved community college retention and

graduation (Heiman, 2010). In this study I explored how to close this gap by increasing

retention and thereby improving college completion rates. The results of this study will

benefit students at the local college as well as the college itself by providing insights into

ways to improve college retention and increase graduation rates for that institution.

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

College student retention is an important issue for all colleges and especially local

community colleges in west central Illinois. The director of enrollment at my project site

reported "that for the 2014-2015 school year, 66% of full time and 47% of part time

students returned to the school the next year." Increasing retention rates is important to

improving graduation rates for the local community college and colleges across the

nation.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The purpose of this project study was to gain an understanding about why the

retention rate at this local community college is about 50% for full time students and less

than 50% for part time students. The literature is clear that such an understanding is

needed for college administrators and stakeholders to create an effective student retention

plan. As Siegel (2011) noted, "For a college-student retention plan to be effective, it

must be comprehensive in nature and integrate a number of different philosophies and

strategies" (p. 8). According to Lobo (2012), researchers have been discussing student

attrition and retention issues for over 40 years. According to Levitch and Shaw (2014),

increasing retention has considerable financial and economic benefits to the institution, as

well as benefits for the individual. In this study, I addressed the issues raised in the current conversation in the literature.

Definitions

Student attrition: While student attrition may be more specifically defined within a particular field, it is generally characterized as the departure from or delay in successful completion of program requirements (Laack, 2013).

Student retention: Retention is staying in school until completion of a degree (Hagedorn, 2006).

Significance

This project is unique because the problem of retention rates at a local community college is not fully understood by stakeholders. The results of this study provide needed insights for administrators and faculty at the local college about how to retain students. There is a gap between college enrollment and college completion, both locally and nationally. In this study, I explored how to close the gap and increase college completion. The results of this study may benefit students at the local college as well as the college itself by providing insights into ways to improve college retention and increase graduation rates for that institution. The findings provide educators at the local community college ideas for how to improve retention rates.

Research Questions

In alignment with the research problem and purpose, I developed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do administrators, students, and teachers at a local community college document the problem of student retention?

RQ2: How do administrators, students, and teachers at a local community college describe the problem of student retention?

I posed these broad, open-ended research questions in order to focus the study while remaining open to what would emerge from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As data was collected and analyzed the research question was refined and modified and additional questions posed to fit better with how the study was framed by the data (Stake, 1995).

Review of the Literature

This literature review is divided into two major parts: (a) the conceptual framework for this study, and (b) a critical review of the literature focusing on the central phenomenon of this study, which is student retention. I have subdivided this critical review into parts on (a) strategies to improve retention; (b) college completion; (c) racial, ethnic, or gender gaps; (d) financial issues; (e) earnings. This literature review provided me regarding college student retention and strategies to improve retention rates. I examined these resources for this literature review: peer-reviewed journals, and professional resources. I used the ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE, and Educational Research Complete databases to serch for the following terms: *college retention, retention rates, college programs,* and *graduation rate.* In total I reviewed 45 resources.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I took a constructivist approach to data collection and analysis. According to Patton (2015), constructivist philosophy is built on the thesis of ontological relativity, which holds that all tenable statements about existence depends on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world. Lincoln and Guba (1986) stated that constructivism views the world as socially, politically, and psychologically constructed as human work to understand and explain the physical world. Constructivists triangulate to capture and report multiple perspectives rather than seek a singular truth. In this study, I sought to capture the different ways that those interviewed interpreted their situations.

Critical Review of the Literature

The purpose of this review of literature was to gather ideas addressing the issue of student retention. This issue is important for the local community college as well as other institutions nationally. These colleges and universities need to retain students and graduate students in order to make a positive social impact on the world. This literature review is divided into several subsection: student retention; strategies to improve retention; college completion; racial, ethnic, or gender gaps; financial issues; and earnings.

Student retention. Student retention is an important factor in producing college graduates. As Mattern, Marini, and Shaw (2015) have noted, "Throughout the college retention literature, there is a recurring theme that students leave college for a variety of reason making retention a difficult phenomenon to model" (p. 18). College retention and

completion is an important issue both nationally and locally. Kerby (2015) stated that over the past 40 years, college student retention has been a concern for those involved in higher education.

Online courses are an option many colleges used to encourage retention. Ribichaud (2016) stated that as colleges offer more online courses, strategies must be in place to encourage successful completion. Travers (2016) reported that recent data showed that students taking online courses are often not being supported as much as those in traditional settings. Earning a college degree is important, but students must have access to colleges in order to be successful college graduates. Whitmore (2011) contended, "If we are to meet the goal set forth by President Obama to increase the number of young adults who earn a college degree, we must not only ensure that more students have access to college, but also make certain that they are well prepared to succeed once they get there" (p. 31). Students must be prepared to complete a college degree when they enroll in a college program.

Students must remain in college and graduate in order for this country to be successful and competitive with other nations. Hutto (2017) stated that one measure of success for colleges is retaining students. According to Noy, Trimble, Jenkins, Barnett, and Wachen (2016), community college programs are not structured to support students' success. Talbert (2012), suggested that for the United States to remain a competitive force in the global economy, it is crucial to keep students in school. While increasing the college retention rates is important, increasing college graduation rates is also important.

The number of high school graduates that enter college has risen, but the number of those graduating college has decreased. Grubb, Scott, and Good (2017) reported that students who participated in dual enrollment were nearly 3.4 times less likely to take remediation. College completion is the goal for most students enrolling in college courses. It is important for colleges to provide support in order to retain and graduate students.

Strategies to improve retention. There are several strategies mentioned in the literature related to improving student retention, including student mentors, a sense of belonging, and creating a counselor-mentor role.

Student mentors can have an impact on college student retention, resulting "in comparatively higher retention and graduation rates" (Corso, & Devine, 2013, p. 9). Siegel (2011) suggested pairing a faculty member and upper-level students with an entering first year student in order to provide support both socially and academically for the new student. The mentor can also assist the student with a sense of belonging and fitting in at the institution.

It is important for a student to develop a sense of belonging in order to help with retention. Such a sense of belonging "can be achieved by the development of positive student/faculty relationships, the presence of a well-resourced counseling centre and the encouragement of diversity and difference" (O'Keefe, 2013, p. 605). This sense of belonging is evident in students who are satisfied with the overall college experience and are able to talk to a mentor about issues of concern. Patterson Silver Wolf, Perkins,

Butler-Barnes, and Walker, Jr. (2017) suggested that social belonging interventions may help student preparation for community college.

Colleges that provide a counselor or mentor to the students help to increase the retention of those students. Tovar (2015) stated that a counseling-intensive program influences the success of the students. Pearson (2012) showed that creating a counselor-mentor role will improve student satisfaction and retention. When students are satisfied with the college they attend, retention rates will improve. Counselors or mentors are the first step in helping students be successful, and support services provided by the institution is the next step. Harrell and Reglin (2018) stated that an effective advising program was critical to student success.

Student and faculty interactions also can contribute to higher retention rates. According to Lillis (2012), student-faculty exchanges can have a great result in keeping students enrolled in school. Relationships among students and faculty can improve student success. Successful students complete their college education and graduate. However, according to Hollis (2015), many colleges are deciding to use more adjunct faculty and less full time faculty. This results in students having a more difficult time getting into contact with their instructors since they do not have office hours on campus. The lack of face to face contact made some students feel insignificant to the college.

College completion. DeAngelo and Franke (2016) stated that completing college is now the minimum threshold for entry into the middle class. Demetriou and Powell (2014) argued that a key question when examining retention should be whether colleges and universities are meeting the needs of the students enrolled. Retaining students will

result in those students graduating with a college degree. Students graduating with a college degree are a societal benefit. It improves the work force and therefore the economy for the United States. "America's College Promise (ACP) is a legislative initiative introduced by President Obama to increase access to higher education, to build the economy, and to support his earlier American Graduation Initiative" (Palmadessa, 2017, p.52). A study completed by Windham et al. (2014) showed that successful completion of a study skills course increased fall-to-fall retention of students. According to Mertes and Hoover (2014), student retention is an important issue for colleges and universities. Monaghan and Attewell (2015) found that an undergraduate's chances of completing a BA are much lower if the students start at a community college.

Mertes and Jankoviak (2015) contended that designing effective student retention programs is of critical importance from both a completion and a monetary standpoint. According to Fontaine (2014), the program produced a significant improvement in retention. Efforts by colleges to improve retention rates have shown to be successful. However, retention rates are not equal among demographics. In a study conducted by Martin and Townsend (2014), student success improved when students had a college plan in place. Another issue is that many studies do not focus on community college retention. According to Melendez (2016), college retention and graduation statistics are typically focused on traditional, full-time, college populations.

Racial, ethnic, or gender gaps. Hispanic students are eight percentage points lower than White students when it comes to college completion. As McGlynn (2010) noted, "Fifty-nine percent of White college students complete a bachelor's degree within

six years while 51% of Hispanic students do " (p. 11). "Sociological research on community colleges focus on the tension between increasing educational opportunities and failing to improve equality in college completion across key demographics, such as race and socioeconomic status" (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab 2015, p. 27). According to Harris and Wood (2013), studies have shown that African American and Latino men rank near the bottom of student success. Colleges need to improve the graduation rates for all minority students.

Early college high school initiatives were set up to help minority and low-income students succeed in college. According to McGlynn (2011), these initiatives were designed so that low income, first-generation, English-language learners could earn both a high school diploma and either an associate degree or up to 2 years of college credit tuition free. These programs provided students the opportunity to earn college credit while still in high school. Colleges need to strive to treat all students equally regardless of their race, gender, or ethnicity. Krymkowski and Mintz (2011) revealed that "college completion accounts for the progress made by white women and for the declines among Hispanic men" (p. 1). Even though women have made progress in college completion, Hispanic men still need to be given equal opportunities.

However, gender is also an issue that deserves attention. Reason (2009) reviewed research related to the study of college student retention based on the issue of gender. Reason (2009) stated that while the foundation of knowledge is solid, the increasing diversity of today's college students and the need to increase the successful retention of all students underscore the importance of reevaluating the understanding of individual

student variables that predict retention. While gender is an issue related to retention, making college affordable for all students is another important factor.

Financial issues. The cost of college tuition continues to rise. A study conducted by the Louisiana Board of Regents (2012) revealed that more financial aid money could help retention rates at community colleges. An anonymous source in that study stated that when Pell Grants are coupled with Louisiana's GO Grants, which help nontraditional and low-to moderate-income students who need financial assistance to afford college, student retention rates improve by 14% compared with students receiving Pell Grants alone. According to Hughes (2013), more students and families need financial assistance to reach the college completion goals. Students need assistance paying for rising cost of college. Students receiving financial aid are more likely to remain in college. According to McKinney, Mukherjee, Wade, Shefman, and Breed (2015), students believed that loans had contributed to their academic success.

Colleges are having their budgets cut and are requiring students to pay higher fees. Strempel (2013) addressed the government of the United States lack of support for education and the increase in tuition. Strempel stated that as a nation students are challenged by dramatic decreases in state and local government support for academia (and corresponding upward swings in tuition costs), stagnating middle-class wages. A study conducted by Wolff, Wood-Kustanowitz, and Ashkenazi (2014) revealed that funding cuts to community colleges force colleges to increase efficiency and retain students. The cost of going to college is increasing; however, the value of education is still substantial.

Earnings. In a study conducted in Ontario, Frank and Walters (2012) examined wages of trade school graduates, college graduates, and university graduates. The authors reported that the level of schooling is generally consistent with human capital theory, indicating that graduates with the highest levels of education (advanced university) obtain the highest earnings. Students who do not complete their college education will not earn high wages, which leads to a discussion about the value of a college degree. As a result, college students still receive good value for the money spent on their education. According to Kalleberg and Dunn (2015), males attending community colleges in areas with higher unemployment rates receive lower earnings.

Implications

In this study, I sought to gain a deeper insight into how community colleges can improve student retention. One potential outcome for this study was to provide professional development training to the faculty and staff at the participating community college. As a result of implementing this training, the community college in this study would benefit from higher retention rates and possibly higher graduation rates. By providing a professional development training that focused on fostering improved relationships between faculty and students, the positive effects would potentially result in more satisfied students who are motivated to stay in college and complete their degrees.

Summary

There was a problem with college retention rates at a local community college. The reported retention rates were about 50% for full time students and a bit less for part-time students. Retention is a concern for educators at that college. It is important to

understand how the students, teachers, and administrators document and describe the problem of student retention. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how to improve the retention rates at this community college. In the following section, I describe the design of this qualitative study, including the selection of participants, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

Student retention is an important issue for the local community college where I conducted this study. In order to graduate students successfully, college leaders must seek ways to retain the students. Typically, studies such as this have included an intervention designed to compare groups based on such variables as socioeconomic status, grades, and individual program retention. These studies are valuable and show that retention is important. Yet this literature is missing the voice of the students and educators describing the problem of low retention rates. In this qualitative case study, I explored student and educators' experiences with retention and gathered valuable data that can be used to design more effective retention programs.

Research Design and Approach

I used a qualitative case study approach to answer the research questions. Specifically, I used an intrinsic case study research design. In such studies, "The case is undertaken because, first and last, one wants better understanding of this particular case" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). According to Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010), case study research is used to gain insight into an in-depth understanding of an individual, group, or situation. This research design was appropriate for this study because the voices of individuals who do not complete their college degree program were represented. This method allows for all participants to describe their perceptions and perspectives in their own words.

Other qualitative research designs such as grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology would have been less effective for this study. Grounded theory would have been less effective because I did not intend to generate a new theory. Ethnography would have been less effective because this study was not about the patterns of a specific cultural group. Phenomenological research was not appropriate because it is based on the individual's interpretation of his or her experiences.   As a result, I determined that an intrinsic case study design was most appropriate to answer the research questions.

Participants

The participants for this study were students previously enrolled in the local community college and faculty members who were currently teaching at the local community college. Six of the participants were students who withdrew from the community college before they completed their degree. Two of the participants were faculty who dealt directly with those students. The remaining two participants were administrators from the office of student retention at community college. I used purposeful snowball sampling to recruit participants based on the experiences that they brought to the study (Patton, 2015). I collected data from persons who were intimately familiar with the topic of this study, were willing to talk with me, and were able to articulate their ideas.

Justification for the Number of Participants

The 10 purposefully-selected participants were faculty members, administrators, and former students from a local community college. There were two instructors, two administrators, and six students who had withdrawn from the college. The data collected

represented what the typical student, administrators, and teacher experienced regarding

student retention.

One of the common issues in qualitative research is deciding how many

participants to include in the study. The common measure for a sufficient sample in

qualitative research is saturation, which is defined as "the stage in data collection when

new information merely replicates previously obtained data" (Holosko & Thyer, 2011, p.

111). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the other measure is redundancy, which

means that no new information is forthcoming from data collection. I believe saturation

and redundancy was reached, as it was apparent that no new information was being

obtained, after interviewing 10 participants.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

I recruited potential participants by contacting students who had withdrawn from

the college in the past 2 years before they completed their degree, faculty members who

taught these students, and the office of student retention administrators. I knew a few

current students at the college and asked them for names of fellow classmates who no

longer attended the college. I obtained the contact information for these students from

the current students. I contacted these students via email and invited them to participate

in an informational meeting to discuss the study and to build a relationship between these

possible participants and me. I obtained the contact information for faculty and retention

staff members from the college website. A letter of invitation was emailed to each

potential participant. I used a conference room at a local restaurant to host the

informational meeting. At the meeting, I provided them with a consent form along with a

self-addressed envelope, and they filled out the consent form and mailed it back to me.

This consent form outlined how their identity would be kept confidential and how they

would be protected from any possible harm arising from participation in the study.

Methods of Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

As a researcher it is important to develop a working relationship with the

participants. The letter of invitation included the date, time, and place of the

informational meeting. This meeting gave me an opportunity to introduce myself to the

potential participants and gave me a chance to get to know them. During the meeting I

explained the purpose of the study and discussed how I would meet with the participants

in order to conduct an interview with them. I assured them that I would use the

information they provide for the sole purpose of this study and that my role would be

non-participatory. It was important for the participants to trust me in my role as the

researcher. I gathered information from the participants based on their answers to the

interview questions.

Measures for Ethical Protection of Participants

As the researcher I assured the participants that all information that they provide

would be confidential. I also assured the participants that no names would be used for

this study. I abided by the ethical standards of Walden University's Institution Review

Board (IRB) and sought approval of the board to conduct the study. Specifically, I

obtained written consent of participants in the study. The participants were asked to

consent to having their interview audio taped. Each participant was assigned a number in

order to keep their information confidential. Participation in this study was voluntary and

the participants were able to decline to participate without any repercussions from the participating college. I will store the data for 5 years before it is destroyed.

Data Collection

There were two methods of data collection for this study: document collection and interviews. "Case study researchis a form of qualitative research that endeavors to discover meaning, to investigate processes, and to gain insight into and in-depth understanding of an individual, group, or situation" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 269). I used a constructivist approach to collecting data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the constructivist approach to research requires that multiple perspectives be gathered about a central phenomenon from multiple people in at least three different roles.

Interviews

I used semi-structured interviews, which are an expedient way to explore the process of a particular event or experience (see Creswell, 2009). Each participant was interviewed for approximately 1 hour at a mutually agreed upon private location outside of instructional time. The participants were asked open-ended interview questions. These questions were consistent with the constructivist approach to data collection (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). According to Bogdan and Bilken (2007), good interviews produce rich data filled with the words that reveal the respondents' perspectives. The probes suggested by Bogdan and Bilken are included in Appendix B along with the interview questions.

Data was collected during the interview in the form of notes recorded by me and an audio recording that I transcribed. I used a reflective journal to keep track of the data

and record emerging understandings. Hard copy data is kept in a locked file cabinet at

my home, and electronic data is kept on my personal, password-protected computer.

Interview questions are listed in Appendix B.

Documents

In alignment with the second research questions, data collection was in the form

of documentation. The documents were collected from the participants related to their

interview responses related to student retention. The documents collected were notes

from each interview and a reflective journal.

Role of the Researcher

I conducted this research at a local community college that I have no personal

affiliation with either currently or in the past. Because I have no past relationship with the

participants, I realized I needed to build trust with these participants in order for them to

be willing to participate. Although this topic is of interest to me, I endeavored to conduct

all aspects of the study in a professional, unbiased way. I had no supervision over the

participants in the study. There were no issues regarding a conflict of interest with regard

to the collection of data. I have no involvement with any community college at this time.

Data Analysis

Two methods of data analysis were used. According to Hatch (2002), inductive

analysis is appropriate for interviews and content analysis is appropriate for documents.

No software was used in the analysis of the data. I analyzed the data until the same ideas

keep repeating from interview to interview by people in three different groups. When no

new themes emerged from the data from the three groups I determined saturation of

themes. Analysis of the data began and was done alongside data collection in order that I

could determine when saturation of themes and redundancy of ideas was reached

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985) Lincoln and Guba (1986) viewed the social world (as opposed to

the physical world) as socially, politically, and psychologically constructed, as are human

understandings and explanations of the physical world.

Inductive Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using inductive analysis. Hatch (2002) explained

that this method of data analysis is appropriate for analyzing interview data. Qualitative

research is an inductive approach to doing research. Therefore, inductive analysis is an

appropriate framework for analysis of data obtained using a qualitative approach. In

accordance with Hatch's approach to qualitative data analysis the steps used in inductive

analysis were: (a) read data and identify frames of analysis, (b) create domains, (c)

identify salient domains, (d) reread data, (e) complete an analysis within domains, and (f)

search for themes.

The first step of analyzing interview data was to read the data and identify frames

of analysis. After reading the data collected, the data were then coded in order to provide

each participant with a particular code for each interview. These frames were developed

based on the answers to the interview questions by the participants. Then I created

domains based on the interview responses. These domains reflected the relationship that

was represented in the data. After the interviews were conducted I compiled the data and

used the data to identify salient domains. These salient domains were coded and put into

an outline that I could refer back to if needed. I reread the data in order to be confident

that the data supported the domains. The next step was to complete an analysis within domains. During this process I looked for subcategories and made sure that no new domains developed. In the final step I developed themes. In order to develop these themes, I searched the domains for comparisons and determined how all the domains fit together to develop the themes.

Content Analysis

Document data were analyzed using content analysis (Patton 2015). Content analysis was used to analyze text from documents collected. Content analysis was used as an attempt to identify consistencies and meaning. Documents were collected, and content analyzed to explore recurring themes related to understanding the underlying meaning of the document data and how those data provided a deeper understanding of the interview data.

Evidence of Quality

To ensure the quality of this study, I used member checking and triangulation as described by Creswell (2012). In order to provide evidence of member checking, I asked the participants about the various aspects of the study such as if the themes were accurate and if the interpretations were fair. This process provided evidence of the trustworthiness and quality of the study. There was evidence of triangulation because there were multiple sources, namely, students, teachers, and retention staff. Also, there were multiple methods of data collection, namely interviews and documents. "Qualitative inquirers triangulate among different data sources to enhance the accuracy of the study" (Creswell, 2012, p. 259).

Procedures for Dealing with Discrepant Cases

I chose participants that would represent a variety of responses. I anticipated certain responses from certain participants based on their role in the study. One participant kept mentioning a particular instructor that they felt was harder on him than the other students and felt he was not treated fairly by this instructor. The other student participants did not mention issues about being treated unfairly by any of their instructors. The theme that an instructor treated a particular student unfairly will be reported as part of the findings under discrepant cases. Patton (2015) discussed disconfirming cases as "they are a source of rival interpretations as well as a way of placing boundaries around confirmed findings" (p. 239). These data are important to include in the findings in order that the findings are a complete and accurate representation of the perceptions of the participants about the topic of interest.

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Findings

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After analyzing the interview and document data, themes were developed. The themes are as follows:

1. Lack of socialization.

2. Cost of tuition is an issue for students to remain enrolled.

3. Lack of online options.

4. Students that are employed have a hard time finding scheduled classes that work around their employment schedule.

5. Student self-discipline.

6. Quality of faculty.

7. Institutional support for students.

8. High schools not preparing students well for college.

9. A two year degree is not marketable in today's work force.

10. Pressure from parents for a student to attend college.

The first theme developed was the lack of socialization for students. The responses from former students indicated that the lack of social opportunities at the local college resulted in low retention rates. One student interviewed responded "There is nothing for us to do here. We drive to class and drive home after class. There is no opportunity to meet new people and hang out with them." Another student responded that "there is nowhere to hang out to meet new people". Based on these statements, the theme for lack of socialization emerged.

Cost of tuition is another reason for students to withdraw from the college. One student responded during the interview "I can't afford tuition". Another student stated that they don't want to be saddled with student loans for "the rest of my life". Even one of the teachers agreed that tuition is a problem stating, "tuition gets higher and higher every year". Kelly (2016) stated when tuition goes up, policy makers increase federal aid to bring out-of-pocket costs down again, only to see those resources gobbled up by future tuition increase. This reflects how the findings reflect the research. The theme of cost of tuition was developed from these interview responses and the current research.

Another theme that emerged from the study indicated that there are not enough online options. One teacher stated that "we are lacking in keeping up with other colleges by not offering many online classes". A student commented that "online classes would

give me an opportunity to go to class when I have time and not when I am told to go".
Huntington-Klein, Cowan and Goldhaber (2017) stated that some new students will take
online courses that never would have taken face-to-face courses. This reflects how the
research relates to the findings. These interviews showed the need for more online class
options for the students.

Students that are employed feel that they cannot find classes that are offered on a
flexible schedule for those that have to work. One student stated that they work full time
during the day and "I would love to go to school at night, but the classes I want are not
offered then". Another student stated, "I want to finish my degree, but I have to work full
time to support my family". One administrator interviewed responded "I have talked
with many students after they have left school and most of them have a hard time fitting
classes into their work schedule. And those students need to work to earn money to help
support their families". This theme showed that class scheduling needed to adjust to
offer more evening or weekend classes for the working students.

Student self-discipline was a theme that emerged from administrators and
teachers. One administrator responded, "Many students lack self-discipline right out of
high school." She felt some students were too immature and "coddled" to be successful
in college. Another faculty member stated, "Some students do not understand how to
keep themselves on track their first semester of college. They need to be more
disciplined". This theme was developed based on the impressions from staff at the
college.

The quality of faculty was another theme that developed during the interviews. A few of the students mentioned that the teachers were not "very good". One student stated, "I don't think my teacher knows what they are talking about". The student explained that the teacher would not give a very good answer when students asked questions. "I never felt like he really knew the material he was teaching". Based on the responses of the students interviewed, this theme developed, and quality of faculty was a concern.

Institutional support was another issue that a few students had with the college. Two students mentioned that their advisor they were assigned to was not very helpful. "I went to her to ask about taking certain gen ed courses and she didn't know the courses were even gen eds". Another student stated "I could never get a hold of my advisor. Every time I went to her office she was out. I called and left messages and she never called me back". This is an important part of the college. Students need advisors to help them schedule the correct classes for their degree.

Answers from the participating instructors indicated that some high schools are not preparing students for college instruction. One of the teachers interviewed stated that "some high schools are not preparing students well enough for the college experience and that is why so many students quit". Another instructor stated, "Some high schools seem to think senior year is play time and they let students skate by without having to work hard". This is an important point to be discussed between the local high schools and the college staff. They need to work together to correct this issue.

Based on responses from some students and an administrator, a two year associates degree is not enough in today's world. An administrator stated, "a two year degree is equivalent to a high school diploma ten years ago". One student commented "what is the point of an associate degree? It don't get you nowhere in life". Even a teacher interviewed stated that "students need to go on to get their bachelor's degree if they want to get a decent job". The importance of this theme is to make sure that students are prepared to move on to another institution of higher learning.

The responses from administrators indicated that many students enroll in college because of pressure from a parent. One administrator said, "many students tell me they are just here because their parents made them". One student said, "I only enrolled so my parents would get off my ass, about going to college". This theme is important because if students do not want to go to college it is unlikely that they will finish their degree program.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to improve the retention rates at a local community college. The participant sample for the data collection was made up of two teachers, two administrators, and six students that have withdrawn from the college as participants for this study. In this way data collected represented what the typical student, administrator, and teacher experienced regarding student retention. I conducted interviews with each of the participants. I summarized the findings of the research questions by developing ten themes as a result of participant answers to the interview questions.

There were two research questions to be answered:

RQ1- How do administrators, students, and teachers at a local community college document the problem of student retention? This research question is posed to align with the collection of documentary data. Based on the interview notes and findings of the study, I was able to develop the themes.

The ten themes identified earlier reflect participant perceptions regarding the issue of student retention. One administrator stated that "there are not a lot of opportunities for students to socialize at the community college". This participant also stated, "We keep records of students that return for the next semester but not much is documented about why students do not return. I personally would like to know the other reasons why students do not return to the college". Another administrator interviewed stated, "rising tuition is another reason for students to withdraw from the college. Many students cannot afford to continue with their education if they have other financial responsibilities".

When interviewing faculty, one professor stated, "it is hard to get students to complete their degrees when they have to drive and give up so much time to be here. I would like to see how many students quit because of the time it takes for them to drive back and forth each day. As teachers we have no idea if students return the next semester or not". Another faculty member replied, "I wish we offered more online classes for students. I believe that this would help with retention issues."

A student interviewed stated, "I don't think they care if we are here or not. They just want the money". Another student reported that they were sick and in the hospital for two weeks and never received a call from the school asking about them. "I guess they don't care if I am here or not. I already paid for my classes".

The findings from the interviews align with this research question. According to Tinto (2006), many students encountered issues that hindered their retention in their first year of college. Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, & Ray (2006) stated that high schools did not prepare students well for college-level work. The themes were developed based on the research reviewed and the results of the interviews from the participants. Both aligned to show that necessary retention efforts need to be developed in order to increase community college retention at the local community college.

RQ2- How do administrators, students, and teachers at a local community college describe the problem of student retention? While conducting this study, I respected the participants' confidentiality and allowed for the participants to be open and honest about the interview questions. Based on the participant's answers during the interview I was able to develop the ten themes.

One former student discussed the lack of online options as a problem, "I have to work so I can't sign up for classes on campus. I need to do online, so I can do it when I have time. I wish there were more online class options". Another former student addressed the quality of faculty, "I don't think my instructor knew the material he was teaching. Whenever a question was asked he couldn't answer. Maybe if they had decent teachers that knew the material I would be willing to stay in school". Another former student said, "I only signed up for classes, so my parents would quit bitching at me to go to college".

More than one former student interviewed expressed the problem was the school didn't seem to care if they attended the school or not. One student stated, "My instructor

didn't take attendance so if the school doesn't care if I am here why should I". Another student said, "It is so different from high school. If I don't want to go to class no one cares. I show up when there is a test or when I feel like it. The school doesn't care if I show or not. It's not like they are gonna call my parents". Another student interviewed said, "Sometimes I get called in to work when I am supposed to have class. I go to work and blow off the class because no one cares if I am there or not".

During an interview with a faculty member, he stated "Many high schools don't teach students what to expect in college. Most students are underprepared when they first start here". Another faculty member blamed the academic advising department on low retention rates. She stated "I don't think the advisors know what they are doing. They never prepare the students for what to expect when they get here. If they did students wouldn't drop out".

Two administrators were interviewed for this study. Both seemed to agree that there are very little consequences if students skip class. One administrator said, "I had a former student tell me they quit going to class after the first two weeks. He showed up for the final and still managed to pass the class. I find that a bit disturbing on the part of the school and the teacher". Another administrator stated, "I have heard students talk about how they only show up to class when there is a test. If an instructor allows that to happen I feel it is a waste of time and money".

Based on the findings from the interviews, developing of themes, and the research questions the conceptual framework constructivist orientation was used. As one of the themes developed was lack of socialization, Rovai, Wighting, and Liu (2005) stated that a

lower sense of belonging or connectedness can lead to higher dropout rates. These perspectives along with the research show how student retention is an important issue to be studied and improved. They triangulate to capture and report multiple perspectives rather than seek a singular truth. Interviewing ten participants allowed for ten different perspectives to be offered. These interviews were then used to develop the ten themes for the project discussed earlier.

This section explored faculty, former students, and administrator's beliefs on improving student retention at a local community college. The impact of student retention has been an issue for colleges and universities for many years. Based on the research and themes in this section, I believe that both explain a need to explore further community college retention. This section of the study addresses the rationale for conducting a qualitative research study and the procedures that this researcher used in conducting interviews. A breakdown of the data that emerged from the themes was also presented. Section 3 provides a description of the proposed project.

This project study was appropriate for both research questions and themes because student retention is important for the local community college. Faculty and staff need to understand why students are not completing their degree programs. The themes were developed based on the interviews and show a need for the local community college to address the retention rate.

A professional development training was developed to present to staff and faculty. This professional development training was designed to be a three day presentation to faculty, staff, and administrators. This presentation will present findings from my study

and will focus on what can be done to improve student retention. A Power Point

presentation was developed to guide the college personnel in ways to improve the

retention rate. The Power Point consists of current literature on the topic of improving

student retention rates, results from the study, and resources from retention experts.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

This section includes a description of the designed project, goals, objectives, and rationale of the project development and how this project will address social change. I include a review of literature, a description of the project implementation process, and an explanation of how this project will be evaluated. I also discuss the implications of the project. Documents are included in the appendices to provide readers a better understanding the project design and intentions.

Description and Goals

Based on the results of this research study, I determined that the faculty and staff at the local community college could increase their knowledge on retaining more students by conducting a 3 day professional development training. In addition, results of this study indicated that faculty and staff members, and former students felt there is a need to explore and improve retention rates. My analysis of the interview data revealed participants' desire to have a professional development training to better understand the reasons why retention rates are so low. In summary, members of the faculty and staff believed there is a need for a training that allows for ways to implement improvement in student retention. Based on the results from former students interviewed, student retention was an important issue.

The proposed project is a 3-day professional development program for faculty and staff at the local community college. The principal goal of this professional development project is to inform the faculty and staff about improvements they can make to retain

more students. This project will address the problem, detailed in Section 1, of improving

retention rates at the local community college. The proposed professional development

program is the most effective tool because it allows for interaction among colleagues,

time for discussion, and a relaxed environment to retain the knowledge presented.

I developed the content for this professional development training from the results

of the research study and the literature that I reviewed. Also, based on the numerous

professional development trainings that I have attended, I felt that the information

presented must be based on interview results, and that the voices of the former students

need to be heard. The interview data indicated that there is a need to understand how

improving retention rates will result in more students completing their college degrees.

This professional development training will address what can be done to improve student

retention.

The program agenda for this training workshop involves discussion as well as

activities that are designed to benefit attendees and give them the opportunity to learn,

understand, and reflect on the importance of student retention (see Appendix A). This

training will give the participants the opportunity to not only learn, but also share ideas

with each other. The 3-day training addresses all 10 themes that were developed from the

interviews with participants: lack of socialization, cost of tuition, lack of online options,

conflict in scheduling around employment, student self-discipline, quality of faculty,

institutional support for students, high schools not preparing students for college, degree

being marketable in the work force, and pressure from parents for a student to go to

college. The training format will consist of group discussions, group activities, social

interactions, small break-out groups, and time for questions each day. According to Eun (2008), effective professional development engages participants by offering multiple formats to accommodate a variety of learners.

The primary goal of this professional development project is to educate the faculty, staff, and administrators about retaining students. Specific outcomes resulting from the 3-day professional development program are:

- Understand the needs of the students.

- Listen to the concerns of the student.

- Learn how to build a rapport with students.

- Learn how to encourage and not discourage students.

The achievement of these outcomes may lead to improved retention rates at the local community college.

Rationale

Retaining students is the primary area of focus for improvement at the local community college. I addressed the problem described in Section 1 by developing a professional development training designed to focus on student retention. Through the 3-day professional development training, faculty and staff members will learn important ways to improve student retention and therefore retain more students at the local community college.

The findings from the data analysis in Section 2 revealed the need for more training to assist the faculty and staff in ways they can work to improve retention. The research participants indicated the need for more training to achieve student satisfaction,

retention, and ultimately improved graduation rates. I determined that professional development training would be the best option to address this issue.

Professional development training is a method of solving the problem of increasing student retention. Mangope (2015) stated that continuing professional development of teachers is crucial for improving quality of educational services. According to Erickson, Noonan, Brussow, and Carter (2016), professional development is essential to teachers' positive impact on students. A study conducted by Nafukho, Alfred, Chakraborty, Johnson, and Cherrstrom (2017) showed that combined training efficiency and training relevance enabled training participants to acquire knowledge and skills and had a significant positive influence in the work place.

This professional development training provides faculty and staff members with tools that will help them increase student retention. The training received by the participants will benefit them in listening, understanding, and relating to students. Desimone (2011) stated that educators prefer effective professional development opportunities that can be put into practice.

Review of Literature

I conducted this review of literature to understand how best to design this professional development training on community college retention. In the following sections of this literature review, I address socialization, tuition costs, online options, student employment, student self-discipline, quality of faculty, institutional support, lack of college preparation of high school students, 2-year degree value, and parental pressure for students to attend college. These sections are linked to significant points of the

project's design. The importance of community college retention was reviewed in Section 1. To gather materials for this review, I searched the ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE, and Educational Research Complete databases for the following terms: *college retention, retention rates, college programs,* and *graduation rate.* In total I reviewed 48 resources.

This professional development training must meet the needs of the intended audience of faculty and staff members at the community college. I designed this professional development training to enhance the skills of the participants in retaining students. The primary objective of this training is to engage the faculty and staff in ways to improve retention at the local community college. This professional development project provides the structure for successful professional development training and allows for the chance to determine the effectiveness of the program through participant feedback and suggestions.

Lack of Socialization

Brock and LeBlanc (2005) stated that community colleges are attended largely by commuter students, many of whom contend with the competing demand of work, family obligations, and school. "Consequently, for many students the only time they are on campus is when they attend class, limiting opportunities for integration" (Weiss, Visher, Weissman, & Wathington, 2015, p. 521). This leaves little time for socialization among students. Gray, Vital, Easton, and Ellison (2013) believed that students who can socially adjust to college life have better retention at the schools.

Social media plays an important role in most college students' worlds today. Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook are all ways to communicate without ever having to

speak to a person. Many college students do not regularly interact face-to-face with many people. Nalborn et al. (2016) explored the use of social networking websites in creating learning communities on campus. Results indicated that Facebook led to small, but significant changes in students' desire to work with others, adjustment to college, and satisfaction with their institutions. A study conducted by Gray et al. (2013) showed that a relationship between students' use of Facebook and engagement with classmates resulted in social adjustment for the students.

Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, and Canche (2015) acknowledged that for the younger generation social media exchanges are the primary source of communication, social engagement, information seeking, and possibly, a control component of their identity and community-building. They went on to explain that post-secondary instructors need to explore technology to engage students. Social media technology (SMT) should be another tool that educators consider when trying to teach a younger generation.

Cost of Tuition

There is no secret that attending college is expensive. Many college students acquire a great amount of college debt. According to Ordonez (2014), the cost of rising tuition and student debt is starting to reach impossible levels. Even with the cost increasing, many people feel that a college degree is important to obtain if they want a better paying job. Storm and Storm (2004) stated that the U.S. college population will increase from 13 million to 21 million between 2003-2015. Kane (2015) stated that this increase, along with increasing tuition, has caused an increase in the financial burden on

students. According to Sages, Britt, and Cumbie (2013), cost of tuition is cited as the major reason students withdraw from college.

How are Americans supposed to afford attending college? Student loans and financial aid are the answers for most students. Fifty-Eight percent of U.S. college students take out loans to help pay for tuition and fees. According to the *Wall Street Journal,* their average debt load upon graduation is $23,166 and rising (*The Wall Street Journal,* 2009). According to Best and Keppo (2014), rising tuition rates make it difficult for families to pay for a college education. Students may qualify for financial aid to help pay tuition. According to McKinney and Novak (2013), completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is correlated with persistence among community college students, especially those who attend part-time. High tuition prices result in student loans with high levels of debt.

Online Options

Students at the local community college were unhappy with the lack of opportunity to enroll in online classes. Previous students interviewed stated that they would sign up for online classes to work at their own pace and when they have time. A study conducted by Xu and Jaggers (2013) explained that online learning is an important strategy to improve access and flexibility in higher education. Adults with many responsibilities outside of college, find it convenient to take classes online. Online learning increases workforce development. Institutions see the value of online classes to offer additional courses to their students.

Another idea for alternative traditional classroom education is competency-based education (CBE). According to Ordonez (2014), under CBE students will be assessed on what they know rather than how much time they will spend seated in a classroom. Competency, rather than credit, is now being given serious consideration by federal and state agencies. Shapiro (2014), states that competency models will appeal to students who want to save time and money by getting credit applied to past experiences.

Student Employment

As stated earlier, community college students must balance commuting to classes, family obligations, and employment all while trying to earn a college degree. In some cases, students are not able to manage all of these at the same time. Cubberley (2015) stated that far too many students are choosing work over school and unfortunately, far too often, withdraw altogether because work gets in the way.

According to Guo (2017), the Chinese higher education system has become the largest in the world, with more than 41.4 million students in over 2,800 institutions in the year 2015. His study revealed that even in China 63% of undergraduate students work while attending college.

Student Self-Discipline

Gaytan (2016) conducted a study that revealed student self-discipline was an important factor when discussing dropout rates, according to faculty that were interviewed. However, according to student participants, student self-discipline was not one of the top five factors affecting retention. This contrast in perception between the faculty and the students may help explain retention problems.

Another study conducted by Gaytan (2013) asked 15 experts what they would identify as critical factors affecting student retention. Expert panelists rated student self-discipline as the number one factor affecting student retention. Based on the study the top three factors that affect student retention were student-self-discipline, quality of faculty and student interaction, and institutional support to students.

Quality of Faculty

Shurden, Santandreu, and Shurden (2016) collected 112 surveys from six upper level business classes from a small southeastern university. The data supported that quality of faculty has a positive effect on student satisfaction. Increasing interaction between faculty and students while improving quality of the faculty is the key to keeping students satisfied, which could help in retaining students. A study conducted by Gaytan (2013) revealed that the second highest factor affecting retention was quality of faculty. To retain students, colleges and universities need to employ quality faculty. The instructors need to be knowledgeable about the subject, engage students, and communicate with the students. Instructors also need to provide enough and immediate feedback to the students. To save money, colleges employ adjunct instructors. A study conducted by Mueller, Mandernach, and Sanderson (2013) noted that adjuncts are often overburdened with extensive commuting and limited resources, which have an impact on instruction.

Institutional Support

According to a study of 29 college students conducted by Vianden (2016) to affect college retention, academic advisors should act as agents of student relationship

management by strengthening the connection between students and their institutions. Noel-Levitz (2014) reported that students consider academic advising of primary importance. Community college students that intend on transferring to a four year university need the proper advising, so they can transition smoothly.

Research conducted by Kai Jin, Abdelrahman, Gonzalez, and Miller (2015) stated that increasing student engagement in the educational process may lead to increased student retention. An enhanced mentoring and tutoring (EMT) program has shown positive impacts on students. The support from faculty members that teach those EMT courses is extremely important. Support from the faculty members is the most important tool.

Kiser and Hammer (2015) emphasized the importance of a provisionary program. This program was designed to help students that were denied admission to a four year university succeed at a community college until the students can transfer and be admitted to the four year university. Through using academic support and intrusive advising techniques, the Provisionary Program was able to impact students by providing specific, emotional, and academic support.

Lack of High Schools Not Preparing Students for College

Lu (1994) stated that most freshman students entering college are not prepared to be successful shifting from high school to college and may be underprepared to face the challenges of college. A study conducted by Raju and Schumacker (2014) proved that high school information along with first semester data can be extremely helpful in

predicting students at risk. Cholewa and Ramaswami (2015) stated that underprepared

college freshmen are of concern given their high risk for dropping out.

Many community college students commute to the college every day for classes.

A study conducted by Melendez (2016) discussed the adjustment to college of 162

college freshman attending an urban commuter institution. The findings revealed

significant Pearson correlations and multivariate analysis of variant main effects among

the variables.

Two Year Degree Value

According to Monahan and Attewell (2014) prior research has found that an

undergraduate's chances of completing a bachelor's degree are much lower if that student

begins at a community college. The study indicated a statistically significant BA

attainment gap of about 17 percentage points. Community college students that do

accumulate 60 credits or an associate degree only about 60% transfer to a 4- year college.

Crosta (2013) believed that very few community college students follow a

traditional fall-spring-fall spring pattern with full-time enrollment in all terms. Over a

six-year/18-term horizon, many students leave after their first contact with the college (28

percent). Only a handful completed certificates or transferred to a four year institution

(15 percent of the 28 percent).

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Project Description

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Potential Resources and Existing Supports

There are several resources needed for this professional development program to

be successful. Support is needed from the local community college administrators,

faculty, and staff to execute the program. Administrative support is crucial to this program being a successful. The facilitator must be educated about the community college and the need for improved retention. Any supplemental materials given to the participants must be succinct and easy to understand. The purpose of these materials is to offer the participants information that they can refer to as they work toward improving retention rates.

<p style="text-align: center;">**Potential Barriers**</p>

The first potential barrier towards implementation of the professional development is administrative support. Another potential barrier is participant participation. If the faculty, staff, and administration are apprehensive about the program, their participation or lack of participation could be a problem with the implementation. Therefore, the potential benefits of the program must be explained to the participants. Time may also be a barrier. The participants all have very different schedules. The solution to these potential barriers is to have a facilitator that is well educated on the importance of retaining the students at the local community college. The facilitator must reiterate to the participants that importance. It is vital that the facilitator develop a schedule that works for all participants.

<p style="text-align: center;">**Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**</p>

Implementation for this professional development project will begin with a proposal to the college board of trustees. Once the proposal is approved the professional development program would take place prior to the 2018-2019 school year. Times will be scheduled to conduct the professional development workshops. This professional

development project will take place incrementally over the course of three years to accommodate all faculty, staff, and administrators. At the end of the professional development, it is my hope that faculty, administrators, and staff at the college will improve the student retention rates.

Roles and Responsibilities

As the researcher for this professional development project, I will plan and assist with the program. Based on the answers given by the participants during the interviews, this project was developed. I will oversee coordinating dates, times, locations, materials, and any needed follow up for this project. However, it is important for the facilitator, administration, and participants to work together so that they will benefit from a successful program.

Project Evaluation Plan

According to Bell and Gilbert (1994), professional development is defined by strong professional knowledge, collegiality, and self-efficacy. This professional development program is designed to provide faculty, administrators, and staff at the local community college training and knowledge to improve student retention at the college. The goal of this professional development program would be to improve student retention. Once the faculty, staff, and administrators complete the professional development then retention should improve at the local community college.

I will use a goals-based evaluation plan. The goal of the project is to improve retention over time. That goal will be measured by measuring student retention over time. This plan is explained in detail in Appendix A.   This evaluation is needed to justify the

professional development as being effective in improving retention. The people that will be primarily interested in this evaluation will be the administrators of the college that are providing the funding for the professional development and the participants because that will motivate them to implement what they learned at the professional development. The overall evaluation goal will be to improve student retention over time at the local community college. This information will be provided to the administration for planning future professional development programs.

Key Stakeholders

The key stakeholders in this program will be the future and current students, faculty, staff, and administration of the local community college. The students will benefit from this program because the participants will be better trained and educated on retaining the students so that they will complete their program of study. The faculty, staff, and administration will gain a greater knowledge of ways to improve retention and therefore, retain students at that college.

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Project Implications

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The participants in this research study provided in-depth insight into the problem of low student retention rates at the local college. These research results and the proposed professional development program will offer the local community college community the needed information and resources to improve student retention. Students remaining at the college and completing their degrees will benefit the surrounding community by increasing educated adult that can be productive members of society.

This project study was designed to affect positive social change by improving retention rates at a local community college. Improved student retention has the impact to improve the local community but also the world. This project may benefit colleges all over the world. Colleges that retain their students, students that graduate with their college degree and the economy will benefit. The implications of a competitive, educated work force will be a benefit for every community.

Project Importance

This project study and professional development program will assist faculty, staff, and administration with improving student retention by providing a structure that they can use in practice. The results of the professional development program will address the problem of low student retention rates. Faculty, staff, and administrators will develop a stronger foundation for retaining students in a positive way. When this happens, positive social change will happen.

The professional development program will consist of techniques that will involve the participants to learn and interact with others that will provide many ways to improve student retention. By practicing these techniques and implementing the knowledge presented, the participants will have the foundation to improve student retention. It is my goal that the faculty, staff, and administrators fond the professional development training useful and will put these strategies into practice.

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Conclusion

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This project was developed to address the needs of student retention at a local community college. It was developed based on the results of participant interviews. The

participants provided their own thoughts and ideas about this project and from current

research on the topic of retention. This project study was designed with a local

community college; it could be adjusted and modified to fit the needs of many different

colleges all over the world. This project was developed to create social change at a local

level by improving student retention at a local community college. There is a possibility

that social change on a wider scale could be accomplished through best practices and

effective training. The result could be improved retention rates for colleges everywhere.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In this project study, I explored improving the student retention rates at a local community college. Specifically, I examined the opinions expressed in semi-structured interviews by previous students, current faculty members, and college administrators. I used the interview data and current research to design a professional development program intended to improve retention rates.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of this project study was the interview data from the participants showing there was a great need for professional development. The results of the interviews, along with the current research data, led me to design the professional development project. In general, the goal of professional training programs is to strengthen the overall effectiveness of employees, bringing them together as high performing teams, ensuring returns to stakeholders (Bates, 2004).

Another strength of this project is the potential to improve student retention by increase collaboration among the college's stakeholders. It is important to acknowledge that professional development can only be effective if it involves collaboration (Attard, 2012). Based on the results, themes emerged that I later used in the design of the professional development program. This professional development model that I developed could be adapted to fit both online and face-to-face trainings. Several studies showed the importance of professional development training programs designed to include engagement training to affect behavioral changes (O'Neal & Gebauer, 2006).

This professional development could also be adjusted slightly to present to any college in the nation to improve student retention rates. Colleges could adjust the protocol to fit their specific needs.

The limitations of this project study start with the difficulty in calculating whether the program participants will use the tools and strategies presented on improving retention. It will be up to the individual institution and the administration to use the tools presented to improve retention. The professional development has not been implemented, so other limitations could arise.

<div style="text-align: center;">Recommendations for Alternative Approaches</div>

Because of other possible limitations, the facilitator will have to use the information gathered from the project study to address and adjust as needed. I designed the project study with a particular college in mind, but it could very easily be adjusted to fit any other institution interested in improving student retention.

<div style="text-align: center;">Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change</div>

This project study taught me about scholarship. Scholarship is a process that in some cases can be quite lengthy. As I began to work through the process of development, implementation, and completion of my study I realized the value of the project. The process required interviewing participants and then trying to organize their information into usable data that I used to answer the research questions posed.

The development of this project began to coalesce during the data collection and research collection phases of this study. The amount of research on student retention was overwhelming. It was during this process that I learned how important my study would

be to not only the local community college, but also many other institutions across the country and around the world. I had to learn to believe in the data and literature from experts in the field. This allowed me to work through the developmental stages of the project. I also had to make sure that I did not interject my personal ideas or beliefs into the data process.

To ensure that the professional development project goals are met, I had to develop an evaluation plan. This step was very important. Without an evaluation plan, it would be difficult to determine if the project would be successful. A goal-based evaluation plan with a 5-year time frame allows for the appropriate amount of time to decide if the project is successful. This time frame will allow for training of all participants and for the new students entering the college to be tracked for completion.

The process of completing this doctoral study has given me the confidence to conduct research, review professional literature, and develop a professional development training to improve student retention. It is through this process that I developed leadership traits that will last a lifetime. In order to lead others a person must be open, honest, communicate well with others, trust results, be respectful, be patient, but also persistent.

During my doctoral journey I learned some important lessons. I learned how hard researchers work to share their knowledge about a topic with others. Without their hard work and dedications, I would not have gained the knowledge I received. I also gained research skills that proved to be very important to the development of my study. I also realized how important communication and collaboration is among researcher,

participants, and administrators. Another lesson I learned was that an educator never quits learning. As a scholar, I want to spend my life continuing to learn.

As a practitioner, I developed research skills such as searching and trying to learn how to navigate through hundreds of research databases. Because of that, I am a better researcher and can find topics more efficiently. I also had to analyze all the data that I found and decide with resources I thought were most beneficial to my cause.

This project study experience has helped me improve my approach to problems. I can say I am a more analytical thinker and a more confident researcher. This experience has helped me grow as a person and a professional. I have a greater respect for research and the work involved in conducting the research.

The project development process taught me that hard work and persistence pays off. The overwhelming number of sources reviewed in order to construct a scholarly literature review was a great lesson learned. Through interaction with the interview participants, I learned that their input was important when constructing the professional development project.

Also, I learned the importance of developing a professional development training that is focused on the participants. I developed the project so that all who participated will benefit from the training. The focus of the trainings is on improve retention rates. As the developer of the project, I wanted to ensure that all involved will feel that they can make a difference in improving their school's retention of students.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

This project study adds to scholarly knowledge of student retention. It is my desire that by developing this professional development program on increasing student retention, faculty members, administrators, and staff members will be equipped to address the issue. It is my goal to help colleges improve their retention rates.

Positive social change is achieved through the enhanced ways to improve student retention. When colleges improve retention rates, more students graduate. This has a positive impact on the American workforce. Increasing the number of college graduates will promote higher paying job positions.

This project study and the professional development training will take time to show an overall impact. The professional development training will need time for all participants to complete. Ultimately, this project should show that by following the professional development recommendations, student retention rates will increase. This project has allowed me to learn valuable research skills and how to implement these skills in designing a professional development training that will impact society.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Use

This case study involved data collected from interviews with faculty, staff, and former students. Along with this case study, I designed a professional development training program. This professional development model could be adjusted to the needs of any college or university in the nation. In short, this professional development project can result in positive social change for colleges and universities.

Future research about increasing student retention could address the needs of each institution of higher learning as individual entities. Each student attending an institution is unique. Studies could be conducted at every institution in the nation to help individually improve the retention rates. Another possibility would be to make the professional development training available online as well as in face-to-face settings.

Conclusion

This case study offers a positive contribution to the problem of low student retention rates. The use of a case study method of research allowed me to conduct one-on-one interviews in a private setting. That environment allowed for the participants to feel comfortable answering the interview questions and giving open and honest responses. Because of the participants responses, I was able to design the professional development training, which addressed issues that needed to be improved.

This doctoral process helped me gain strength and knowledge about research and how to improve social change. I also learned that, as an educator, it is my responsibility to make every effort to impact the world in a positive way. I truly believe that when more students graduate from college, there will be a positive impact on society. The economy will improve and therefore our great country will benefit.

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Appendix A: Project

This professional development project will define student retention, provide an overview of the importance of retention, and allow the participants to share ideas about improving student retention. The three day professional development training will examine all ten themes of student retention: lack of socialization, cost of tuition, lack of online options, better class scheduling options, student self-discipline, quality of faculty, institutional support, high school preparation, two year degree, and parental pressure to attend college.

Professional development participants will also learn to understand the needs of the students, listen to the concerns of the students, learn how to build a rapport with the students, and learn how to encourage students. It is important for participants to not only learn about improving student retention but how to engage and interact with the students.

Implementation for this professional development project will begin with a proposal to the college board of trustees. Once the proposal is approved the professional development program would take place prior to the 2018-2019 school year. Times will be scheduled to conduct the professional development workshops. This professional development project will take place incrementally over the course of three years in order to accommodate all faculty, staff, and administrators. At the conclusion of the professional development, it is my hope that faculty, administrators, and staff at the college will improve the student retention rates.

Program Outcomes and objectives:

The participants will:

- Understand the importance of student retention.

- Understand and apply techniques on how to improve retention rates.

- Learn how to interact with students in a manner that is respectful and understandable.

- Learn how to listen to the needs and concerns of the students.

    Responsibilities of the participants:

    Coordinator/Facilitator:

    - Deliver instruction using the resources from experts in the field of student retention

    - Promote and encourage engagement among participants

    - Encourage collaboration among participants

Attendees:

- Must be willing to actively participate in all professional development stages

- Contribute to discussions

- Remain open minded about techniques presented to improve retention rates

Practice and feedback:

- Immediate feedback/response during discussions

- Review

- Summarize

Evaluation:

- Goal-based measured over time

Agenda for Professional Development Training on Student Retention

Making Our College Better by Improving Student Retention

Day 1 Agenda

(9:00am) Welcome: Introductions and opening remarks

(9:30am) Activity: Small Group activity:

"What is your definition of student retention?" One member of

each group shares with large group.

(9:45am) Discuss: Group responses

(10:00am) Discuss: Goals of the training:

- Understand the importance of student retention.

- Understand and apply techniques on how to improve retention rates.

- Learn how to interact with students in a manner that is respectful and

understandable.

- Learn how to listen to the needs and concerns of the students.

(10:30am) Break

(10:45am) Brief Lecture: Why is retention important?

(11:00am) Brief discussion

(11:15am) Lecture: Theme 1: Lack of socialization, how can we improve this issue?

(11:45am) Brief discussion with question and answer segment

(12:00pm) Lunch

(1:15pm) Lecture: Theme 2: Why is college tuition so expensive?

(1:45pm) Brief Discussion

(2:00pm) Small Group Activity

      Discuss with your group:

- Why did you want to go to college?

(2:30pm) Group responses

(2:45pm) Break

(3:00pm) Summarize: Theme 1 and Theme 2

(3:30pm) Questions, remarks, and sharing of ideas from today's lecture

Day 2 Agenda

(9:00am) Welcome back and questions

(9:30am) Lecture Theme 3: Lack of online options

(10:00am) Small Group Activity

      Discuss with your group:

- Ways to improve online options at this college

(10:30am) Group responses

(11am) Lecture Theme 4: Class options for students that work full time

(11:30am) Small group activity (handout)

Make a schedule that fits into a 12 hour day

(12:00pm) Lunch Break

(1:00pm) Group responses

(1:30pm) Lecture Theme 5: Student self-discipline

(2:00pm) Large group discussion on Theme 5

(2:30pm) Break

(3:00pm) Lecture Theme 6: Quality of faculty

(3:45pm) Questions, remarks, and sharing of ideas from today's agenda

Day 3 Agenda

(9:00am) Welcome and opening remarks

(9:15am) Lecture Theme 7: Institutional support for students

(9:45am) Small group discussion

What can we do better?

(10:00am) Large group sharing

(10:30am) Break

(10:45am) Lecture Theme 8: High school preparation for students

(11:15am) Discussion

(11:30am) Lunch

(1:00pm) Lecture Theme 9: The actual worth of a two-year degree

(1:30pm) Discussion

(1:45pm) Break

(2:00pm) Lecture Theme 10: Pressure from parents for students to attend college

(2:30pm) Small group discussion

Role play. 1-2 people be the parent/s and 1 person be the high school senior.

Discuss your child attending college.

(3:00pm) Discussion in large group about role play activity

(3:30pm) Wrap up, question and answer session

Power Point Presentation

The retention rate for 2014-2015 at this community college was 66% for full time students. Solving this issue would increase the graduation rate at this college.

Small Group Activity:

What is your definition of student retention?

Retention is staying in school until completion of a degree (Hagedorn, 2006).

Why is retention important?

In order to graduate students successfully, ways to retain the students must be sought. Typically, these studies have included an intervention designed to compare groups based on such variables as socioeconomic status, grades, and individual program retention. These studies are valuable, making a case that retention is important. Yet what is missing is the voice of the students and educators describing the problem of low retention rates.

Theme 1

Lack of Socialization of students, how can we improve this issue?

Community colleges are attended largely by commuter students, many of whom contend with the competing demand of work, family obligations, and school.

Brock, T. & LeBlanc, A. (2005). *Promoting student success in community college and beyond: The opening doors demonstration.* New York, NY: MDRC.

Many college students do not interact face to face with many people on a regular basis. A study conducted by Nalborn, Kovach, Fish, McCoy, Jones, and Wright (2016) explored the use of social networking websites in creating learning communities on campus. Results indicated that Facebook led to a small, but significant change in students' desire to work with others, adjustment to college, and satisfaction with their institutions.

- Discussion
- Questions
- Comments

Theme 2
Why is college tuition so expensive?

There is no secret that attending college is expensive. Many college students acquire a great amount of college debt. According to Ordonez (2014) student debt has increased and the cost of college tuition has risen steadily to unattainable levels.

Ways to pay for college:
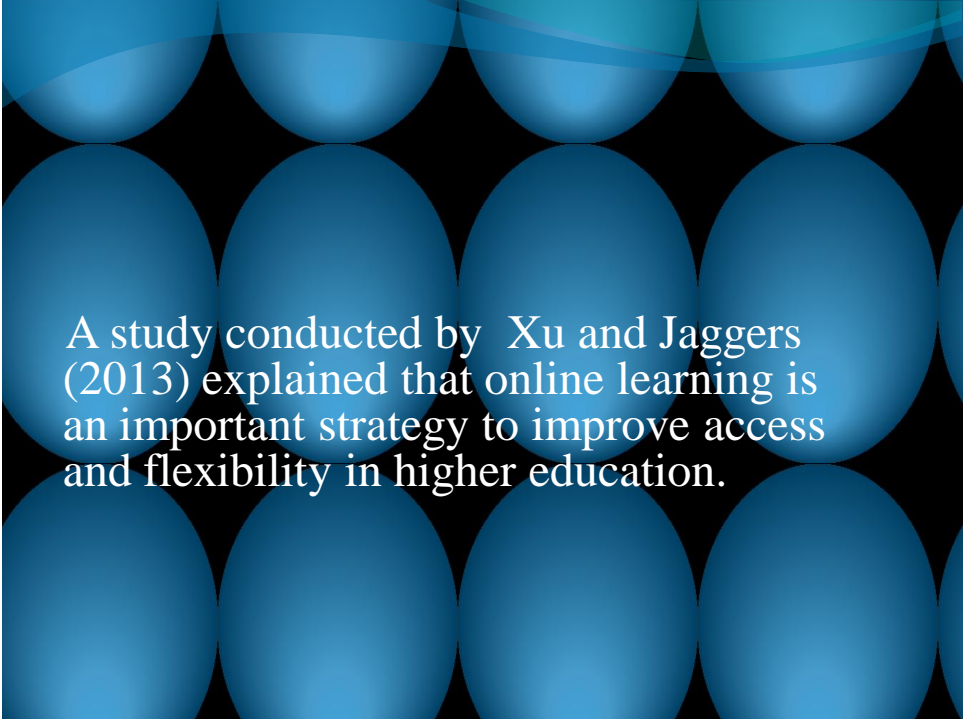- Scholarships
- Loans
- Grants
- Work Study

Theme 3
Lack of online options

A study conducted by Xu and Jaggers (2013) explained that online learning is an important strategy to improve access and flexibility in higher education.

- Adults with many responsibilities outside of college, find it convenient to take classes online. Online learning increases workforce development. Institutions see the value of online classes to offer additional courses to their students.

Theme 4:Class options for students working full-time

What are some class options for working students:
- Offer more online classes
- Offer more evening classes
- Offer more Saturday classes

Community college students must balance commuting to classes, family obligations, and employment all while trying to earn a college degree. In some cases students are not able to manage all of these at the same time.

- Cubberley (2015) stated that far too many students are choosing work over school and unfortunately, far too often, withdraw altogether because work gets in the way.
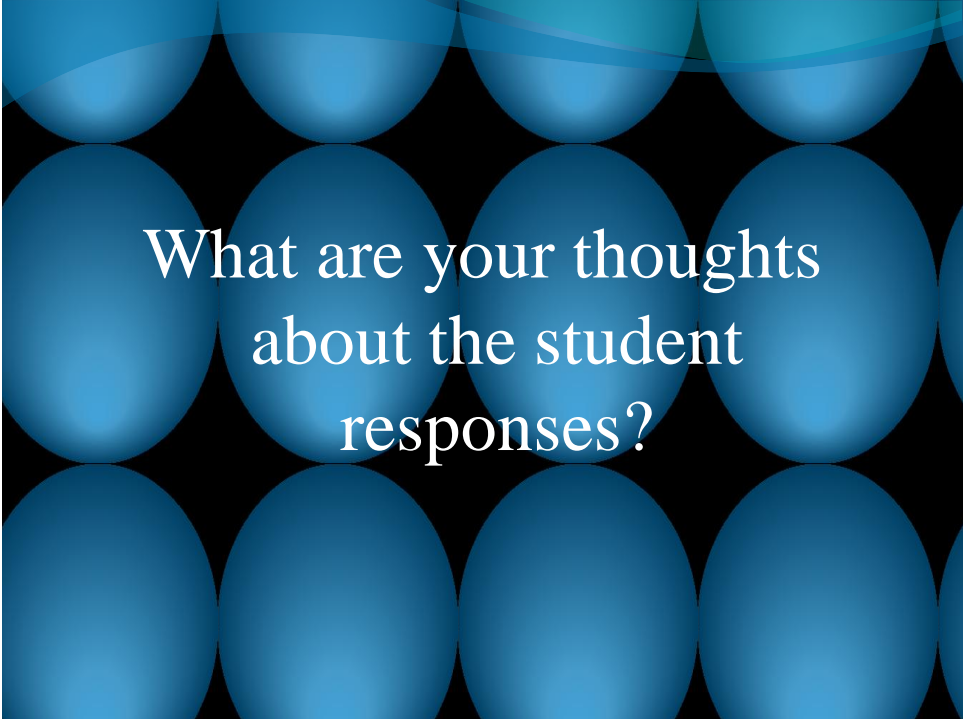
Theme 5: Student Self-Discipline

- Gaytan (2016) conducted a study that revealed that according to faculty the most important factor affecting student retention was student self-discipline.

- However, according to student participants, student self-discipline was not one of the top five factors affecting retention. This contrast in perception between the faculty and the students may help explain retention problems.

Reflection:

What are your thoughts about the study by Gaytan?

What are your thoughts about the student responses?

Theme 6: Quality of Faculty

Increasing interaction between faculty and
students while improving quality of the faculty
is the key to keeping students satisfied, which
could help in retaining students.

A study conducted by Gaytan (2013), revealed
that the second highest factor affecting
retention was quality of faculty.

- In order to retain students, colleges and universities
need to employ quality faculty. The instructors need
to be knowledgeable about the subject, engage
students, and communicate with the students.
Instructors also need to provide sufficient and
immediate feedback to the students.

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Any questions or comments?

Welcome back for day 3!

Any questions or comments from the previous two days presentation?

Theme 7: Institutional Support for Students

How can we help our students?

- Listen to their concerns
- Look for ways to engage students
- Make time for the students

Theme 8: High School Preparation

- What issues have you experienced with students not being prepared to move from high school to college?
- What are the main problems you have observed?
- What can we do to make the transition easier for students?

Theme 9: What is the worth of a two-year degree?

- Why should a student want to attend this college?
- What good will an associates degree be in the future?
- Where do students go from here?

Theme 10: Parental pressure for students to attend college

You be the parent!

- Tell your child why they need to go to college.
- Tell your child how tuition will get paid.
- Tell your child how great your college experience was.
- Tell your child how to deal with the pressure of classes.

Evaluation Tool

The evaluation tool for this professional development will be a goals-based evaluation plan based on improvement in retention over a five year time frame. Retention data will be obtained before the implementation of the professional development begins and it will compare retention data after the professional development has been completed.

The professional development will be done incrementally with the faculty, staff, and administrators. Within 3 years all participants will complete the professional development training. Retention data will be compared from before the professional development began and after the professional development is completed.

This evaluation is needed to justify the professional development as effective in improving student retention over time. The people primarily interested in this evaluation will be the administrators providing funding for this professional development and the participants to motivate them to implement the ideas from the project.

Calculating the percentage of students that enroll as new students and stay to complete their degree or program will give accurate data. The overall goal for this professional development is to improve retention. Measuring retention over a five year period will ensure that all participants will have completed the professional development and that most students complete their degree at the local community college in 2-3 years.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

The following is a list of interview questions that will be asked of the former student participants in the study:

1. What was your reason for leaving this community college?

2. Why do you think students leave this school before completing their degree program?

3. What do you think would improve student retention?

4. Do you have anything to add?

The following questions will be asked of the teachers that taught students that withdrew from the college:

1. How would you describe your experience with regard to college student retention?

2. Why do you think students leave this school before completing their degree program?

3. What do you think would improve student retention?

4. Do you have anything to add?

The following questions will be asked of the office of student retention staff members:

1. How would you describe your experience with regard to college student retention?

2. Why do you think students leave this school before completing their degree program?

3. What do you think would improve student retention?

4. Do you have anything to add?

As the interviewee responds to the open-ended questions that are posed, I will listen carefully for the opportunity to ask one or more of the following probes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007):

What do you mean?

I'm not sure that I am following you.

Would you please explain that?

What did you say then?

What were you thinking at that time?

Give me an example.

Tell me about it.

Take me through the experience. (p. 104)