

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF  
STUDENT SUCCESS  
IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAM  
FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS:  
A CASE STUDY

by

Karen Goodfellow Engelsen

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## ABSTRACT

Students come to community colleges with different levels of personal development, academic preparedness, and learning needs. Success programs that focus on the holistic development of nontraditional students provide an important pathway into college for students who might not otherwise attend or succeed. These programs face increasing accountability to demonstrate student learning outcomes. In assessing outcomes, are the successes experienced by these students fully captured with traditional student success measures?

Constituent groups may differ with regard to expected outcomes and conceptualizations of success. To examine this possibility, a community college program designed to promote goal attainment for at-risk, nontraditional re-entry students was chosen for a case study to determine what success means to the students who participate in the program, the instructional counselors who teach the course for the program, and the administrators who make resource allocation decisions that impact the viability of the program.

The case study was organized around four propositions that hypothesize how different participants construct their perceptions of success:

- 1) *Students who complete the program course will come to search for and define success in terms of finding their voice and developing cultural capital;*
- 2) *Instructors who teach the course will conceive of success outcomes in differing ways depending on the extent of their professionalization - locals will support a more traditional, academic oriented preparation whereas cosmopolitans and intermediates, to varying degrees, will embrace a more holistically developmental approach to the course;*

*3) Administrators will evaluate and allocate resources to the program primarily in terms of traditional institutional measures of student success – student credit production and student completion; and*

*3a) Perspectives of success based on students finding their voice, cultural capital, and holistic developmental outcomes are not considered nor valued independently by administrators in their decision-making.*

Knowing what is valued by those involved allows for strategically informed decisions about what to assess and how to present data that best supports the benefits of this program to the students, the college, and the community. The importance of aligning various participant perspectives of success for ultimate program efficiency and effectiveness is demonstrated.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The community college distinguishes itself from four-year institutions by the multiple missions it serves: to provide academic preparedness and general education for students who transfer to four-year institutions; to provide vocational training and workplace skills; and to provide learning opportunities for under-prepared, re-entry students, and lifelong learners who seek to develop their abilities through educational opportunities. These multiple missions meet the various needs of people in the community, benefiting individual learners while also providing a societal benefit.

In support of the overall mission of promoting educational opportunities and lifelong learning, community colleges have a long and proud tradition of providing access to all those in the community who desire to learn. This “open door” policy allows any motivated individual to seek the classes and services provided by their local community college, despite their history – academic, personal, or occupational. With the assistance of federal financial aid, developmental education, and flexible scheduling options, the community college is more available than other institutions of higher education to working students, the economically disadvantaged, and academically under-prepared, as evidenced by their growing numbers.

According to IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) data, in the period from 1992 – 2002, undergraduate enrollment grew by 11% to almost 15 million students. 42% of those students enrolled in community colleges. 35% of the community college students in 2003-2004 were  $\geq 30$  years old. U.S. Department of Education data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002) shows

that three-quarters of 1999-2000 undergraduates had at least one “nontraditional” characteristic (i.e., they delayed their enrollment in postsecondary education, attended part-time for at least part of the academic year, worked full-time while enrolled, were considered financially independent for purposes of determining financial aid eligibility, had dependents other than a spouse, were single parents, or did not have a high school diploma.) Further, two-thirds of those students who had four or more nontraditional characteristics were concentrated in public 2-year institutions. (U.S. Dept of Education, NPSAS, 2000).

Increasingly, nontraditional students are returning to school, primarily to community colleges, in order to gain the strategies, skills, and information necessary to enhance their educational experience and successfully compete in the employment market. While these students are usually motivated by a second chance opportunity, they are not always prepared for the reality of their endeavor. They often work, have families, and bring varying levels of academic preparedness and experience in a learning environment. In addition to academic issues, they often have issues around social and economic readiness for college (Hoyt, 1999; Valadez, 1993). These additional challenges put nontraditional students at risk of not succeeding.

In order to maximize the success of students who may be new to college, under-prepared academically, unprepared for or unfamiliar with the responsibilities of the college environment, or uncertain about their goals, many community colleges offer success programs targeting the holistic needs – emotional, behavioral, and cognitive – of specific student populations. These programs provide specialized services and/or create

learning communities that develop important support networks for participating students and help them gain a variety of skills and abilities that will enable them to succeed in the college environment. The growing number of these student success / student support programs is evidenced by the large number of workshops on developing programs, making programs work, and/or celebrating program success at regional and national professional conferences; as well as the frequency of related articles in professional journals such as *Community College Journal*, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *New Directions in Community Colleges*, and on-line, especially in ERIC (Education Resources Information Center).

In general, student success programs promote increased awareness and usage of existing support services on campus, under the assumption that identified students will fare better academically if they participate and take advantage of available campus resources. Students typically work closely with assigned counselors who provide a holistic approach – supporting the personal, career, and academic goals of the student, and addressing their emotional, behavioral, and cognitive developmental needs. Counseling faculty work with students one-on-one outside the classroom, in addition to teaching student success classes, providing both instructional learning opportunities and developmental guidance. Student development is often considered a soft service and developmental progress is not often, or easily, documented. The effect of these efforts on increased retention and graduation rates as well as in the holistic development of students must be acknowledged (Ousley, 2003).

This case study examines a program referred to as GO (Growth Opportunity – see a more comprehensive discussion of the program in Chapter Three). GO supports re-entry, nontraditional students, primarily women who are heads of household. 2005 U.S. Department of Education data demonstrates that in 1970 about one-third of the total number of undergraduate students in community colleges were female. By 2004 that figure had increased to just over half. In 1992/93, approximately 8% of undergraduates were single mothers; by 1999/00 the number had grown to 13% (U.S. Dept of Education, NPSAS, 2000). 2005 census bureau data indicates that of 77 million families in the United States, 28.3% were single-parent households. In GO (from a 2007 program report): 96% of the participants are women, 57% are single parents, and 70% are single, divorced or separated. The average age of students in this program is 36 years. This population has traditionally been female, but a growing need among re-entry men and single fathers is being observed.

GO is one of several different student success programs targeting different specific populations at Southwest Community College (SCC). (Fictional names are being used throughout this paper.) At SCC, the student success programs are either college sponsored (like GO), or part of the federally funded TRIO program (named for the three primary programs under this federally funded support umbrella). They exist to provide a solid foundation for students who enter college with challenges. The GO program addresses these broad needs: access for underrepresented students, support for re-entry students, and opportunity for single parents (mostly moms) who can benefit from education, but need help getting started.

Success programs to support nontraditional students exist, in one form or another, at all but three of the 23 community colleges in the state where this case is situated. Thirteen college campuses in the state have programs specifically targeting re-entry students. Each of these colleges structure the experience for re-entry students differently; four of the thirteen promoted targeted services for re-entry, nine have programs that incorporate out-of-class activities and community building experiences with resources and services. The program being studied is unique in its approach; there is a required course that serves as an extensive orientation to college. During the class, students are exposed to knowledge, skills and abilities that address their personal, career, and academic goals.

Despite the proliferation of student success programs, whether those sponsored by federal or state governments or those sponsored at individual college campuses, there are many issues and questions that are not fully addressed by current retention and student success research agendas. Individuals in the GO program who work directly with participating students speak about the growth they witness; the students are seen to grow in important academic and non-academic ways, and holistic student learning outcomes affecting personal growth as well as academic development are observed. This anecdotal evidence, however, is not easily measured or tracked. Performance-based funding realities focus the attention of the college to student credit production (full-time student equivalency – FTSE – numbers drive state allocation funding), persistence, and goal-completion. The non-academic growth important to the learning process is harder to assess and document.

The program being studied (SCC's GO) uses a holistic approach, addressing emotional, behavioral, and cognitive growth, and provides individual guidance as well as support through a community of learners. Student outcomes include gaining knowledge and developing skills to grow both as a student and as an individual. Expected benefits are both individual and societal, as they address the college mission of "developing our community through learning."

Lisa is a single mother and caretaker for her own mother. She vocalized a sentiment commonly heard from students in the program, "*It has been very difficult for me to get an education while taking care of my mother, who is ill. Without the coping and time management skills I learned through my (GO) class, I don't believe I would have made it. I'm graduating this semester and will be transferring to... get a degree in Social Services.*" The program provides an important first step; foundational skills within a supportive learning community that creates a successful initial experience for the students it serves – for many of them a first significant success. And yet, this program struggles to attract the level of funding necessary to ensure its robustness.

Minimal funding levels results in additional program resources (time/effort) expended working on developing new funding sources, which takes away from a focus on students. It also detracts from time spent developing, gathering, and analyzing student data necessary to demonstrate success. Institutional commitment is shown in other ways (e.g. staffing, presence at program events, fundraising support), but continued budgeted funding for the program seems to be in jeopardy every year. Like the students it serves, the program is continually on the edge. A secondary outcome of this project is to

understand why a program that produces positive outcomes for the students it serves, the college that supports it, and the community it is part of, doesn't have more financial support.

The need to develop additional resource streams is essential for small programs that serve high-need students at community colleges. To do so is especially difficult with limited resources and the challenge of demonstrating success for a growing population of students who don't always achieve their goals in the same ways or in the same time frame as traditional students. Some would ask the question, "Why bother?" However, by supporting these students in their efforts to gain the skills and abilities necessary for them to attain their goals, the college fulfills its societal mission of "developing community through learning," provides access to higher education and higher wages (Grubb, 2002; Kane & Rouse, 1999), and produces positive individual and societal impact (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2000; Geske & Cohn, 1998).

To obtain funding in fiscally tight times, it becomes even more necessary to demonstrate successful outcomes. In order to know what outcomes to measure and document, we need to be clear on what success means to those involved. In this case, I will be exploring the meaning of success for students, instructional counselors, and administrators involved with this program.

### **Accountability**

High expectations for outcomes, competition, accountability, and finite resources have put pressure on educational organizations to focus more on efficiency and effectiveness (Blimling, 1999). When colleges evaluate the effectiveness of support

programs, quantitative data is often used to represent costs and benefits (typically thought of in terms of traditional student outcomes such as assessment results, test scores, course completion, credit units produced, gpa, graduation/transfer rates) to indicate whether a program is successful. This approach does not necessarily provide a complete picture of the student experience, nor does it help us understand why the students do or do not succeed in the short-term or long-term. Some success indicators (gpa, graduation rates) are not appropriate for demonstrating student development, the completion of personal goals, or the achievement of holistic skills and abilities that can become the foundation for lifelong learning.

Outcome data, in and of itself, does not necessarily provide ‘absolute truth’ about our knowledge of a program’s impact on student learning. “We can’t be ‘positive’ about our claims of knowledge when studying the behavior and actions of humans” (Phillips & Barbules, 2000, in Creswell, 2003, p. 7). Simply examining traditional student outcome data does not really tell us much about whether our students are successful (or not), or how their learning experience is impacted. Nor does it necessarily indicate the needs of students that are *not* reflected in traditional measures of student success. Deil-Amen (2006) suggests “community colleges may be actively contributing to the social reproduction of inequality by avoiding instruction in the cultural competencies and social skills required in today’s workplace” (p. 397).

Research indicates that a broad range of student characteristics are important for success, not only in college but also in the workforce. Brookfield (1986) discusses five themes that support success for adult learners: skills, attitudes, feelings, behaviors, and

knowledge. Traditional measures of learning typically focus on skills and knowledge acquired. Yet we know from the abundance of literature on creating high-performing learning environments (Astin, 1985, 1991, 1993; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Kuh, et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 1997) that attitudes, feelings, and behaviors are vital to the process of meaning making. This supports the program focus on addressing holistic needs of the student learner. Moreover, similar factors are important in the workplace. Of the top ten skills and abilities highly desired by employers, as indicated in the yearly NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2007) Job Outlook survey, the majority are “soft skills;” personal qualities and interpersonal skills. Communication skills, work ethic, flexibility, honesty, motivation, teamwork and detail orientation would be considered soft skills.

**TABLE 1.1. Skills/Qualities Desired By Employers**

1. Communication Skills (verbal and written)	2. Honesty / Integrity
3. Interpersonal Skills (relates well to others)	4. Motivation / Initiative
5. Strong work ethic	6. Teamwork Skills (works well w/others)
7. Computer Skills	8. Analytical Skills
9. Flexibility / adaptability	10. Detail-oriented

*Source:* NACE Research: Job Outlook 2007

This begins to raise the question about what success outcomes really matter. Conceptualizations of success seem to vary. Traditional student outcomes have historically relied on testing as a means of ascertaining knowledge acquisition and measuring student “success.” Yet outcome indicators alone may not reflect all the ways that students acquire and demonstrate knowledge, particularly in the case of

nontraditional students. Considering the diversity of these students and what we know about various learning styles (Gardner, 1993; Kolb, 1984) we must acknowledge that students learn in a multitude of ways. Additional assessment methodologies, then, may be necessary to identify a variety of knowledge, skills, and abilities demonstrated by students at different stages of development.

Much of the comprehensive research conducted with college students focused on the experiences of the majority – those who form the bulk of a typical bell curve. With a mission to provide learning access to all, community colleges must be prepared to accommodate those students who represent the exceptions, the increasing number of students who account for the tails. In an environment that serves a diversity of students with a wider range of experiences and needs, we see a wider, flatter bell curve with a longer lower tail. In order to ensure that we provide effective learning experiences for a wider audience, it becomes necessary to identify additional outcome indicators.

### **Need for Assessments**

It is clear that diverse students with college readiness needs require a new way of approaching the college experience. The GO class offers students the opportunity to find their voice and gain the cultural capital necessary to reach their goals. Students who take advantage of this have a better chance of continuing and succeeding. Providing for their success has implication for assessment practices.

Assessments provide information to address immediate purpose and underlying value (Astin, 1991); in this case, to inform the student how they are progressing, and

determine the ultimate effectiveness of the program. Classroom feedback enhances student learning if feedback is informative and well timed. Classroom assessments help identify pre-established learning outcomes, and provide a means of continually checking with students to identify their specific learning needs.

Early intervention for students with academic difficulties can improve persistence and academic performance through counseling and other student support services (Grubb, 2003; Summers, 2003). Students who are struggling to find their voice and/or build their capital may benefit from the right feedback at a critical point in their development. In addition to informing students, assessments can provide educators with up-to-date information about the effectiveness of various educational practices. Using a systems outlook, a comprehensive assessment within a culture of inquiry can illustrate how this student development program supports learning.

Various assessment instruments have been created (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Borden & Zak Owens, 2001; Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1979) to measure learning, developmental outcomes, and the effect of the environment on student success. Classroom assessments (Angelo & Cross, 1993) have gained popularity as a way of taking multiple, quick “snapshots” of student academic progress, and are helpful in determining learning outcomes. In addition to classroom learning, non-instructional support activities (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 1993) have been shown to promote student success. There is much less research that documents how student development programs directly influence student outcomes (Astin, 1993; Love, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini,

1991). What role the GO program plays in the success of participating students can be better answered when we fully understand their conceptualization of success.

Effectively using assessment data develops a meaningful learning environment, and provides a tool that can be used to impact quality student learning and institutional effectiveness (O'Banion, 1997; Senge, 1990). The need to properly assess student outcomes becomes essential in determining meaningful student success and overall program effectiveness. This puts pressure on the programs themselves, for their very survival can be dependent on demonstrated success. Thus, with a call for increased accountability, the need to assess appropriate outcome indicators becomes vital for program continuance.

The success of students in the classroom, persistence from semester to semester, program outcomes, goal completion, graduation outcomes, and employment are different measures of success. Each represents a progression along a continuum of student success that ultimately gets documented as student credit production (funding outcomes) and graduation rates (institutional outcomes). What measures of success matter, and to whom they matter, seems to be a more important consideration as funding tightens, accountability increases, and assessing student-learning outcomes becomes the focus.

Ongoing assessment, from the beginning of the student's college experience, using multiple measures holds promise as a means to better understand and account for the progress of students gaining, demonstrating, and using new skills. This focus on the student also suggests that the broad experiences of our students, and the faculty and staff members who support them, are an important consideration if we want a complete picture

of how to identify the right indicators that will demonstrate efficient and effective student success programming. Knowing what skills are necessary for success, how they are gained, and what meaningful ways they can be measured depend on our understanding of what success means. Determining this from the perspective of those involved will meet the need to better understand, apply, and utilize assessment data to improve the learning process and overall student success.

O'Banion (1997) suggests that the entire organization can benefit from becoming a "learning institution" by applying assessment techniques to not only what we do (focus on student learning), but also on how we do it (efficiency, effectiveness of processes, and services provided). This outlook promotes ongoing assessment and continuous improvement as a way of insuring that the institution lives up to its role in the promotion of student success while serving its educational mission to the community.

The following excerpt from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* (2004, section 3.3) serves to guide institutional focus and highlights the necessity of documenting educational program effectiveness through assessment data: "The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidences of improvement based on analysis of those results."

I contend that "the institution" should be defined as students, faculty, and administration. They should all have a voice in how to best identify, measure and document student success. Further, I posit that student success is viewed differently

depending on the student's perception of their role in their own educational experience, and their knowledge of college processes. The different characteristics and needs of nontraditional, re-entry students require a variety of ways to assess success. Programs that support student success must be held accountable by the appropriate measures of success that best represent the needs of students in that specific program.

### **Purpose of the Study**

What does success mean?

In light of the changes in society and in our student body, there is growing evidence that the status quo is not fully serving our students' educational needs. The national rate of student departure varies by type of institution, but it is much higher than deemed acceptable. Data from 1999 (compiled from ACT Institutional Data File) indicates national dropout rates from freshman to sophomore year range from 28.6% (private, four year) to 47.5% (public, two-year) with an average of 32.6% across all Carnegie classifications of higher education institutions. Such findings make programs designed to increase retention and student success all the more important.

Community colleges are key points of access in the U.S. Higher Education system. Of the 11.5 million students who attended college in 2000, 45% attended community colleges. Community college attendance has increased from 5.5 million students in 1996 to over 6.5 million students in 2002 (NCES Enrollment Files).

What is important to note, however, is that community college students are three to four times more likely than students in four-year institutions to experience the factors

that put students most at risk of not attaining a degree. Those factors include: delayed entry into postsecondary education after high school, parents who have not attended college, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, dependent(s) (other than spouse) at home, single parenting, and lack of adequate academic preparation (AACC, 2000). The community college is responding to these changing demographics with a renewed focus on learning and student success. However, “unless we attend to the quality of students’ collegiate experiences once they matriculate and provide more effective learning environments for all students, full educational access and educational success will remain an unfulfilled dream for many who seek advanced degrees” (King, 1999).

Programs are created to provide accessible educational opportunities in support of the student success mission of the community college. The first Dean of Students in a U.S. college, Harvard’s LeBaron Russell Briggs promoted the interconnection of person and knowledge and focused on education of the whole student. He wrote that the main purpose of a college was “to establish character, and to make character more efficient through knowledge; to make moral character more efficient through mental discipline” (1904, p. 7). The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) acknowledges in *The Student Learning Imperative* (1994) that learning extends beyond academic, intellectual and cognitive development to include psychosocial development as well. However, the qualities of an educated citizen supported by student programs (such as leadership skills, interpersonal skills, psychosocial development, experiential learning) are not normally included in outcome indicators (Blimling, 1999).

Student success programs typically take a holistic approach to student development and learning; increasing a student's sense of self in order to support their ability to make meaning (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 1999a, 1999b; Chickering & Gamson, 1987), and recognizing that the way students construct knowledge is dependent on their personal assumptions and the way they view the world (Baxter Magolda, 1999b; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986/1997; King & Kitchner, 1994). "Self-definition plays a crucial role in complex learning" (Baxter Magolda, 2003, p. 231).

It was by studying the student perspective and listening to the student voice that Belenky et al. (1986/1997) and Baxter Magolda (1992) gained a different insight into the diverse ways students learn. Their research demonstrated that what was known about traditional four-year college male students was different for traditional four-year college female students. It is likely that differences may also exist for community college students in general, particularly for nontraditional students, and specifically for re-entry women students in community colleges.

By interviewing participants in a student success program and documenting their perspective I hope to 1) gain a different insight into nontraditional student expectations; 2) better understand the ways that students feel successful (or not) when they are transitioning into an educational environment; and 3) discover how that success is identified, encouraged, and evaluated in a community college. In order to best understand how to define student success for program participants, I consider the student, instructor, and administrator perspectives. Being able to identify, measure, document, and present

what demonstrates student success from their perspective becomes an important strategic activity necessary for resource allocation and ultimately, program success.

A guiding assumption central to this project is the idea that individuals construct meaning differently depending on their social identities. Just as students learn differently, and have varied educational experiences based on how they perceive themselves and how they acquire knowledge, so do instructors and administrators differ on their views of the education process based on their background and point of reference. Instructors likely approach their classrooms differently depending on their educational backgrounds and levels of professionalization. Administrators differ in their assumptions about how the college mission plays into economic and political considerations; and how these issues affect strategic planning, problem solving and decision-making. This case study will explore three different conceptualizations of success, which I propose are influenced by the social identities of the participants.

What prompts this research is learning what is important about this program, and how we fully capture the successes experienced by these students. I have attempted to do so by identifying different perspectives of what constitutes program success as identified by primary participants. Referencing the concept of student voice and levels of cultural capital, the social identities of faculty members, and administrative decision-making strategies, four propositions were developed to guide this inquiry. These propositions provide the basis for this investigation and analysis of participant perspectives in an effort to account for student success in community college programs.

## Propositions and Supporting Theory

**TABLE 1.2. Propositions**

*Proposition 1: Students who complete the program course will come to search for and define success in terms of finding their voice and developing cultural capital;*

*Proposition 2: Instructors who teach the course will conceive of success outcomes in differing ways depending on the extent of their professionalization - locals will support a more traditional, academic oriented preparation whereas cosmopolitans and intermediates, to varying degrees, will embrace a more holistically developmental approach to the course;*

*Proposition 3: Administrators will evaluate and allocate resources to the program primarily in terms of traditional institutional measures of student success – student credit production and student completion; and*

*Proposition 3a: Perspectives of success based on students finding their voice, gaining cultural capital, and holistic developmental outcomes are not considered nor valued independently by administrators in their decision-making.*

I propose that of the students who complete the program course, those who gained their voice and/or increased their level of cultural capital will speak of success in a more personal way. Several years of working with these students, and prevailing student success literature, have informed my assumption that in order for them to be successful learners and achieve their ultimate goals, they will need to develop a strong sense of self (voice) that will allow them to figure out what they believe, what their values are, and how to take responsibility for setting and achieving their goals. I expect the students who experienced this will talk about it.

I further propose that instructional counselors who are more involved with notions of holistic student development (“cosmopolitans”), due to their active connection to a larger professional network, encourage a kind of success more indicative of personal growth than their “local” colleagues. I would expect this because the cosmopolitans are,

by definition, more involved with professional associations (American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC), American College Personnel Administrators (ACPA), National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), etc.), and more aware of activities in their profession that focus on student development and the role of the student in their own successful learning outcomes (as discussed in journals and at conferences). In keeping up with the developments of innovative colleagues and practices of benchmarked institutions, the cosmopolitan instructors are more likely to know about and use learning strategies to develop voice in their students, and encourage the growth of cultural capital both in and out of the classroom.

Different notions of success are also likely to exist in the conference room where administrative decisions about resource allocation are made based on information that may or may not reflect what is valued by the students, the instructional counselors, or the institution. Instead of the mission-driven notion of student success providing the basis for decisions (“decision rationality”) I propose that resource-dependency results in decisions that reflect “political action rationality” based on the economics of student credit production, and goal completion rates.

These perspectives may differ regarding what matters about this program. Knowing what is important to the different participants (students, instructional counselors, administrators) better indicates what assessment practices - “the gathering of information concerning the functioning of students, staff, and institutions of higher education” (Astin, 1991, p. 2) - are needed. Assessment practices indicate student learning and development, and help measure knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary

for student success. Students benefit when they are given the tools needed to succeed and are involved in their own learning process. Instructors can tailor classroom experiences to the needs of students when they know what the students have learned and what they have not.

Assessing student learning outcomes and goal attainment can demonstrate both student and institutional successes. With so many ways to measure success, it is important to remember that the assessment indicators used by the administrators who make resource allocation decisions are significant, and must reflect classroom and student indicators of success. I will demonstrate the importance of aligning the student perspective, classroom/instructor perspective, and administrative perspective for ultimate positive effect. Examining data gathered in regard to the guiding propositions, and learning more about how each constituency conceptualizes success enables me to do so.

*Proposition 1: Students who complete the program course will come to search for and define success in terms of finding their voice and developing cultural capital.*

The first proposition speaks to the students' ability to engage in the learning process, necessary for successful course/program completion. If we accept the notion of student success as a large, purposeful, integrated plan to provide the kind of experiences and environments that are known to promote learning and persistence, as advocated by policymakers (Kazis, 2006), then we must look to the learning *process* as an indicator of success.

Early student development research helped us better understand how students successfully learn, but it was centered on white male students attending prestigious four-

year institutions (Chickering, 1969; Erickson, 1959/1980; Kohlberg, 1981, 1984; Perry, 1968). In response to these limitations, Baxter Magolda (1992), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986/1997), and Gilligan (1982/1993) interviewed a wider array of students, primarily women who attend prestigious four-year institutions, to establish additional perspectives that demonstrated the notion that women often learn differently than men. A different kind of learning typology was established, based on a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38) and the realization that “ways of knowing and the patterns within them are socially constructed” (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p. 190).

A construct central to the majority of research and theory on cognitive development, adult learning, and psychosocial growth is the concept of movement, or progression (Erikson, 1959/1980; King and Kitchener, 1994; Marcia, 1966; Perry, 1968). Students progress through these epigenetic stages of student development at different rates. Students start their educational endeavors at different levels which cannot be assessed the same. Traditional measures of student success rely heavily on learning outcome indicators. If we think about learning as a process, we need to approach the indicators we measure differently.

Supporting academic preparedness is the mission of the program being studied, so these students are typically in earlier stages of student development. Because of the “cognitive revolution” (Brown, 1994), an increased understanding of the learning process has resulted in changed beliefs about learning and learners; “learners came to be viewed as *active constructors*, rather than passive recipients of knowledge” (p. 6). Active

constructors are involved, and responsible for their own learning. Students who have been out of school, or who didn't succeed in school initially, may be more passive and need help learning how to be active constructors. A student without self-esteem, who doesn't have confidence in their own ability, typifies many GO students upon entry to college.

The concept of voice (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997) demonstrates the progression students make from an externally oriented reliance on information (no voice) to an internally motivated quest to gain understanding (voice). As a student develops their voice, they relate more personally to the learning process. This concept of voice will be used to illustrate a holistic aspect of growth necessary for successful learning. Voice represents self-determination and an internalized locus of control, concepts that are taught in the class. Students who are able to take and learn from these concepts are expected to have better success in the short-term (complete the class), and the long-term (ultimate goal completion).

The notion of cultural capital is rooted in Bourdieu's (1977, 1993) ideas about the role social class plays in education, and its impact on student achievement and aspirations. As used here, cultural capital refers to the skills and knowledge necessary for understanding and maneuvering through the higher education system, specifically, "1) assumptions about what students need to know about college-going behavior (school knowledge), 2) the significance of placement exams, 3) academic and career 'advising', and 4) attitudes about the world of work" (Valadez, 1996, p. 393). Cultural capital takes form as students learn about college processes: practicing key student behaviors like

meeting with an advisor, choosing and registering for classes, applying for financial aid, participating in the assessment process, utilizing campus resources, interacting with faculty and staff, and participating in career exploration and job readiness.

Concepts of an internally focused sense of meaning making and cultural capital that informs appropriate student behavior may be at the heart of what accounts for these students' success. When the students gain an increased understanding of self, the learning process, course/program requirements and how to use college resources, they have a better chance at succeeding in achieving their goal. These are lessons taught to the students during the program course. It is expected that the students will refer to these concepts in describing the success they aspire to.

*Proposition 2: Instructors who teach the course will conceive of success outcomes in differing ways depending on the extent of their professionalization - locals will support a more traditional, academic oriented preparation whereas cosmopolitans and intermediates, to varying degrees, will embrace a more holistically developmental approach to the course.*

The instructional perspective of success is explored in this second proposition. Using professional socialization theory, I examined the expectations and different perspectives of the program and classroom success outcomes from the view of instructional counselors who are “locals” vs. those considered “cosmopolitans” by Gouldner (1957) in respect to three latent social identity variables: “a) loyalty to the organization, b) commitment to professional skills and values, and c) reference group orientation” (p. 281).

I will operationalize these concepts by examining the relationship of these educational faculty members to the institution and to their colleagues, their ongoing

professional development, and their level of involvement with national professional organizations, attendance at national conferences, and degree to which they read professional journals and have kept up with prevailing thought in their profession. I expect these activities to inform the faculty members in different ways, depending on their professional frame of reference, source of their information, and level of their networking. I want to know if prescribed norms, latent influences, and systemic structures influenced the way instructors approach this class and how they view student outcomes. This examination is expected to establish a correlation of their professional social identity with their views of student success.

Given their ties to external professional organizations, ongoing professional development, awareness of current best practices in their field, and networking with colleagues from other institutions; I would expect the cosmopolitan instructional counselors to advocate a more holistic, student development approach to the course as reflected in current professional literature. Locals would be expected to promote the historic values of the program, support a traditional academic focus, and align their loyalties with campus colleagues. It might be expected, as Gouldner found, to observe significant involvement from those who are “intermediates” and have a balance of institutional and professional loyalties.

*Proposition 3: Administrators will evaluate and allocate resources to the program primarily in terms of traditional institutional measures of student success – student credit production and student completion.*

This proposition investigates the institutional “ideologies vs. realities” dilemma all too common for college administrators. Influenced by the concept of resource dependency theory, I employed Eckel’s (2002) observations of decision rules - that political action rationality (based on politics and economics) is more often a factor in decision-making than is decision rationality (doing the right thing as defined by the college mission statement and values.) Eckel demonstrates that leaders do not actually use stated criteria for decision-making, but rely on action rationality influenced by resource dependency. I expect that the success indicators used to make decisions involving support of the program will demonstrate how the administrators define success.

I explored patterns of how administrators assess the success of the program, and what criteria are used. I also considered the idea that administrators are more likely to consider traditional institutional outcome indicators (student credit production and goal completion), over outcomes that successfully demonstrate stated mission objectives. A resource dependency lens was used to illuminate the role of the funding source in affecting program decisions.

*Proposition 3a: Perspectives of success based on students finding their voice, gaining cultural capital, and holistic developmental outcomes are not considered nor valued independently by administrators in their decision-making.*

The last proposition reflects the previous three and asserts the likelihood that what represents success to the students and instructional counselors in this program is not considered as part of the decision-making process. The measurements currently used to determine program success may not accurately reflect what the students expect their

success to be, what they find it to be, or what the faculty expects from the learning process. I expect that the administrators will be looking for measurements of success that are more meaningful to the institution when making important decisions about the program.

As a counselor and instructor for this class, I have seen clearly the positive results of educationally purposeful academic and social experiences, and their ability to promote individual students to identify and succeed in attaining their academic goals. Incredible individual successes have been witnessed as a result of the GO program, whether or not they are documented or considered. The students are a diverse representation of learners who truly are taking advantage of a second chance, despite their challenges. My perspective, based on experience teaching this class for six semesters, is that each student has a different expectation based on their previous academic experiences and the extent to which they have found their voice.

It seems that throughout stages of the learning process, students have different goals, different needs, and will demonstrate different outcomes depending on their concept of knowledge and levels of cultural capital. These variations in student experiences necessitate a variety of benchmarks to identify learning outcomes and assess student success markers. If we are going to value the success of all learners, then we need to recognize different measures of success. To begin making this happen, a better understanding from those involved is needed so the student experience becomes the foundation from which we seek solutions. This study allowed me to check these beliefs,

explore these hypotheses, and include the participants' voice in understanding what success means to this program.

### **Strategy**

A program has been chosen as a case study to investigate different expectations of student success. "A qualitative case study design can provide investigators with an in-depth understanding of a...situation and it's meaning for those involved...in which understanding is expected to lead to improved practice" (Merriam, 1988). It is the understanding of "the meaning for those involved" that provides the basis for this case study.

This qualitative investigation examined expectations from the students' perspective, and defined classroom success from the faculty point-of-view. Identifying the success indicators expected from administrators provides additional data for contrast and comparison. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) allowed me to illuminate a phenomenon and provided meaningful understanding about this specific sample population by concentrating only on participants who are involved with this particular program.

As a single case, an institutionally bound study was created that explores factors uniquely specific to this program and it's participants. I do not plan to include data from other schools at this point. "Small sample size is not an issue, because case study 'analytic generation' is different than 'statistical generation' and doesn't depend on significant "n" to infer empirical data" (Yin, 2003, p. 33). In this case, the process is as

important as the end result. Being conscious of the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators with regard to program success allows for an honest appraisal, positive and negative, about intended and actual outcomes at this institution.

The study provided a rich body of evidence that suggested alternative perspectives when considering program efficiency and effectiveness, and student outcomes in support of success. By looking more closely at participant expectations and classroom experiences, our view about which student learning outcomes are valued in regard to this program is broadened. Reflecting the perspectives of different participants lent credibility to the process for an institution that claims to be student focused in support of success.

Interviews illuminated the thoughts of those who participated, which were examined from various angles. A constructive approach (Creswell, 2003) provided the opportunity to collect open-ended data that suggested emerging themes representing various participant perspectives. Interview data was coded and sorted by thematic strains. Contrasts and comparisons were made; how different student success outcomes were defined and valued by different constituencies was examined. Institutional data was used to illustrate how expectations and processes influence what is measured and considered in decision-making and resource allocation.

Ultimately, this study was driven by pragmatic concerns about creating a useful, successful program that creates lifelong learners. Overriding interests of this researcher were to a) focus on what the students, faculty, and administrators think about what success in this program means to them; b) investigate what outcomes are desired by

participants in this particular program; and c) gain insights in order to begin creating a comprehensive assessment methodology to evaluate and demonstrate (ongoing) student success outcomes for these nontraditional students participating in Growth Opportunity.

As a form of empirical social research, this case allowed for the exploration of various perspectives of a common phenomenon. Using an ethnographical approach and having a researcher who was a participant-observer provided an informed landscape upon which to focus critically. Although using a single case may at first appear to be a weakness of the strategy, “the single case can represent a significant contribution to knowledge and theory building...(in its ability to)...confirm, challenge, or extend the theory” (Yin, 2003, p. 40).

Choosing a single case to capture circumstances and conditions that might not otherwise be considered provided an opportunity to focus attention on appropriate student success outcomes for this program. The case study approach, in this instance, will likely serve as a useful teaching tool (Yin, 2003), providing insight that can be used for continuous improvement efforts and contribute to a ‘culture of evidence’ (McClenney, 2004) “which can ultimately foster significant transformation in approaches to students and their learning” (p. 20).

In the following chapter, I provide an overview of the literature that informs the propositions grounding this dissertation in order to provide better understanding of the concepts of voice, cultural capital, social identities, administrative decision-making, and resource dependency. I also explore the role of assessment as an accountability measure of success, and describe ways that assessment supports learning at the student, classroom,

and institutional levels. A discussion of how students learn illustrates the unique needs that predominately female, re-entry students in this program have, especially as they are often academically disadvantaged.

Chapter 3 includes an overview of the program being studied, and gives a sense of the class, the students, and the role of this program within the college. I also address the limitations of this project, as well as the significance of the study. Chapter 4 describes the methodology used, the case-study format, research design, data collection, and data analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 provide insight into the results of this study, significance of the outcomes, observations, implication for scholarship and practice, as well as questions for further study and lessons learned.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Student Success**

The purpose of this case study is to document different perspectives of success by participants – students, instructors, and administrators – in the program being studied.

These perspectives may or may not be similar to one another, and may or may not reflect what is considered regarding student success. In addition, nontraditional students at the beginning of their community college experience may or may not have the same expectations of success as traditional students at four-year universities.

Current literature is ripe with references to student success, at all educational levels. Federal law dictates that “No Child Shall be Left Behind” from successfully completing a K-12 education. Journal articles, conference seminars, and college efforts abound that speak to success in higher education. It seems, though, that student success means different things to different people. “Both individual students and institutions define success in relation to the extent to which they achieve their goals. As such, success is a ‘value laden term’” (Braxton, 2003, p. 228).

A search for a common definition of student success in higher education was not fruitful. Most institutions create their own statement of student success. These institutional definitions usually include both institutional outcomes (retention, persistence, completion) and student outcomes (completing personal goals, attaining individual potential). For most college campuses, student success is referred to as a process of activities to engage students in supportive services that propel them toward

meeting their goals. This concept of promoting student success typically focuses on first-year students.

Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot (2005) offer a conception of student success for first-year students that is very comprehensive: "...they succeed when they make progress toward developing academic and intellectual competence, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, exploring identity development, deciding on a career and lifestyle, maintaining personal health and wellness, developing civic responsibility, considering the spiritual dimensions of life, and dealing with diversity."

Hunter (2006) acknowledges different perspectives in defining success, given the holistic and multidimensional aspects of student success. "Students who learn are students who succeed...and we have to provide intentional programs to teach new students how to be effective students."

In creating intentional programming, especially at the community college level, we need to remember who our students are. "Despite the fact that older nontraditional students now constitute well over 30% of all college students, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the factors that influence educational attainments are the same for this group as they are for their traditional-aged counterparts. A similar statement could be made for students who work, who attend college part-time rather than full-time, or who are enrolled in two-year rather than four-year institutions. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 414).

In a two-phase study on the persistence of adult women enrolled in a re-entry program at a community college, Goldsmith and Archambault (1997) labeled as "goal

persisters” those students who don’t aspire to a degree, but come to the community college with personal goals. Their study explored the extent to which community colleges supported re-entry student goals and offered them opportunities to succeed that would not otherwise be available to them. It was clear from their research that the open admission opportunity gave these women a second chance at an education. They found that “for an older woman attending a community college, persistence requires the intention of changing one’s life by getting a college education, the ability to integrate the various aspects of attending college with the student’s personal and family life, and the goal of getting a college degree. Each of these aspects of persistence acts upon and reinforces the other” (p. 29). These aspects of persistence become important indicators of student success, as goal completion depends on these steps.

Traditional institutional indicators of student success include student goal attainment, course retention, fall-to-fall persistence, and degree/certificate completion. Additional educational focus centers on student learning outcomes typically defined for each course. This sets up a tension between the short-term indicators of student success progress used to indicate that students are on their way to achieving their goals, and the long-term results of actual completion and graduation, especially since community college students do not always have earning a degree as their goal (Bailey, Jenkins, Leinback, 2005). This begins to suggest a difference between student success outcomes and institutional success markers.

The effectiveness of community colleges as learning institutions comes under scrutiny as focus on accountability increases and reduced state funding results in greater

competition for resources. Policymakers have called for the collection and reporting of graduation and transfer rates, based on the outcomes of fall semester cohorts of first-time, full-time students in degree programs, under the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990. This SRK data indicates low completion rates for community colleges overall. However, it does not take into consideration part-time students, or the multiple missions of the community college. Many students come to a community college without the intention of graduating with a degree. According to Bailey et al. (2005) in their study of student success, "...the value of SRK data as appropriate measures for outcome-based accountability is disputed by college advocates, who assert that they are not accurate reflections of student success for a variety of reasons" (p. 1).

While there is research value in having consistent information available from almost every community college in the country, Bailey et al. (2005) assert concerns with the indicators used in the method of measurement. Namely, a) because community college students often attend more than one institution during the time measured, there is the likelihood of underreporting students who are mobile and difficult to track; b) the data considers full-time students, which does not account for the large numbers of part-time community college students; and c) the measurement period covers three years, which does not include the multitude of students who take longer to complete a degree. In this case, and perhaps others, student success indicators don't seem to account for the characteristics that are true for many community college students, and for most nontraditional students.

Given the multiple missions of the community college, the changing demographics of community college students, and the growing needs of nontraditional students, definitions of student success might need to expand to include the variety of goals, needs, and abilities these students have. However, Bailey et al. (2005) caution that we not “accept...limited goals from low-income students, of any age, who have had little success in school and lack confidence in their abilities or knowledge about what they need to do to progress” (p. 4). I would expand this statement to include not only low-income students, but also minority students, re-entry students, nontraditional students, and students who participate in the GO program. In the process of promoting academic goals to students who have not had much experience with success, it is important to recognize the small successes at each step of the way toward a long-term goal.

As we gain a better understanding of how success is defined by the students participating in this program, we are also informed regarding the steps that are valued and/or required to achieve ultimate goal attainment. However defined, it seems that students find the process daunting. “In order to ensure the success of nontraditional students, community college professionals must strive to assist them through factor-specific student-support services” (Miller et al., 2005, p. 73). Each factor, identified by best practices and based on research in higher education, provides challenge and support features to promote growth for the student to the next step on their personal journey. These steps, and the factors that develop skills and abilities *for* student success, are worthy of assessment and consideration in the evaluation *of* student success.

The Ohio Board of Regents is beginning to look at learning accountability in a broader way, as indicated in their *Statement on Student Success Plans* (2006). They have concluded that if student success is indicated by student learning outcomes that demonstrate general educational skills and abilities, then we need to find new ways of measuring student success. Grades, certificates of completion, and graduation are no longer sufficient, by themselves, as evidence of student success. More direct ways to measure learning outcomes and performance competencies are needed in higher education to demonstrate that students are gaining skills, using processes, and acquiring learning strategies needed to compete in the global economy and contribute to societal needs.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, in conjunction with the Lumina Foundation, examined the gap between achieving high levels of access and achieving student readiness and success (2007). They noted that "...improving student success has emerged as a key federal and state policy objective that complements the traditional focus on increasing student access. This performance-based focus on success entails increasing both the year-to-year retention and degree-completion rates for all students, but particularly for those groups of students who are most at-risk" (p. ix). While promoting retention and completion as success indicators, they also "acknowledge that federal and state funding and policy debates have tended to focus less on ensuring the adequate preparation of students and more on whether students stay in school and complete their degree in a reasonable amount of time" (p. ix). The commission goes on to advise state policymakers to "take into greater account the intended and unintended

consequences of policies in addressing the issues related to improving student success” (p. x). It is the unintended consequences that are of special interest here.

The practice of supporting student success must be intentional, and success defined from different perspectives. This project looks to do that, in the context of a particular program. In a larger context, USA Funds, in a 2006 Educational Access Report, reported the results of a discussion that took place during a conference workshop on “What is Student Success?” The group considered this question from several viewpoints: the student’s, the school’s, and society’s. These views of success represent three distinct perspectives, and indicate the existing differences:

**TABLE 2.1. Views Of Success**

<b>Student’s View of Success</b>	<b>School’s View of Success</b>	<b>Society’s View of Success</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Earning a degree</li> <li>- Gaining real-world experience</li> <li>- Progressing academically</li> <li>- Making more money</li> <li>- Becoming Financially literate</li> <li>- Satisfying parent’s wishes</li> <li>- Earning or maintaining licenses for profession</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Graduation rates</li> <li>- High grade point averages</li> <li>- Achieving accreditation</li> <li>- Increasing passing rates</li> <li>- Job Placement</li> <li>- Student Satisfaction</li> <li>- Alumni Support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Return on Investment</li> <li>- Gainful employment</li> <li>- Cost-effectiveness</li> <li>- Meeting stereotypes associated with degrees</li> <li>- Taking advantage of diverse programs</li> <li>- Meeting societies expectations</li> </ul>

*Source: USA Funds (2006), Educational Access Report*

We see that student success has a wide range of meaning for students, educators and the community. I will expand on this idea, to examine how various perspectives of success affect a small student support program. In order to explore the ways that student success is perceived for the program in this case study, four propositions provide a foundational context. Each of the first three propositions is supported by theory and

research that provides a vehicle from which to examine my observations and experiences as well as those of the participants. Different conceptualizations of success are examined from the perspective of participating students, instructional counselors who teach the course, and administrators who make decisions related to the program.

### **Theoretical Background**

*Proposition 1: Students who complete the program course will come to search for and define success in terms of finding their voice and developing cultural capital.*

A review of student development and cognitive development theories reveal a literature base rooted in the male experience (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1959, 1968; Kohlberg, 1981, 1984; Perry, 1968). Pioneering research by critical feminist theorists has built upon these founding fathers in ways that include the female perspective (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986/1997; Gilligan, 1982/1993; Josselson, 1987, 1996). These female researchers demonstrated clearly that a full representation of the student body must be included in order to draw valid conclusions about the student body experience as a whole.

Current strategies aimed at promoting student success and focused on creating meaningful learning outcomes are rooted in the psychosocial and cognitive ways that individuals develop over time. Absent in the seminal research regarding human growth and development were representatives of half of the population. Women theorists weren't represented in the early social sciences, and women were not included as research subjects in the many studies that laid the foundation for our thinking about human/student

development and growth. As a result, the “male experience was used to define the human experience” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 6).

The female perspective was introduced to developmental psychology by Carol Gilligan (1982), a student of Lawrence Kohlberg’s who researched moral development (1981) and built upon Piaget’s (1932) observations of children’s interactions with their environment. Piaget observed that moral development required social interaction. Kohlberg theorized a correlation between a person’s moral development and the extent of their social radius. He also demonstrated the influence of power structures between individuals in social interactions well into adulthood. The problem was that he considered a very limited kind of social radius, and only certain kinds of power structures and social interactions.

Although steeped in “Western philosophical tradition” (Crain, 1992, p. 152), Kohlberg’s concepts were criticized by Gilligan for not taking into account the potential for differences in male and female moral orientations. Extending the research by talking with female students (traditional students in four-year institutions), Gilligan showed that there are inherent gender differences and socialization processes that influence moral orientations. Her work changed the paradigm of social research, and paved the way for a multitude of social identity theories that include a more individual perspective representative of the diversity inherent in our changing world

### **Student Voice**

When Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule began writing their breakthrough book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (1986/1997), they wanted to know more about “the

multitude of obstacles women must overcome in developing the power of their minds” (1997, p. xxv). As a result of interviewing 135 women from nine different sites (eight four-year universities, and one “invisible university” in the community), five different perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority were identified. These represented stages women go through in developing their way of knowing from one of no voice to a way of knowing that includes the self (voice).

Identifying gendered ways of knowing helped to demonstrate that female students have different approaches to their educational experiences. This research gave credence to the students’ own voices, which demonstrated that “women’s epistemological assumptions were central to their perceptions of themselves and their world” (p. xiii). Perceptions of self and reality affected conclusions drawn about truth, knowledge, and authority. Internalizing the educational process gave voice to these students and supported their cognitive growth. The study went on to explore “the basic assumptions about the nature of truth and reality and the origins of knowledge that shape the way we see the world and ourselves as participants in it” (1997, p. 3).

These different perspectives demonstrate the “intertwined” connections between the woman’s self-concept and their way of knowing. This concept of self includes issues of power and authority. The counselors in the community college program being studied have also seen similar patterns of power and authority influence the academic and personal progress of women in the program. A need to internalize control, develop their

own voice, and realize that they are at the center of their learning is necessary for students to successfully engage in the learning process.

Baxter Magolda writes about the “complex journey from external to internal self-definition” (1999b, p. 629). She demonstrates, through the words of traditional four-year students, the transition from externally derived plans for success, yielding an externally defined identity, to an internal self-system where self-definition emerges. Students “whose identity was externally defined reacted to their environments rather than made conscious choices” (1999b, p. 633). As an awareness of reliance on external influences grows, the internal voice tends to be heard more, prompting a “focus on becoming one’s own person and figuring out one’s goals, responsibilities and life” (p. 637). This self-controlled internal identity not only allows the student to direct all aspects of their life but also organizes how they make meaning as well as how they act on it.

The concept of voice will be conceptualized both by the perceptions of students who rely on external authorities for knowledge and have not yet found their voice; and those students who have internalized their way of knowing, connect knowledge to their own experiences, and use their voice. These constructs correspond with Baxter Magolda’s (1999b) concept of adult identities and Belenky, et al.’s (1997) ways of knowing: external self-definition (silent, no voice) and internal self-definition (with voice).

Given the distinction between students who have a “voice” (internal identity) and those who don’t (external identity), this project explored the expectations and perceptions of success that students participating in the program have at the beginning of the

program, and how this perception might have changed as a result of the program and their subsequent academic experiences. Students who completed the class were exposed to a curriculum of ideas that promoted their self-esteem and internal locus of control, identified their abilities, affirmed their intuition, and taught them concepts of self-authorship. I would expect students to relate their experiences in terms they learned in the course.

### **Cultural Capital**

The concept of cultural capital is being used in a very specific way for this project. Originally conceived by Bourdieu (1977) as the reinforcement and legitimization of values, behaviors, and practices associated with certain classes, I am borrowing from Valadez's interpretation into higher education (1993, 1996). In this application, cultural capital refers to the beliefs and assumptions of the students concerning their academic experience and career aspirations, as well as the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to successfully navigate through the higher education system. I will take this concept one step farther, suggesting that these beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, skills and abilities create behaviors that demonstrate a holistic success for new college learners.

In his article "*Educational Access and Social Mobility*" (1996), Valadez concentrates on four practices and beliefs that he considers especially relevant to the community college culture and which represent levels of cultural capital that make a difference for students depending on whether they have this knowledge and understanding, or not. As well, Valadez reminds us, "students are not merely bearers of

cultural capital...they also play an important role in defining and claiming the knowledge they need to achieve their goals” (p. 407).

<b>TABLE 2.2. Cultural Capital Considerations Important To Student Success</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assumptions about what students need to know about college-going behavior,</li> <li>• The significance of placement exams,</li> <li>• Academic and career advising, and</li> <li>• Attitudes about the world of work</li> </ul>

*Source: Valadez (1996), Educational access and social mobility in a rural community college.*

Valadez (1993) writes about the effects resulting from the lack of an academic frame of reference; the conflicts that can arise “when accepted practices are unfamiliar to new generations of nontraditional students...these nontraditional students cannot call upon an accumulation of cultural capital to solve problems or to make informed decisions that ensure success in higher education. Instead, they bring with them resources that are endemic to their own cultural groups, which may not be recognized or valued by the institution” (p. 31).

### **Student Identities**

Nontraditional students who attend community colleges are in various stages of development, which has a direct bearing on how they make meaning and how well they know how to learn. Their backgrounds are diverse and don't often reflect the economic robustness, quality academic foundation, and exposure to the college experience of most four-year college students.

The re-entry program being studied is comprised predominately of female students (96%), who are minority (69%), and on government assistance (70%), the majority of whom are either single mothers or otherwise heads of household (2006 GO program data). These nontraditional female students have learning needs unique to their background and level of individual growth. These unique needs and experiential backgrounds will likely affect their vision of success, and their ability to succeed.

Given the diversity of community college students, we must be aware of the ways their identities affect their perceptions. Nora & Cabrera (1996) extended the discussion of why students don't succeed (finances, academic under-preparedness) to include non-cognitive factors (adjustment factors, self-concept, perceptions of prejudice). For minority students in a predominantly white environment, self-concept and heightened feelings of not belonging compounded the negative effect of other stressors and played a role in shaping performance and persistence. Nora & Cabrera saw that these lesser perceptions of self had a negative effect on the student's commitment to the goal of college completion and to the institution as a whole.

“Influences of sociocultural conditions, family background, and current experiences cannot be underestimated in understanding how (students) construct and

experience their identities” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). Jones and McEwen have constructed a conceptual model for multiple dimensions of identity to recognize that students with ethnic and cultural identities must reconcile experiences of difference and understanding of their own identity and evolving sense of self. “The model is a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development” (p. 408).

The literature suggests that learning is enhanced when these identities are taken into consideration. Bringing the student experience into the learning process provides a basis of making meaning in a way that matters to the student. Understanding the student experience becomes important in helping them identify and navigate their path.

Acknowledging the successful outcomes of this experience is necessary for providing a culture of evidence required for demonstrating outcomes, and ultimately, gaining access to resources.

The presence of voice as well as internal/external identity and defined aspects of cultural capital adopted for this project were identified. Key concepts and patterns were matched with interview data collected from students in the program being studied. This allowed for an investigation of the first proposition. It may be that these patterns affect not only how students see themselves, but also how faculty members perceive student success, and how administrators conceptualize outcomes. I think we will see that different perspectives are influenced by different social identities.

### **Locals and Cosmopolitans**

*Proposition 2: Instructors who teach the course will conceive of success outcomes in differing ways depending on the extent of their professionalization - locals will support a more traditional, academic oriented preparation whereas cosmopolitans and intermediates, to varying degrees, will embrace a more holistically developmental approach to the course.*

(McClenney, 2004) found that a majority of instructional faculty believe that anyone can learn, given the right conditions; they see themselves as facilitators of student learning. A similar optimism exists among many of the instructional counselors in this program. What conditions are “right” may be a matter of perspective, influenced by social identity and the extent of professional development.

Long before woman’s ways of knowing and constructed adult identities, Gouldner (1957) observed that latent social identities have a strong influence on behavior in a particular context. A cornerstone of his work was his hypothesis that two particular social identities are significant in organizational behavior: cosmopolitans and locals.

“Cosmopolitans” exhibit the following positively correlated variables: low organizational loyalty, high commitment to specialized skills, and an external reference group orientation. Likewise, “locals” tend to exhibit different variables, also highly correlated: high organizational loyalty, low commitment to specialized skills, and an internal reference group orientation. There are also those “intermediates” who find themselves sharing characteristics common to both of these identities.

Depending on which orientation is manifested, an individual can have different conceptions of loyalty in terms of how they approach their work, and may perceive success outcomes differently. The contributions of these different identities are valued, but in different ways. The loyalty of a local is born of commitment to the organization

and a desire to maintain status quo. Their concern is for the institution, its traditions, and norms. Cosmopolitans, on the other hand, are more concerned with their professional specialty and the esteem of their professional peers. I expect faculty members who are cosmopolitans to be more involved with notions of holistic student development than their counterparts, largely because of the external networking and awareness of best practices typical of professionals who continue to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Interestingly, it is the “intermediates” – those loyal to the organization but also open to the new ideas of cosmopolitans – who tend to have the most influence on what happens in the organization.

Instructional faculty members who teach in community colleges are widely known for their commitment to students and the learning process (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Grubb, 1999; Tagg, 2003). Barr and Tagg (1995) write of community college faculty members who lead students to become self-directed, and encourage them to become involved in their own learning process in support of the lifelong learning mission of the college. At the same time, there is a variation within the community college teaching ranks with regard to the needs of nontraditional students in the classroom.

Observations on some college campuses would suggest that those who teach “transfer” courses don’t see as much of a need to promote cultural capital in the classroom. Deil-Amen (2006) found that vocational faculty members were more likely to actually address cultural capital in their classrooms, despite a widespread awareness of the need amongst all faculty members. While some research shows that community college faculty members are less sympathetic to students from underrepresented

populations (Weis, 1985), an increasing awareness of diversity (for both economic and altruistic reasons) has likely affected faculty response. I would expect cosmopolitans to be more aware of cultural capital needs and sensitive to the unique circumstances of underrepresented populations because of the proliferation of articles and seminars on these topics in professional circles.

In light of the instructional counselors who teach in the program, their professional orientation may shape the way they conceive of and teach the class and evaluate the students. The instructors who teach the class required in the GO program being studied are certificated college counselors. As such, they belong to a larger profession that has provided them with specialized training in student development, as well as exposure to a holistic appreciation of a diverse student body. This external network may help shape more of a cosmopolitan perception supported by an awareness of best practices, topical conference offerings, and inclusion in professional organizations.

On the other hand, many of the counselors involved with this program received their training many years ago and haven't stayed plugged into a larger professional network. They are part of the institution's educational faculty ranks. Their perspective may be more likely shaped by local experiences. Gouldner found that professionals with local orientations, who demonstrate commitment to organizational norms, also tend to rate higher in "rule tropism" (p. 299) than their cosmopolitan colleagues. This propensity to use formal rules, regulations, norms, and traditions to solve problems may influence the way the program is considered, developed, and delivered. Faculty members become,

in the words of Barr and Tagg (1995), “designers of learning environments.” As I gain insight from these instructors about how they perceive success, I expect to hear reflections of their social identity in the kind of learning environment they create for students in the program.

### **Decision Making Rationality**

*Proposition 3: Administrators will evaluate and allocate resources to the program primarily in terms of traditional institutional measures of student success – student credit production and student completion.*

The quality and viability of a program depends on an on-going process of resource allocation decisions. The formal rules, regulations, norms, and traditions surrounding this decision-making process are not so clear-cut. This study tries to understand what the decision-making factors are for this program. As a basis for analysis, I refer to Peter Eckel’s (2002) study concerning decision rules used in academic program closure. Although this study doesn’t focus on program closure, the same principles concerning decision-making will be considered applicable for purposes of this case study.

Eckel provided two observations about decision-making. His “political action rationality” model looks to efficiency, political considerations, resource dependency, and narrowly defined outcome criteria when informing decisions regarding academic programs. An alternative to political action rationality is “decision rationality” which looks to the mission and depends on logical decision rules (“exploring available options, weighing consequences, considering alternatives, and choosing the option that optimizes results” p. 240) to inform decisions.

He found that although decision makers set out to follow a logical pattern to arrive at decisions by identifying alternatives, exploring consequences, and making choices based upon cost, quality, and centrality to the mission, this pattern wasn't always followed in its entirety. Rather, minimal alternatives are usually identified, and a 'good enough' solution is often accepted, even though it is not necessarily the best possible choice. This limited rational choice results in actions without full consideration. In this instance, political and/or economic considerations may take precedent over mission-driven considerations. How decisions are made, and the resulting effect on resource allocation, make it worthwhile to explore the criteria used by decision makers in assessing success.

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) propose that institutions of higher education will change their resource seeking patterns and align themselves with the market to compete for funding. Their observations were made about four-year institutions (primarily Research Institutions) forced to find alternative revenue sources to maintain their income in light of reduced federal and state funds. While the community college doesn't have the same reliance on industry funding for research, there are lessons to be learned for programs that have to find alternative resources when institutional funds are limited. Slaughter and Leslie's observations regarding the dependency of the institution on the source of funding illustrate: a) the criticality of the resource and the degree to which the institution will be able to function in the absence of the resource, and b) when an institution is dependent on the funding source, the resource provider has power over guiding values and goals, and how the money is spent.

Levin (2000) found that community college administrators, in general, feel pressured to increase enrollments because students are now considered “economic commodities.” He conducted a multi-case-study with seven rural and urban community colleges to define changes in institutional missions through the 1990’s. His examination revealed behaviors that conformed to expectations of local business, industry, and the larger global economy. “In the 1990’s, the mission of the community college had less emphasis on education and more on training, less emphasis upon community social needs and more on the economic needs of business and industry, less upon individual development and more upon workforce preparation and training” (p. 3).

This heightened awareness of the economic needs of the institution has prompted a college-wide focus on student credit production, both as an institutional outcome of student success and as an indication of funding levels expected from the state (based on performance funding indexes tied to student enrollment). On the one hand, the mission of the college promotes “developing community through learning.” This might indicate a need to assess development, or measure learning outcomes. And yet, I expect to find decisions driven by student credit production and completion rates. These economic indicators of institutional success demonstrate robust attendance figures and long-term goal-completion outcomes. What they don’t address are short-term indicators of student development or student learning outcomes.

*Proposition 3a: Perspectives of success based on students finding their voice, cultural capital, and holistic developmental outcomes are not considered nor valued independently by administrators in their decision-making.*

The literature reviewed provides some understanding of the various perspectives that might be expected in this investigation. The ability of students to view themselves as successful learners is influenced by the extent to which they are able to internalize the learning process, and utilize an understanding of college processes and academic expectations. Instructors are also influenced in how they approach the learning process by the social identity they subscribe to and their networking affiliations.

Given the political and economic influences prevalent in today's competitive environment, there are different considerations used by administrators in determining successful outcomes. Differing motivations arise depending on whether political and/or economic influences are regarded, or whether the institution's guiding mission and a student orientation are paramount. A dependency on resource stream(s) also plays a role in determining what is valued in the process of assessing success and allocating funds. With various aspects of success considered by the different stakeholders, a clear understanding of all relevant perspectives is necessary to affirm consistency of effort and expectation.

The propositions provide a structure from which to investigate the varying points of view that are likely to arise as those involved with this program begin to define their concept of success. What we assess and what we value determines learning outcomes, and ultimately how we focus our efforts toward student success. We need to know this in order to determine how to assess and what to do with the resulting information, which becomes critical to overall program effectiveness and efficiency. To maximize the

outcomes of this program, the alignment of different conceptualizations of success is necessary.

Using a case study format provides the opportunity for “small scale research in real-life settings” and provides the opportunity to understand how people behave in context (Gillham, 2000). This kind of qualitative research also allows for a broader range of thinking that expands beyond deductive reasoning.

In the following chapter, the program and the students will be discussed in order to provide a clear context within which to consider the propositions. Given that this project is a case study focused on a single program, the limitations will be outlined and any significance beyond the confines of this particular program discussed. The Methodology chapter follows, in which the questions driving this project are reviewed and the guiding research design is outlined. Data collection and analysis are detailed to provide an awareness of how information is identified, gathered, organized, interpreted, and documented. Results of my research and the conclusions drawn from this case study complete this dissertation.

### CHAPTER 3: THE CASE

The case studied serves nontraditional students with distinctive characteristics who participate in a specific program. These at-risk students have academic, emotional, and life challenges above and beyond the larger student body. Thus, this research is not necessarily applicable to the general student population. The students who participate in this program have likely struggled with their educational endeavors in the past, have had a hard time learning, have especially challenging personal lives, often work in addition to attending school, are typically head of household, and usually have families that require their time and attention. These students might not otherwise attend, or succeed in, college. To successfully transition them into college and provide a foundation for continued learning, by itself, could be considered a success.

**TABLE 3.1. A Comparison Of Characteristics –  
Community College Student Populations**

	Percentages in Community Colleges Nationally*	Percentages in Southwestern Community College*	Percentages in Community College Program – GO*
% female / % male	59.1 / 40.9	57.0 / 43.0	96.0 / 4.0
Ethnicity:			
White	60	51.0	31.0
Hispanic	14	29.0	59.0
African American	15	4.0	5.0
Asian American	5	4.0	1.0
Native American	1.0	2.0	4.0
Age: (average)			36
≤ 23 years	47.0	(13 – 19): 26.0	

24-29 years	18.2	(20 – 29):45.0	
30 +	34.8	28.0	
Single Parent	25.1		57.0
Receiving Government assistance			70.0
<i>Source:</i>	* 2003-04 data from NCES, NPSAS:04 and NCES Digest, 2005	* 2006 Institutional data	* 2006 program data

Following is more information about the program, program funding sources, the students, and a discussion of both the limitations and delimitations of this project.

### **The Program**

Growth Opportunity (GO) is a program that supports education for self-reliance (as described in the current program brochure.) It targets re-entry students who have completed high school, hold a GED, are nearing completion of a GED, or demonstrate by assessment the ability to benefit from instruction (as defined by Federal Financial Aid guidelines for ability to benefit). Applicants must meet the requirements of being a single parent, homemaker, or displaced worker. Typically, students who participate have interrupted their college education due to family commitments; have lost family financial support due to separation, divorce or spouse's death, disability or unemployment; are single parents or sole supporters of their family; need to upgrade their skills to provide a better life for their family; and qualify for financial aid (as indicated by student data sheets used during program enrollment.) In an average semester, about 100 students enroll throughout the district.

GO is an active program that just celebrated twenty years at Southwestern Community College. “Since 1985, the program...has helped approximately 4,000 single parents, homemakers and other adults get off to a good start in college in their quest for a challenging and lucrative career” (2006 GO Alumni recognition program, p. 2).

*In 1985, (the faculty member who started the first class) responded to a need. Students in her business class needed more than office skills. A significant number of her students, primarily women, seemed to be ‘lost,’ needing direction. It wasn’t office skills training that stumped them. Many were adult students with families and were coming back to school to earn a better living or to contribute to the family income. In an ‘aha’ moment, (she) responded to the need – the need to help them get acclimated to school and find career direction. And with that, (Growth Opportunity) was born.*

*- From Alumni Recognition Program, 2006*

Over twenty-one years, the program has grown to six campuses and two off-site classes. This number can fluctuate from semester to semester, however there haven’t been less than five or more than eight classes each semester in the last ten years. A full-time coordinator now serves in a district capacity. The program is currently housed at the district’s largest campus, which has oversight responsibility, although GO serves the entire district.

The program coordinator works with campus coordinators to ensure a quality program. Campus coordinators typically teach the class on their campus, provide intake for GO students on their campus, and provide counseling to these students as part of their

load. They continue to see other students, and serve on other college committees as well. They all meet monthly to discuss the students, share ideas, collectively solve problems, plan for upcoming activities, and strategically plan for program success. Minutes from coordinator meetings indicated regularly scheduled meetings that were well attended and had ambitious agendas. Many agenda items involved the course; to include review of the course outline, ideas for classroom activities, shared lesson plans, and discussions about consistency in each campus syllabus.

A cornerstone of the program is a required semester-long course that concentrates support for students, and helps build the confidence and skills necessary to succeed in school and to acquire a career leading to self-sufficiency. In addition to providing an extended orientation to the college, the course addresses personal (goal setting and time management, self-concept, communication skills, stress management); academic (critical thinking skills, college success skills, academic planning); and career (career exploration, gender awareness, employment skills) needs of the students. The class, taught by counseling instructors, emphasizes a holistic approach within a community of learners.

The district coordinates marketing and helps identify students who are eligible for the program from community agencies. Eligible students are also identified at each campus during the standard matriculation process and are invited to meet individually with the campus program coordinator for an intake interview. The campus coordinator is (for all campuses except one) also the class instructor, and provides ongoing counseling and advising for these students. Those identified as meeting the requirements of the program complete a separate program application form that collects information about

the student, their needs, general financial situation, and eligibility for other funding resources.

Each student is required to apply for Federal Financial Aid, which is a class project. The college guarantees the tuition will be granted if the student doesn't qualify. Approximately 25% of the students each year require campus funding. A majority (60%) of GO students are typically eligible for Federal Pell grants (which usually provides enough to pay for tuition, fees, books, and supplies). The remaining 15% of the students are funded privately or with external scholarship funds. In addition to the financial aid and scholarship application process, other college processes are modeled and included as class projects during that first semester. These include use of tutoring and career centers, meeting with a counselor to develop an educational plan and identify classes for next semester, early registration process, and participation in campus activities and student life.

Each of six campuses in this multi campus district supports the program, consisting of\*:

- A required class that introduces students to the college environment, assists students in setting personal, academic and career goals;
- Tuition scholarship support and assistance applying for federal financial aid, including scholarships for continuing students;
- Book scholarships for students not on financial aid (as funding allows);
- Child care referrals (formerly child care support from Federal funding);
- Access to emergency funds if necessary;
- Ongoing career development, budgeting, job skills, and other appropriate workshops offered by college personnel and community partners; and
- An opportunity to participate in a mentoring program.

(\*As indicated by course syllabi, and program marketing materials.)

There have been efforts over the years to expand the program to serve students who continue beyond the first semester class. A second semester “Advanced” class was offered for six consecutive semesters between 1995 and 1998. This class, although well attended, was grant funded. When the grant went away, so did the class. According to a program review report from 2001, a plan was proposed to provide additional classes each semester for GO students to take in their progression toward a degree or certificate in a way that would keep them connected to their resource network. A grant at the time funded two second-semester leadership classes, each of which appears to have been successful, with above average retention rates (>70%). Why the plan was not fully implemented is unclear.

### **Program Resources**

Original funding came primarily from federal sources; the program qualified for federal SPDH (Single Parent Displaced Homemaker) funding intended to support education as an alternative to welfare. As welfare reform moved away from supporting education as a means to better employment options, funding for students to go back to school dwindled. The college, or, more specifically the program, faced the challenge of identifying alternative funding sources. Seeking college funds, community support, and grants, the program prevails and continues to offer targeted support for this specific population.

The program budget itself is relatively small. Most of the operating costs are borne by the campuses, each of which dedicates an instructional counselor to teach the

class and see the students as part of their load. Campus funding for tuition and book scholarships varies from campus to campus. Some campuses find grant funding to provide scholarships and books for students who aren't able to get Federal Pell funding (roughly fifty district-wide each year). Campus scholarship amounts vary. Historically, the campus provided for two classes (the program class plus one basic-skills class) and books. When funding is tight, the cost of the class alone (currently about \$150.00) is covered.

The District Foundation office manages a scholarship fund supported by community advocates who earmark their donations for continuing re-entry students (including funding for GO women, specifically). According to GO program reports, the Foundation provided \$12,000 of tuition assistance in 2000. Five years later, this fund has grown to provide \$50,000 in scholarships for GO students who continue to successfully progress toward achieving their academic goals.

In addition to campus support and scholarship funding from the Foundation, the program receives an operating budget each year from the district. These resources pay a full-time coordinator (currently temporary with no benefits) who has responsibility for marketing the program, planning, and managing program activities. Funding for student scholarships (the biggest need) comes from a variety of sources, including each campus, the district, and community. Additional scholarships have been provided through fundraising efforts, as well as from local and federal grants. A combination of entrepreneurial efforts and grant dollars have attracted additional support from established community agencies, as evidenced by a successful community partnership

establishing an off-site class five years ago that continues today. The shared responsibility for funding has evolved; it has come about by necessity.

**TABLE 3.2. Program Costs – A Responsibility Shared**

Students	Campus	Program	District	Community
<p>60% of students apply for and receive a Pell Grant from the Federal Government.</p> <p>15% self-pay or have external funding</p> <p>Provides marketing – former students help promote the program</p>	<p>Provides new-student tuition for non-Pell recipients who cannot self-pay</p> <p>Dedicates a counselor to conduct intake, teach the class, and see students as part of their load</p> <p>Secures grants, as possible, to help support students in campus class</p>	<p>Provides FT Program Coordinator responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Marketing</li> <li>- Intake (with campus)</li> <li>- Planning and implementing program activities</li> <li>- Workshops</li> <li>- Scholarship application process for continuing students</li> <li>- Grant-writing</li> </ul>	<p>Provides funding for District Program Coordinator</p> <p>Assigns Lead Campus/Lead Dean to manage program</p> <p>Foundation provides a growing number of scholarships for continuing GO students -</p> <p>2000: \$16,000 2003: \$20,000 2004: \$34,000 2005: \$48,000 2006: \$50,000</p> <p>Provides support with grant management</p>	<p>Donations provided to Foundation from community supporters who target their donations for this program; includes support from community organizations</p> <p>Private scholarships, computers, and additional support to community based, off-site class from prominent community organization.</p> <p>Grants – both Local and Federal</p>

When the program first began and the need was recognized on campus to provide access to job skills that could help single moms become self-sufficient, it was also recognized by those in the Federal government who saw the power of education as a tool for welfare benefit recipients to use to gain access to sustainable wages. Funding was available to the district through the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act. When welfare reform decreased financial support for educational alternatives for benefit

recipients, the students still wanted to come to school, but needed help paying for it.

Their childcare and other benefits became predicated on the fact that they work – at least part time. I remember being challenged by campus employment regulations limiting student workers to 19 hours per week, while welfare caseworkers required a minimum of 20 hours of work to keep child care benefits. These kinds of frustrations that can arise when efforts are not coordinated test the motivation to go outside the institution for financial support, not to mention the negative effect this can have on student success.

When federal funding disappeared, the future of the program was questioned. There were those who could not understand (as observed in meetings within the district) why these students (primarily women) needed a special class to do what other new students who also faced challenges had to do. It was clear to me, as someone involved with these students who could see the differences between their needs and the needs of the general student population, that there were many in the district who really didn't understand these students, or this program. Those of us involved were challenged to demonstrate the successes we witnessed every day working with these students in ways that others could appreciate.

Fortunately, there were enough decision-makers in the district who recognized the value and power of this program to approve just enough financial support to keep the program afloat when federal funding was cut. They championed the program for many reasons: personal histories, professional experiences with this (or similar) population(s), exposure to these students and witness to their accomplishments, and/or commitment to the social responsibilities of community colleges. Despite the reduction of resource rich

benefits (i.e. child care assistance, book scholarships), funding continued to be made available to students who could not qualify for federal aid and needed tuition scholarships to attend, largely because of campus champions.

Recognizing this situation, program leaders began to look toward the community for financial support. A few finite grants (funding for one to three years) allowed for student scholarships to supplement minimal campus funding. In 2001, an appeal to the Board of Governors resulted in the district Foundation office soliciting a scholarship endowment that continues to provide ongoing financial support for students who successfully complete their first semester, have defined goals, and financial need to continue.

The program just celebrated its twenty-year anniversary. As part of the celebration, a book scholarship endowment fund was established in honor of the program's founder. This will ensure that the ability to buy a textbook does not become a barrier to success for any future student. A district-wide staff council fundraiser added several thousand dollars to this book scholarship fund recently, and demonstrated support from another segment of the college community.

SCC has expressed a public commitment to student success in general and to this program in particular, based on the program's long, celebrated history. GO serves an important role in supporting SCC's mission by welcoming and supporting adult students who desire to return to school to increase their knowledge, gain skills, enrich their lives, and benefit from learning.

TABLE 3.3. Mission Statements

SCC Mission Statement	GO Program Mission Statement
<p data-bbox="396 457 846 531"><i>“The mission of SCC is to develop our community through learning.”</i></p> <p data-bbox="396 642 607 674">Goals (include):</p> <ul data-bbox="396 716 857 1371" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="396 716 837 789">* To improve access to all college programs &amp; services</li> <li data-bbox="396 863 857 936">* To provide excellent teaching and responsive student services</li> <li data-bbox="396 1041 769 1115">* To prepare a highly skilled workforce.</li> <li data-bbox="396 1157 789 1251">* To provide effective developmental and adult basic education.</li> <li data-bbox="396 1304 764 1371">* To foster responsible civic engagement.</li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="888 457 1365 604"><i>“To provide education, services and support for single parents, homemakers and other adults returning to college”</i></p> <p data-bbox="888 642 980 674">Goals:</p> <ul data-bbox="888 716 1383 1371" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="888 716 1365 821">* Provide a comprehensive re-entry program for single parents, homemakers, and displaced workers.</li> <li data-bbox="888 863 1383 999">* Empower adult students as they adjust to college life, and provide access to student services that support their success.</li> <li data-bbox="888 1041 1360 1188">* Prepare students with the skills, education, and confidence necessary for them to acquire jobs with wages and benefits for self-sufficiency.</li> <li data-bbox="888 1230 1328 1371">* Serve as a bridge for returning students, especially those referred from agencies and community organizations.</li> </ul>

The college mission and values declare support for access to learning and student success. Intended outcomes of the program include the formation of learning communities and support networks that follow the students through their college experience, an increase in confidence and understanding of college processes, and demonstration of successful student behaviors. Ongoing efforts to identify unintended

barriers and promote successful learning outcomes continue to be strategic goals of the GO coordinating committee (consisting of district and campus coordinators).

### **GO Students**

Currently, students are identified from many sources. Some referrals come from college advisors and counselors (as they identify students coming through the matriculation process), or from community agencies. Others self-identify after seeing an ad, flyer or hearing from a friend. Word-of-mouth from former GO students is a common recruitment tool. All interested students go through an intake process for the program in addition to the matriculation steps (admission, assessment, orientation, advising, registration) required of all new students.

The program reflects the diversity of the community, attracting students who might not otherwise attend college.

**TABLE 3.4. Characteristics Of Program Participants**

% of GO students who are....	2001	2007
Ethnicity:		
Hispanic	55%	59%
Anglo	34%	31%
African American	5%	5%
Native American	5%	4%
Asian American	1%	1%
Single Parents	48%	57%
Displaced Homemakers	29%	23%

Re-entry Adults	20%	20%
Male Students	5%	4%
Re-entry Youth	3%	
Married	26%	26%
Single	34%	42%
Divorced	24%	20%
Separated	16%	8%
Average Age	34 years	36 years
Employed	55%	n/a
Unemployed	45%	n/a
Primary Breadwinner	70%	n/a
Living < poverty level	59%	n/a

Source: 2001 and 2007 GO Program Review documents

Marina knew she needed an education to support her four boys, especially now that she was a single mother. She heard the program would help prepare her. It ended up being *“the most crucial, powerful thing in my life.”* She graduated this year, and was accepted to the local university. She wants to be a family psychologist. Sofia was 60 when she decided to go back to college, with the support of her second husband. She had an inferiority complex, taking the course to get help. *“I went from I can’t...to I can.”* Four courses later, she landed a great new job. Cece couldn’t stay in the course, she also needed to go back to work full-time. She doesn’t know if she will be able to come to school, because her family depends on her income.

Jane had a hard life, including many disappointments in her 59 years, but the course was like a switch that turned her on. *“I know I will get an Associates Degree. Why? Something I want to do for myself. I just know, I feel it in my heart...I can.”* Denise

thought it was selfish to take care of herself. *“I lost myself, what I liked, what I wanted.”* This mother of three teenagers re-discovered her art abilities, won an art award and a scholarship, and continued taking general education courses – including art. Julia studied in Mexico, learned English with her children and *“loves to learn.”* She currently volunteers with a domestic violence program while taking classes toward a degree in Social Sciences.

Lisa is still in school, thanks to what she learned in this course about learning styles, how to study, and how to set goals. Now she has confidence in her ability to finish her degree. Beth is *“struggling to make positive things happen in my life.”* She has been working, but *“feels like (she) wants to do something else”* so she is pursuing a new career goal. She is continuing part-time, *“it is slow for me.”* Luz thought she was going to get an AS in Accounting, but with all she learned, and the availability of scholarships, she will transfer and pursue her BS.

Celia didn't finish the semester because her mom died. *“After working for 20+ years, I couldn't comprehend coming back to school, but now I have study skills and can navigate the system...I do have a wonderful new full-time job. I may go back to school, but I am in no hurry.”* Nina was worried after so many years out of school, and didn't know what to expect when she decided to try the program. She went on to participate in the career program with a mentor she keeps in touch with. Her classes are going well; she is an Accounting major.

Paula has been in a first generation project, and was referred by her mentor. She wants to transfer to the University. She has learned that *“we can do it, can go forward,*

*even if (there are) obstacles.*” Tina attended college four years ago, but wasn’t focused then. She saw an article in the paper about the program, and noticed there were scholarships. She had “messy transcripts” and didn’t think she could get back to school, but she was able to gain access to the resources she needed to go forward. With the help of scholarships, she is optimistic about her goal to be a doctor.

Jan is studying bookkeeping, “*one class at a time. Now I look at classes differently, I have such a confidence boost.*” Edna is still in college, after finishing her GED. She got a part-time job on campus, with help from the skills she learned in the course. Connie hasn’t been in school for a while, but she entered the program to get “*a push forward.*” She wants to finish college, and have a career in social services.

Many of the students who come through the program face personal and family issues to a degree unlike those experienced by most traditional students. Often, the family support is not there; in fact, for many single mothers, they have to be the supportive head of household when they go home after a long day of classes and studying. Many of these students had not experienced success in the classroom, or out. Considering the multitude of challenges these students face every day, it is surprising they do as well as they do.

When the first class was created, the focus was on study skills, coping skills, and introduction to the support networks that existed on campus and in the community. From the beginning, there was a holistic approach that acknowledged the entirety of a student’s life experiences – that coming to school also had an impact on their lives away from the campus. The class was designed in such a way that the students became a community;

they learned together, supported one another, and leaned on each other when times were tough.

Over the years, the curriculum of the course was reviewed by college curriculum committees, and strengthened with the addition of study skills, knowledge of college processes, and self-management skills. The program coordinators met regularly, discussed student experiences, and considered more effective ways to help these students. Teaching strategies, classroom activities, assignments that worked well, and newly discovered resources were shared regularly.

There are many, including the students themselves, who attribute their successful persistence to the program course. The environment provides a community of learners that have the bond of common experiences. A synergistic energy supports the entire class throughout the semester. Less supportive district administrators have expressed the opinion that these students should be able to make it using services already provided to the general student population.

What does seem to get the attention of program supporters and detractors alike are the outcomes. Much of the early outcome data has been lost, along with many historical files from this program. Since the college started using an integrated student information system in 1999, students who take the class have been tracked. Information from old class rosters and computerized student information was used to compile the following summary, as well as data presented in the Results chapter of this paper.

**TABLE 3.5. Summary Of Outcomes  
For Go Participants**

- 3947 students have enrolled since the program began in 1985; and
- 3183 (81%) successfully completed the program course.
- Of those, 75% continued their education with an average gpa of 3.25.
- Three quarters of enrolled students work while attending part-time. As part-time students they take an average of six years to complete an Associates Degree.
- Since the program began, 435 students earned Associates Degrees (54 for transfer), and 146 completed certificates.
- Since 2001, 1108 students have enrolled in the course;
  - 868 (78%) successfully completed the course;
  - 242 (28%) are still enrolled at SCC; and
  - 100 have completed degrees or certificates (25 for transfer).

*Source: 2007 GO Program Review*

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Important to the research design was an honest appraisal of the potential weaknesses inherent in the study. This project does not propose any significance beyond the scope of the program studied. In this case, the study is limited to one institution, albeit a large, multi-campus district that has a substantial history with the program being studied. The sampling of students, while random, cannot be considered a valid representation of all students, only those I was able to connect with. Common to all interviewees was their participation in the program; but there were participants I was not able to talk with. Given the small sample size and nature of this study, a single voice can have a unique message. A limitation of the study includes those unique messages not captured.

A vulnerability of a single case study (per Yin, 2003) is that the case may not be what it appears to be. Careful investigation and active listening were employed to minimize the chances of misrepresentation or misinterpretation. The project could benefit from more voices adding to the discussion, enriching the discourse. Further study that includes additional interviewees and/or multiple sites would lend credibility to the outcomes, as analytic conclusions are more powerful when they come from several sources.

It was the intention of this researcher to conduct a thorough, in-depth analysis to illustrate themes that can be used to create more efficient and effective programming for this particular nontraditional student population. The theories cited regarding student development and learning are based primarily on research involving four-year traditional students. Likewise, the research on which theories of latent faculty social roles and administrative decision-making were based took place in four-year institutions.

These theories were not tested in the community college environment to the same extent, and may or may not be as applicable in the two-year, commuter college environment with a greater diversity of students. (Note: There is a growing body of higher education research in the community college environment, but this has not historically been so. The theories used in this project don't appear to have any notable research regarding applicability in the community college setting, other than what is referred to in the body of this text.) Nevertheless, the intention of this examination is to focus on broad similarities and comparisons, and will regard all supporting thesis as legitimate in this community college program setting for purposes of this study.

There is likelihood of bias in the interview sample. I spoke with those who were reachable, and who were willing to talk with me. There are those from all groups who were not reachable and who I did not talk with. Especially with the students, this “unheard” population may be unique even within the nontraditional student population studied. The difficulties they experience may affect their perspective(s), which may be different than other students, and not necessarily portrayed. If the unique voice representing these students on the edge is not captured, results may be biased toward affirming experiences. The same may be said for the instructors and/or administrators I didn’t speak with. It is hard to know if their experiences and/or comments would be similar to or different than what I did hear.

A major source of error of interpretation can be the investigator’s own bias, so it was imperative to maintain a clear understanding not only of my role as observer, but also an awareness of my perceptions, assumptions, and biases. While my involvement with the program informed my understanding, it would not be appropriate to allow any preconceptions to cloud my examination. A way to insure validity and reliability is to have another individual (the current program coordinator) provide a second set of eyes to read and review interview data in order to confirm researcher coding, sorting, and interpretation. My dissertation committee, and advisor specifically, guided the integrity of the project as well. Any conflicting interpretations were discussed, reviewed further, and with clarification, resolved. Any remaining questions were clarified with the interviewee.

### **Role of the Researcher**

This researcher acknowledges a close relationship with the institution that spanned a twelve-year history. During that time, I had oversight responsibility for this program as part of my campus administrative duties, served a one-year appointment as district coordinator of the program during a time of transition, and taught the program class on a campus for three years. I no longer work for the college, and my involvement predated this project, so there is unlikely to be any influence or effect of my presence as an observer (“observer effect,” Gillham, 2000, p. 47).

The bias this history may represent was monitored by focusing on the research questions during interviews, maintaining my perspective as researcher (rather than participant), and challenging and scrutinizing my expectations and preferences (Gillham, 2000) in order to clarify research bias and member checking (double-checking information and observations with those involved, Creswell, 2003). Any noted discrepancies were considered and addressed, and the entire study reviewed by an external reviewer, new to the project, as a way of assessing and questioning the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). “Looking for negative, i.e. opposite or contradictory, evidence, or evidence that qualifies or complicates your emerging understanding, is basic to research integrity” (Gillham, 2003, p. 29).

My level of involvement also served to enhance a holistic perspective (Tierney, 1991) that enriched this study with experiential insight, illustrations drawn from actual incidents, and access to students who were more willing to talk openly with me based on my relationship with the program. My history with the institution established a level of

knowledge and trust that was useful in identifying and gaining access to sources of information and institutional records.

Likewise, while an instructor in this program, I constantly assessed my students in the classroom and collected feedback from them during each semester I taught the class. My several years of documented student input became a valuable supplemental resource used to illustrate and provide context for comments made during interviews. During the research phase of this project I did not teach the class, although I did interview former students, along with students from other sections of the course.

It will be especially important that I maintain objectivity in my analysis and not project my perceptions onto others. At the same time, my involvement has provided me “data” that does inform my perspectives. To the extent that my awareness of higher educational research, best practices in student success programming, and effective adult learning pedagogy added to my perspective is a plus, in this researchers opinion. It will be necessary, however, to separate my knowledge from my observations in a way that supports the validity of this project.

Prior to addressing the collective wisdom of the authors and researchers noted, I must be clear about my own biases and assumptions. These concepts have guided my observations, thought processes, interpretations, and conclusions. Although I will make every effort to minimize my personal and professional bias during interviews with program participants, the following assumptions have lead me to this field and must be acknowledged:

- I support Piaget's (1932) contention that learning is socially constructed. Individuals have their own unique perspective that helps them make sense of their individual experiences. Students respond to learning situations in different ways, depending on these perspectives. This must be accounted for.
- Likewise, rooted with Dewey (1934) is my support of experiential learning; linking individuals and knowledge through action can affect subsequent experiences. Rooting learning experiences by involving students and making them active partners in the learning process has long-term benefits.
- There is a wide diversity of students and learners; students come to community colleges at all different stages of development (psychosocial and cognitive). We need to recognize and meet them where they are and help them get where they want to go. In supporting students this way, the community college provides an important societal benefit.
- Our focus should be on holistic student learning: addressing the whole student – body, mind, and spirit – and their learning process to include various personal and academic growth needs. By addressing both cognitive and psychosocial growth, we promote stronger student development with higher quality outcomes.
- Students learn in many different ways. It is our responsibility to help them learn how to learn, to succeed in a variety of learning environments, and to become lifelong learners.

- As a living system, an educational institution must rely on the collective, systematic commitment of all participants in the educational process for its ultimate success.

The above-mentioned are my thoughts, and represent a singular outlook. This project will explore different points of view regarding student success. A better understanding of these diverse perspectives is significant when considering accountability measures of student success programs. Attitudes, feelings, and behaviors are vital to the process of meaning making. And yet, we don't always assess or measure these important learning outcomes, and they are rarely included in discussions of success. This project begins to address this need. Following is a detailed methodology that provides for the design of the research, as well as how the data was collected and analyzed.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

*“The essence of research methodology lies in seeking answers to the following basic question: How can we find ‘true and useful information’ about a particular domain of phenomena in our universe?” (Pelto and Pelto, 1978, p. 1)*

This qualitative study examines the perceptions of program participants with regard to their expectations for success. Using a case study format, data collection was focused around four guiding propositions, and obtained primarily from participant interviews, program information, and institutional data. The research design section of this chapter details data collection, analysis, and validation strategies. Following is a description of the propositions and supporting theory that prompted my research questions and provided a guiding framework for this project.

As a basis for investigation and analysis, the study’s four propositions focus attention on efforts to account for student success in community college programs:

*Proposition 1: Students who complete the program course will come to search for and define success in terms of finding their voice and developing cultural capital;*

*Proposition 2: Instructors who teach the course will conceive of success outcomes in differing ways depending on the extent of their professionalization - locals will support a more traditional, academic oriented preparation whereas cosmopolitans and intermediates, to varying degrees, will embrace a more holistically developmental approach to the course;*

*Proposition 3: Administrators will evaluate and allocate resources to the program primarily in terms of traditional institutional measures of student success – student credit production and student completion; and*

*Proposition 3a: Perspectives of success based on students finding their voice, gaining cultural capital, and holistic developmental outcomes are not considered nor valued independently by administrators in their decision-making.*

Proposition 1 addresses the student's perspective of success, and their readiness to be successful. Given that this program is offered to nontraditional students new to higher education, I listened to hear from them about their past academic experiences (including high school) and their current academic experiences. Students need to learn how to learn, and old messages about learning struggles and failure need to be replaced. An internalized relationship with knowledge ("voice") needs to be established for long-term success (Belenky et al., 1997).

These students also attend/return to college with different expectations about the probability of their success and what it will take for them to do well. I anticipated a gap between the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to succeed in a college academic setting and the current "cultural capital" (Valadez, 1996) these students possess with regard to learning and the process of higher education. Better understanding this gap is an outcome of this project.

I interviewed students who participated in the program and heard what their expectations of success were for this class, and how they felt about their ability to succeed. By asking questions such as: "*What kind of success were you looking for when you signed up for the program? How successful do you feel now? What do you think accounts for your success?*" I explored how their differing conceptions of success might relate to the presence of "voice." It seems that as the student finds their voice, it becomes easier to think about their goals.

I also looked for verbiage that would indicate the presence of cultural capital, such as "*I don't know anything about coming to college*" or "*I have no idea how I'm*

*going to do this.*” The constructs of internalized voice, the definition of cultural capital, and the words of the students provided data to examine, compare, contrast, and analyze by way of “pattern matching” (Campbell, 1975; Trochim, 1989).

By reflecting on the words of the students, I searched for demonstrations of the principles guiding this study. I determined indications of “voice” by the way the student talked about their orientation toward learning or locus of control (internal or external), their sense of self and relationship with authority figures, and the way they react to their environment (proactive or reactive). Likewise, I distinguished a student’s referral to cultural capital by listening for their level of understanding of college processes, their connection with an advisor or counselor, whether they felt like part of a learning community, their conception of the world of work, and how well they understand the importance of assessments (characteristics of cultural capital used by Valadez, 1996, p. 393).

Most of these considerations (i.e. locus of control, issues of authority and assertiveness, proactive determination, understanding of the college processes, working with a counselor, career exploration and gender roles in the workplace, financial aid, and assessments) are included as topics in the course that all these students take. As a teacher of the course, and participant in a successful effort to enrich the course curriculum, inclusion of these concepts as a means of encouraging the development of voice and cultural capital provided me with the ability to observe these effects in my own classroom. Upon introducing these concepts, I was able to witness the reality of seeing students each semester who never quite got it, as well as the incredible transformation of

those who did. These recollections as a participant observer are included in my research and inform this study.

Proposition 2 examines the instructional perspective of what success is and/or should be for students who complete this program. Guided by professional socialization theory, I looked for any differences in the perspective of program and classroom outcomes between instructors who are “locals” vs. those who can be considered “cosmopolitans” according to Gouldner (1957). Using his original “Guttman Scales” (p. 302) as a guide, I created a scale to determine the orientation of instructional counselors involved with this program (see Results, Chapter Five). The different networking and communication patterns of instructors who have a strong loyalty to the institution, its culture and history display constructs of the local concept of social professionalization. On the other hand, cosmopolitans are more active with and/or aware of external professional networks, benchmarking, and best practices.

I expected instructional faculty to have different concepts of success outcomes depending on their professional social identity. In order to determine the orientations of the instructional counselors, I looked for effects of professionalization evidenced in how the instructors talked about the program, professional practices used, or teaching methods employed. I learned about their various academic backgrounds, experiences with the college, and extent of their involvement with professional organizations and/or professional development, all of which contributes to their social identity and may relate to their conception of student success.

The instructional counselors who are “locals” were expected to exhibit their professionalism by following in the tradition of the program, staying true to demonstrated practices, and following standard operating procedures. “Cosmopolitans” likely expressed their professional commitment by borrowing ideas from best practices touted at conferences and in professional journals, and introducing new concepts of learning and/or student success. Because of this commitment to developing their specialized skills, and staying current with best practices, their views have a propensity to reflect the holistic approach to learning and student success reflected by their professional network and their affiliated organizations. There are a few “intermediate” instructional counselors who have professional characteristics of both; they uphold organizational traditions and are loyal to the institution, but they also are aware of some of the latest developments in student success theory and are more willing to try different approaches in the classroom.

Proposition 3 investigates the success factors considered by college administrators in making decisions related to the program, including resource allocation. I looked for evidence of Eckel’s (2002) contention that political action rationality (based on economic and/or political decisions), is more often a factor in decision-making than is decision rationality (doing the right thing as evidenced by the college mission statement and values.) This would be demonstrated if decisions were made about the program based on student credit production (FTSE motivated) or completion numbers, rather than individual and societal benefit.

Using the concept of resource dependency theory, I sought to know if external resource streams (and the influences over where they are distributed) were more likely to

contribute to the reasoning behind decisions involving the program than the support of the college mission and demonstration of holistic student learning outcomes. This would be indicated when decisions were made based on funding sources instead of individual or societal benefit. Given the dismal economic condition of higher education and resulting competition for scarce resources, it is especially important to know what is valued and what identified outcome indicators need to be measured to demonstrate accountability and, ultimately, student success. In this case, interviews with administrators, together with program budget information, established a perspective of how program resource allocation decisions are made, and on what information these decisions are based. Do their actions reflect their discourse?

Proposition 3a considers the gap between conceptualizations of success that the students and instructors have, and the outcomes considered by administrators during resource allocation decision-making. This potential gap has great implications for the program. It raises questions about success and the role of assessment practices. If there are different definitions of success, which one is considered? Who decides what measurements of success will be used? Is what is being measured really what we believe is most important? I posit that these questions are not addressed and the answers not considered; the administration defines success by default. As a result of this study, I will attempt to highlight and align the different conceptualizations of success that exist within this program and find answers to these important questions

The information collected and reviewed during this case study provided a basis for examining what is really important about this program. Interviewing the participants

provided data that was coded, sorted and organized to provide a database against which my propositions were tested. This study assumes different conceptualizations of success by students, faculty members, and administrators. Which of these outcome indicators are considered during institutional planning and decision-making, including resource allocation, has a powerful affect on the viability, sustainability, and ultimate success of the program.

This case study served as the context in which to look at the phenomenon of multiple perspectives. The research design includes both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Following discussion of the study design, I address data collection specifics and data analysis methods. Validation strategies are presented at the end of the chapter.

### **Research Design**

This research project (a “qualitative strategy of inquiry,” Creswell, 2003, p. 197) used a case study to provide a real world setting for this participant-observer. A benefit of this kind of inquiry is that “the observer is sufficiently a part of the situation to be able to understand personally what is happening” (Patton, 1982, p. 189). Key concepts from various literature bases were used to frame my work, but the research is discovery oriented. Interviews were ethnographic in nature (reflecting the experiences of those involved), informal and open-ended. I was careful not to impose my preconceptions (Tierney, 1991).

A mixed methods investigation was preferred because of the distinctive, contextual perspectives that were captured through the methods employed in the project – interactive interviews and institutional document review through the eyes of an internal

participant. Although both sources of information provide an opportunity to “expand an understanding from one method to another, (and to) converge or confirm finding from different data sources” (Creswell, 2003, p. 210), this project is driven by qualitative discovery supplemented by quantitative data. A case study was chosen for several reasons: first, this research strategy provided a unique ability to study a situation in-depth and explore participant perceptions; second, this strategy is preferred when dealing with contemporary events regarding decision-making and organizational behavior (Yin, 2003); and third, the results of the case study provided me with greater insight into the student experience that will enhance my ability to be an effective administrator.

Data gleaned from interviews, student feedback, institutional documents, and participant insight form the bulk of my research material. “Purposeful sampling” (Patton, 2002) provided a rich data source, as individuals asked to participate had direct knowledge and/or information regarding the program being studied. The results of this case study cannot be generalized to the entire population of students, but focusing on students in one program increases the utility of information regarding the specific population and the specific program I am studying.

Participant interviews conducted with students (past and present) explored their expectations of the class, the program, and themselves in college. The counseling instructors who teach the class, serve as counselor/advisor to students in the program, and coordinate the program on their campus, were included. They were asked about what kind of success they expect from their students, how they assess their students’ success,

and how they assess overall class success. Administrators were interviewed to learn what measures of success they consider when making decisions related to the program.

Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing insight about the program and its effect on the students to emerge from the experiences of the participants (Tierney, 1991). This phenomenological approach emphasized the importance of providing the opportunity for participants to communicate their own understanding, perspective, and give their own meaning to what they saw and experienced (Patton, 1982; Tierney, 1991).

Participants had the freedom to respond in their own way. The interviewer gave prompts for additional information only to clarify a position, not to guide the answers. Interview notes and a draft of the project were made available to participating individuals for confirmation of accuracy and appropriateness of interpretation. The information obtained during the interviews was reviewed immediately upon the conclusion of the interview, and notes added to illuminate and clarify so any ambiguity or questions were immediately addressed. Interview notes were then coded, sorted, and organized into informational tables according to the content and context of the data.

All data was coded to identify academic and non-academic issues, as well as student characteristics and institutional characteristics as a general organizational tool. Alone, these areas of focus didn't necessarily provide a clear picture, but when paired with other lenses, significant themes and patterns emerged. Several theories were utilized to better frame and analyze the data obtained.

Student interview notes were also coded and organized according to presence of “voice” – an important pre-cursor to successful learning. Evidence of “cultural capital” (knowledge of college and the higher education experience) was also noted. These, along with academic, non-academic, student and institutional codes, provided for a multitude of considerations about what is valued by the students.

Faculty interviews were additionally coded for indicators of social identity (does the instructor see themselves as keepers of the status quo, or do they champion new ways of thinking?) and network affiliation (does the instructor relate more to colleagues who have been around a long time and adhere to status quo, or with colleagues who are fairly new and bring a new way of thinking?) These indicators showed a propensity for either “local” or “cosmopolitan” ways of thinking. Administrative interviews were reviewed for action rationality (motivated by political or economic factors) and decision rationality (taking the time to do the right thing), as described by Eckel (2002). Evidence was sought to demonstrate whether decisions were made largely based on indicators of student credit production and goal completion, or whether the college/program mission was considered paramount.

The case study data was thoroughly reviewed, recorded, coded, sorted, and examined for emerging themes and patterns, as well as prominent responses. These themes were analyzed for patterns, substantive significance, logical analysis, and interpreted for meaning (Patton, 2002) with regard to one or more of the propositions. This was documented and reviewed using “pattern matching” (Campbell, 1975; Trochim, 1989). Concepts from the theoretical frameworks being employed were compared against

the themes and trends that emerge from the data. A number of concept similarities indicate a “match” between data and theoretical constructs, lending internal validity and clarity of analysis.

Research methods, data collection processes, and procedures for analysis were scrutinized from many perspectives (in this case, the investigator, a second reviewer, the investigator’s committee, and Human Subjects) to assure quality and validity of efforts and outcomes (Cohen and Brewer, 1996). As a result, the interviews provide a well-informed consideration of various success perspectives that will support the creation of assessment tools to ensure that the needs of all participants are being met.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected from institutional information, interviews, classroom assignments, and observations. Students, instructional counselors, staff, and administrators involved with the program were eligible to participate in this study; participation was voluntary. Institutional records were reviewed for student success information, program mission, values and goals, and other data relevant to student and/or program outcomes. Minutes of coordinator meetings, and program file information provided historical background information about the program. Notes from my personal observations as a teacher and records from my classes were used to provide context. Class assignments, examples of student journaling, and other student work remaining in my files were reviewed for insight and served as a reminder of students and class experiences.

Information used to explore the guiding propositions of this project came from several primary sources: institutional data, participant interviews, and classroom experiences. The institutional data, “documents through which organizations represent themselves and the records and documentary data they accumulate” (Silverman, 1997, p. 3), served as reference, documented decisions, and provided both background information and general information about the program. Mission statements, value and goal statements, institutional research and program data, college catalog, institutional Factbook, college website, printed materials, class materials, program brochures, program coordinator meeting minutes, program review reports, and other documents served to create a contextual backdrop.

Interviews were conducted in person, or by telephone. Informed consent was handled verbally at the beginning of each interview. Since the risks of participating in this research project are no more than minimal and involve no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context, the requirement for a signed consent form was waived by the College Human Subjects Protection Program. The consent form was instead used as a script during the beginning of each interview, with verbal consent documented. When the consent form was read to the potential interviewee, they had the opportunity to participate or not. If they chose to participate, I noted their agreement on the interview note sheet and the fact that all their questions had been answered. Substantial notes were taken during the interview.

Names were not included in interview notes, which had a number or letter assigned that corresponds with similarly identified contact information kept in a different

location. Eliminating a direct link between participant data and the identity of the contributor ensures anonymity, and discourages personal bias. It was made clear to the participant that their name would not be used in the final report, and that interview notes, data, and project files would be kept private and secure by the researcher.

Upon completion of the project and after the appropriate waiting time, project files and all student information will be destroyed. Until then, they will be kept in a private, secure file. Anonymity and confidentiality of private information is ensured. In discussing the results, I used general terms that protect anonymity while still preserving the intent and message of the speaker. The names and/or initials used throughout this paper are assigned.

The cost to the participants (in this case, time) was minimal; no more than about 45 minutes for an average interview. There was potential for follow-up, as decided by either the interviewee or interviewer. Verbal, heartfelt thanks were extended to those who gave of their time and energy in support of this project. Potential benefits directly to the participants were minimal, but in a broader sense, their contribution to program improvement may have been motivational for student involvement. Faculty and administrators were potentially more aware of, and wanted to contribute to, long-term effects: the benefits provided by program assessment, potential for increased effectiveness, and documentation of student success measurements.

There were essentially no risks to the participants through their participation in this project as confidentiality and anonymity were assured. The questions and research methods used posed minimal risk. "The probability and magnitude of harm associated

with the research are no greater than those encountered in everyday activities” (Federal Regulations CFR§46.102(i)). Patton’s (2002, p. 177) “*Common Principles Undergirding Qualitative Inquiry and Humanistic Values*” motivated the spirit of this investigation. Included among the principles is a “respect for and concern about others by learning about them, their perspective, and their world.”

### **Data Analysis**

*Analysis of data: careful work going over notes, organizing the data, looking for patterns, checking emergent patterns against the data, cross-validating data sources and findings, and making linkages among the various parts of the data and the emergent dimensions of the analysis. (Patton, 1982, p. 297)*

Using qualitative document analysis and participant interviews provided a social and historical perspective of the program, allowing additional meaning to be gleaned from the collective results. Document analysis included examination of college and program missions, goals, and value statements as well as program information and student success data. The institutional data provided a rich context for better understanding this case. While conducting a qualitative document analysis, I reviewed:

- The Program Mission Statement: What is the program really trying to accomplish? Is this consistent with the college mission? What are the program expectations? What is valued?

- The College Mission Statement: How is the Program Mission Statement reflective of the College Mission Statement? What aspects of the College Mission Statement speak to program ideals and student success?
- Course Objectives: How are they used in class, as part of the learning process, and what is their relation to overall program assessment and student learning outcomes? What are the classroom expectations? Student expectations?
- Program Review: What criteria are used to judge program success during strategic planning, decision-making and/or budgeting sessions? How is support negotiated? What are the college expectations for the program?
- Program data: What data does the program have with regard to quantifiable student success? How does this correspond with resulting funding levels?

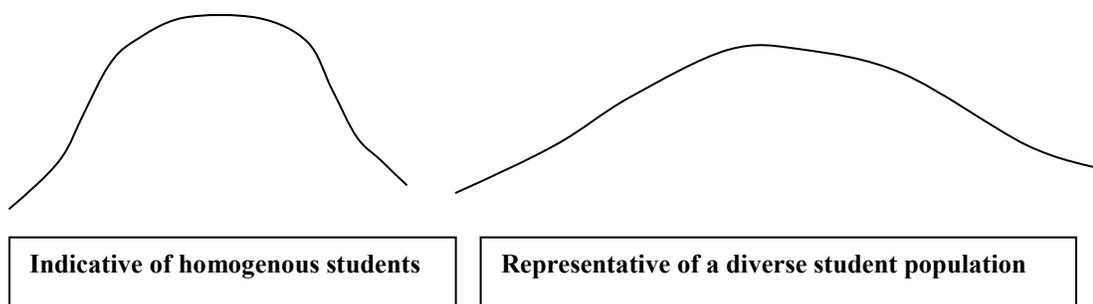
These questions guided my review of this institutional data and provided focus to help address the research questions and guiding propositions of this study.

In addition to institutional records, rich sources of data were the words of program participants obtained during the interviews. When the students and staff themselves form the content, *which* voices are heard form a foundation for the results. Ideally, a cross-section of this purposeful sample provided a diversity of voices representative of the program as a whole. Mindfulness was given to the make-up of student interviewees with respect to overall program demographics and class distribution to ensure fair representation.

While study participants are fairly representative of program participants, we must be reminded that these students are not necessarily representative of the college

student population as a whole. Neither are they representative of the student populations used in the majority of higher education research. A typical bell curve representing homogenous traditional four-year students appears more atypical when it signifies the wider diversity of nontraditional community college students. While not a scientifically valid pictorial, it demonstrates a sense of the differences that exist between dissimilar groups of students. A wider, flatter shape depicts the greater range of these students.

**FIGURE 4.1. Homogenous/Diverse Bell Curves**



The tails of these bell curves are also significant. With a more homogenous group, like traditional four-year university students, the tails often represent a statistically insignificant minority. With the bigger tails representing a wider diversity of students, those represented by the tails become a more significant consideration. Including those students is more important at the community college, where they represent a larger percentage of the student body. The extent to which these students are included in the mission statement of the college, and supported within the institution is examined by looking at the alignment of mission statement and institutional practices.

It was expected that interviews with college personnel involved with the program might shed some light on political, social, and other institutional issues that impact the program. Due to my active participation, history with the program, and established relationships with participants, I expected a high degree of openness and candor. Because this case study involves instructional counselors, staff, and students who are invested in the goals of the program, there tend to be strong feelings about the worthiness and ultimate outcomes of the program. Capturing these thoughts accurately was central to the research project and data analysis.

It became extremely important to consider context, perspective, and interpretations when evaluating the data, and to check my bias to avoid misinterpreting or misrepresenting the data. “The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone’s mind” (Patton, 1982, p. 161.) A way of triangulating this inquiry (Patton, 2002) was to be aware of the values and politics of the study participants: the students, instructors, administrators, as well as the audience, and myself in the role of researcher.

Institutional and program information provided additional data to support or challenge the findings. During the analysis of qualitative data, it was necessary to address “convergence” (Guba, 1978), figuring out what things fit together. A coding system provided a means to classify the data in a way that was useful for analysis. Information gathered via institutional documents and interview data was reviewed and coded, with emerging themes examined against the four propositions guiding this project. Interview comments were documented during the interview. Raw data from interview notes was

reviewed several times, first for general content and again to identify specific themes before being coded.

All data was reviewed and coded according to the following categories: 1) student characteristics, 2) institutional characteristics, 3) academic issues, and 4) non-academic issues. Additional alpha coding identified data significant to one or more of the propositions. This data was reviewed, in depth, for specific pattern matching that linked coding (see chart below) to theories used in support of the propositions that form the basis of this inquiry.

**TABLE 4.2. Coding Chart**

Overall Coding:	<p><b>S)</b> <i>Student characteristics</i></p> <p><b>I)</b> <i>Institutional characteristics</i></p> <p><b>A)</b> <i>Academic issues</i></p> <p><b>NA)</b> <i>Non-academic issues (personal+)</i></p>
<b>Research questions / Propositions</b>	<b>Data Coding – category applied</b>
Proposition 1) re: Students	<p><b>NV)</b> <i>No-voice</i> – can receive, but not create knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- external orientation</li> <li>- dependence on authority</li> <li>- right/wrong, black/white</li> <li>- “deaf/dumb”, “powerless”</li> <li>- react to their environment</li> </ul> <p><i>**The shift in perspective usually comes from a</i></p>

	<p><i>change in their personal lives... "I have changed"... "I see things differently now"</i></p> <p><b>V) Voice</b> – knows how to learn, puts knowledge in subjective context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- internal orientation</li> <li>- reflective, relativistic</li> <li>- invested in learning</li> <li>- make conscious choices</li> </ul> <p><b>CC) Cultural Capital</b> – “College Knowledge”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- assumptions of what one needs to know; college-going behavior; school knowledge</li> <li>- significance of placement exams and getting the right classes</li> <li>- use of academic and career advising</li> <li>- attitudes about the world of work</li> </ul>
<p>Proposition 2) re: Instructional Counselors</p>	<p>Social Identity / Latent Role:</p> <p><b>L) Locals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- loyal to the college / campus</li> <li>- internal (college) networks</li> <li>- local affiliations</li> </ul> <p><b>IN) Intermediates</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- locals who have kept current with their profession and are open to new ideas and ways of doing things differently</li> </ul> <p><b>C) Cosmopolitans</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- committed to profession and specialized skills</li> <li>- external (professional) networks</li> <li>- professional affiliation</li> </ul>

<p>Proposition 3) re: Decision-Making</p>	<p><b>AR) Action Rationality</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- economics, \$ / resources</li> <li>- politics, power, agendas</li> </ul> <p><b>RD) Resource Dependency</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- resources governed by source</li> </ul> <p><b>DR) Decision Rationality</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- students, philosophy</li> <li>- mission, student success</li> </ul>
<p>Proposition 3a) re: Concept of Success</p>	<p><b>SX) Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- concept or definition of success</li> </ul> <p>(Sort by student, faculty, administrator: SXs, SXf, SXa)</p>

Key theoretical constructs were used to operationalize concepts from the supporting propositions for data collection and analysis. Likewise, guiding theoretical principles provided the basis for organizing information. Woodard, et al. (2001), in response to the challenge to retain and graduate students, identified four “spheres of influence” that affect an institutions ability to retain and graduate students: 1) characteristics of the students, 2) characteristics of the institution, 3) academic good practices, and 4) student services good practices. I adapted these four spheres of influence in my overall coding by identifying student and institutional characteristics as well as

academic and non-academic issues that may affect the success of a student while enrolled in pursuit of their goal.

Specific to the propositions, I related my coding markers to predominant ideas present in the literature surrounding that particular theoretical premise. Proposition 1 seeks to note evidence of voice and cultural capital. In the case of voice, I listened for students to talk about their orientation when it comes to knowledge (internal or external), and the role they take in their own learning. Students with no voice refer to a dependence on external authority for direction. For them, life is dualistic; what they learn is either right or wrong, their perspective is black and white. They indicate a belief that their opinion doesn't matter; they are accepting, and not used to asking questions. They may indicate a feeling of being powerless, of being more reactive than proactive. An individual who has no voice is aware of life around them, but they don't recognize themselves as being an active participant. They look to others for information and direction.

On the other hand, students demonstrate a presence of voice by indicating a subjective context with regard to their meaning making. They are more internally oriented in how they learn, as indicated by their reflection, relativism, and ability to make conscious, proactive choices. They invest in their learning experience, and are able to trust their own inner voice. If a shift of perspective is indicated, it is usually because of a change in their personal life. "Women typically approach adulthood with the understanding that the care and empowerment of others is central to their life's work. Through listening and responding, they draw out the voices and minds of those they help

to raise up. In the process, they often come to hear, value, and strengthen their own voices and minds as well” (Belenky, et al., p. 48, 1997).

Cultural capital is indicated when students talk about their knowledge of the college experience, express an understanding of the skills needed to successfully navigate through the semester, and recognize the behaviors necessary to succeed in attaining their goal. As defined by Valadez (1996) cultural capital refers to the student’s assumptions of what they need to know in order to succeed in college; college going behavior and knowledge of school practices, policies, and resources. Understanding the importance of assessments; choosing the right classes; and knowing the availability of academic advising, career resources, and the world of work, demonstrates a student’s cultural capital.

Instructors demonstrate their social identity as indicated by their loyalties, networking, and affiliations (Gardner, 1957). Locals present a loyalty to the college, the campus, and historical roots; cosmopolitans are more aligned with their profession (“outer reference group”) and more focused on development of new, specialized skills and ways of doing things. Networking is referred to by locals as being internal within the college, perhaps even localized to their campus. Cosmopolitans discuss their access to external, professional networks that connect them to a larger association of trailblazing colleagues and best practices. The affiliation of locals will be with their workmates, those within their department, and on their campus. Cosmopolitans are more likely to affiliate with professionals who share a broader view of student development, through professional associations, continuing education, or participation in regional/national

conferences. Intermediates demonstrate a combination of local and cosmopolitan traits; while remaining loyal to institutional history, they keep current with their profession and are more open to new ideas and ways of doing things.

Decision-making tendencies are evidenced by the rationale given by the administrators for their decisions. Action rationality (Eckel, 2002) indicates decisions driven by economics, money, and/or resources. This is likely coupled with resource dependency, referred to by talking about the requirements of the funding source. Alternately, decision rationality might be indicated by deciding in the direction of guiding institutional missions of student success, as evidenced by a student-driven philosophy and focus.

Respondents likely represent a spectrum of thought regarding different conceptualizations of success. Depending on the social identity, and resulting perspective of the program participants, there are likely be differing expectations. These differences are detected by organizing the words and thoughts of the interviewees by codes referring to the thought patterns outlined in the chart, above.

Clustering information in this way provided a comprehensive view, bringing order to the data by organizing input into basic descriptive units (Patton, 2002). Transferring coded data into tables, by category, arranged the information so that themes could emerge. Further analysis identified specific responses consistent with one or more of the propositions. This interview data was cross-analyzed with institutional data to support conclusions and provide additional validity in support (or not) of the propositions. Proper interpretation was critical throughout the process of examining,

categorizing, tabulating, and reviewing information to effectively address the objectives of this project.

This research utilized a constructivist perspective, allowing insights to emerge from the experiences and words of the participants. Using a “bracketing” method of phenomenological analysis (Patton, 2002), key phrases and statements that reflect these concepts were highlighted from interview notes. Perceptions from the interviewees were clarified so that interpretation of these phrases was informed and valid. Recurring themes lead to conclusions that either supported or defied the propositions in question.

Significant to the credibility of the themes was a willingness to consider multiple perspectives. It was critical that these perspectives were accurately reflected. The meaning and significance given to data, how patterns are described, and the relationships and linkages identified are all open to bias and interpretation. A major source of error is one’s own biases, illustrating the need for self-knowledge and awareness of personal dominant patterns and positions in sense making, as well as stereotypes and assumptions of how students make sense of the world. This researcher was committed to minimizing any negative subjective effect and maximizing an ethnographic quality to my participation and observations. In an attempt to be unbiased by preconceptions, I tried to be sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence.

During the evaluation and interpretation of data, standard rules of evidence and case study protocol (Yin, 2003) were used to ensure systematic evaluation and regularity of the process. A standardized process promoted consistency when judgments were made and when values assigned to what was being analyzed and interpreted. Developing a

database for this case study served as a way of demonstrating the process. Notations documented the sources of evidence and study protocol for reliability. Should further study add to the data, the same procedures can be followed to maintain the integrity of the research design. Any similar findings would add credibility to the conclusions and increase relevance for external generalization.

Within this study, triangulation helped to confirm the different perspectives that emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). Converging multiple sources and types of evidence (systematic interviews, documents, observations, and personal insights) confirmed the validity of the outcomes. At the same time, being open to different perspectives was vital, even as those perspectives seem at odds with each other. Checking interpretations and being alert to bias also promoted reliability, as did using several theoretical lenses in the analysis of data. “Substantive significance” (Patton, 2002) was supported by comprehensive “*verstehen*” from a triangulation of supporting sources. The more rigorous the supporting evidence, the more confidence we have in lessons learned.

### **Validation Strategies**

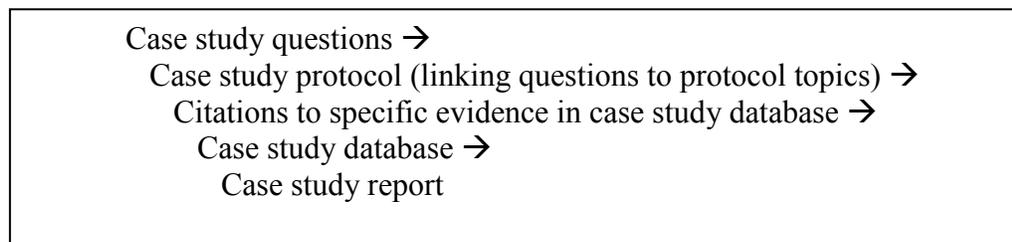
A vulnerability of a single case study is that appearances may be deceiving (Yin, 2003). The case may not be what it appears to be and/or the case may be wholly unique, with no opportunity for observing varying circumstances in different contexts. To do so would more powerfully support external generalization, which is not the intent of this project. In this case, though, careful consideration during my investigation was required

to minimize misrepresentation, and maximize both the reliability of evidence collected and validity of results presented.

“Cross-validating evidence” (Fetterman, 1991) was sought to provide a triangulation of methods used to find corroboration in the data. Patton (2002) outlines several kinds of triangulation: 1) using different methods and getting data from different sources to increase consistency; 2) using multiple analysts to double check interpretations of the data; 3) use several theories or perspectives to interpret the data; and 4) managing subjectivity. By seeking convergence through triangulation, bias inherent in one method neutralizes the bias inherent in another method. Results from one method inform or helps develop ideas from another (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989). At the same time, there was an expectation of different perspectives and points of view from the interviewees and data reviewed.

Yin (2003) discusses four conditions relating to research design: *construct validity*, *internal validity*, *external validity*, and *reliability*. The quality of case study research can be judged by these standards.

Establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied provided *construct validity* during data collection (Patton, 2002). A chain of evidence (explicit links between the questions asked, the data collected, and the conclusions drawn) helped to ensure integrity of the data.

**TABLE 4.3. Chain Of Evidence**

Source: (Yin, 2003) *Case Study Research Design and Methods*

Just as the evidence chain ensured the reliability of the evidence, multiple sources of data strengthened the integrity of the conclusions. Maintaining a focus on the goals of the project helped this researcher sift through the data in an objective manner. Answers to interview questions were interpreted against the propositions guiding this inquiry. This continuous interaction between theoretical issues and the data being collected provided an opportunity to acquire a firm grasp of the issues being studied, given that I remained sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence and continued to be unbiased by my own preconceptions (Yin, 2003).

Yin advocates for maintaining *internal validity* by pattern matching, explanation building, using logic models, and addressing other explanations. In this case, to be certain inferences drawn are based on the evidence, existing theoretical constructs were used to match illustrating interviewee comments. Case study protocol ensured that procedures used were consistent, and applied uniformly. The quality of findings were judged by the following criteria (Patton, 2002):

- Traditional research criteria: rigor, validity, reliability, and generalizability;
- Evaluation standards: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy;
- Nontraditional criteria: trustworthiness, diversity of perspectives, clarity of

voice, and credibility of the inquirer.

Every attempt was made to apply these standards, ensuring the integrity of this project.

This project is a personal one. It deals intimately with the people involved and what they hold to be important. This presents a significant responsibility, which this researcher takes seriously. It is crucial for academic integrity that the thoughts and meanings of the participants are correctly interpreted and properly matched to the theoretical constructs of this case study. The “trustworthiness” of the data is paramount (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To avoid inference, it was important to explain student success in terms of specific outcomes, document linkages between observations and conclusions, and address possible alternative explanations. Because this study is unique to this program, a cause and effect relationship cannot be inferred beyond the parameters and scope of the experiences of participants in this program.

This project was not designed to meet the standards of *external validity*, and there are currently no expectations for general application. It is recognized that a single case study offers a poor basis for generalization, but this study is based on analytic, not statistical, methods and is suitable for purposes of this venture. This case relies on “analytic generalization” (Yin, 2003), using developed theory as a template with which to compare the empirical data resulting from the case study investigation.

Should further inquiry stem from this case study, the demonstration of protocol (Yin, 2003) is effective in increasing the *reliability* of the project. In this case, the protocol includes a) a clear documented overview of the project: objectives, issues,

theoretical foundations; b) an outline of field procedures: interview and document review processes, interview questions; c) tables for recording data, coding charts, and sources of information; and d) a guide for the reporting of results to maintain consistency when communicating the results.

The case study derives its strength from “it’s sensitivity to individual situations, patterns of relationships, contexts, and natural environments in organizations” (Hearn and Corcoran, 1988, p. 640). It demonstrates the importance of considering various perceptions, especially when those perceptions influence outcome assessment and standards of success. Long-term validation may be evidenced by changes in practice with regard to this specific program. In terms of strict validity, there is no way to ascertain “truth” when it comes to individuals and their perceptions.

*A qualitative case study design can provide investigators with an in-depth understanding of a problematic situation and its meaning for those involved...the interest lies in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Such insights into aspects of educational practice can have a direct influence on policy, practice, and future research...The case study approach is often the best methodology for addressing problems in which understanding is expected to lead to improved practice. It is problem centered and situation specific.*

*(S. B. Merriam, 1988, p.xxi)*

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

This case study provided an opportunity to a) identify the different perspectives of success that emerge, especially in light of institutional decision-making regarding the program, b) better understand what success outcomes are valued by the participants, and c) explore the way student assessment data is used to identify student success outcomes. Hearing from the participants and reviewing program information provided a rich source of data that was coded, sorted, and organized to provide a database against which the propositions were tested.

In this chapter, I discuss how I collected, sorted, coded, analyzed, and documented the information used to examine this program; and how the data led me to my conclusions. Institutional resources provided an important foundation for understanding the context, and an overview of the program within the institution over time. Interview data completed the picture and offered clarification of participant perspectives. Included is a discussion of how the data speaks to the four propositions guiding this inquiry, as well as other findings of interest.

### **Institutional Data**

Additional to participant interviews, I examined institutional data for information about the program, the students, and their success. Transcripts of presentations to the Board of Governors, reports representing various snapshots of program outcomes, historical overviews, and minutes of coordinator meetings provided information to round out an understanding of accomplishments, challenges, priorities and needs. To know how

the program presents itself, I read program brochures and marketing materials (both former and current).

The program grew slowly over the years, evolving to meet the needs of the students, the college, and changing funding sources.

**TABLE 5.1. Significant Program Developments**

1985	Program started by faculty member at one campus, funded as a campus pilot
1988	A Special Topics course was developed
1989	The program served four campuses
1990	SCC campuses allocated scholarship dollars for GO
1996	Federal grant supported child care payments
1998	P/T District coordinator hired to expand program (increased marketing efforts, opened program to larger audience, developed community advisory group)
2000	Board support confirmed; Foundation established Scholarship fund; Short-term grants allowed expansion with off-site class; Outcome data collection began
2003	F/T District coordinator hired to increase participation, stabilize program; Focus on Careers initiated; Workshops and scholarship support increased; Child care funding ceased
2006	Campus scholarship funding centralized; HUD grant funds one campus course; Program faces funding cuts
2007	Outcome data presented as part of Program Review; District funding continued; District wants to refer to as “class” not “program”

*Source:* GO History from 2007 Program Review

Older marketing materials (prior to 1999) were targeted solely to women, even in the title of the program (which has since changed). Early emphasis was on single mothers and displaced homemakers, and promoted childcare subsidies among the benefits offered to students in the program. Newer brochures (after 1999) indicated a more inclusive outreach effort, featuring pictures of men and career women, reflecting a program that was targeted to both male and female re-entry students. Although funding for childcare benefits ended in 2003, scholarship support and the opportunity to be part of a learning community are currently offered to single parents as well as those who have been out of the workforce, had their education interrupted, have limited resources, and/or lack the skills necessarily for career advancement.

Men now account for about 4% of the students who participate in the program each semester. The most recent program review has prompted a discussion about how to be more inclusive for male re-entry students, as well as re-entry females who aren't necessarily single parents. The program is evolving to better meet the demands of the community, and to appeal to a wider audience of older, nontraditional and/or re-entry students in an effort to increase enrollment in all sections of the program course. This commitment to grow in a more inclusive direction underscores the need to find ways to assess the success achieved by more diverse student learners with a wider range of needs and goals.

One way to increase student credits/FTES is to get as many students in the classes as possible, and to offer more classes. Intense marketing efforts have provided an increase in student numbers on several occasions in the program's history. One of the

administrators recalled a time “*when the college wasn’t really vested, it (GO) cost money but didn’t show good return on investment...made it difficult not to put it on the chopping block.*” When asked why GO didn’t get cut, I learned how the program became “politically correct” –

*...we developed a marketing plan, with specific outcomes, and moved the marketing out into the community. We set a goal and met it – tripled enrollment in the classes... We were able to show the state (that we could) grow the numbers by reaching out to people who wouldn’t otherwise attend college.*

In order to determine how these students perform, access to student records provided an opportunity to track student achievement. The names and student numbers of students who have registered for the program course were entered into the college student information system. Their student transcripts were reviewed to confirm successful completion of this class, additional classes registered for and/or completed, and documentation of any degrees or certificates earned.

As a result of this analysis, it was determined that from Fall 1985 through Fall 2006, 3,947 students have registered for the course, and 81% (3,183) passed with a grade of “C” or better. 75% of the students who completed the course continued their education, with an average 3.25 gpa. Data kept since 1999 (when the new student data system was adopted and programmed to track students who participate in GO) shows that 581 students have completed the requirements for an Associate’s Degree or Occupational Certificate. 242 students who have taken the course since Fall 2001 are still enrolled as of

Fall 2006. Attending part-time, these students take an average of six years to complete an Associates Degree.

A 1999-2000 Program Report includes, in addition to goals and accomplishments, a) a chart showing the number of FTSE generated by students in the program, b) a re-enrollment report, c) program budget information. This information demonstrated that students in the program also enrolled in an increasing number of additional credits hours. From Fall 1997 to Spring 2000, student credits generated by GO students increased from 1072 (35.74 FTSE) to 1747 (58.23 FTSE). 58.23 full-time student equivalents generated \$123,451 (\$2120 per FTSE) in state revenue to the district. Over the course of three semesters, an average of 64% of program course completers re-registered the following semester. The cost to the college averaged just over \$300 per FTSE.

A 2007 Program Report documents that “602 FTSE have been generated by GO students during the past five years after completion of the program course.” This alone is impressive, as it means that the program has generated over 1.2 million dollars for the college in the last five years.

**TABLE 5.2. Student Credit Completion**

	Students passing course with “C” or better	Continuing Students completing 3 – 15 credits	Continuing Students completing 16 – 40 credits	Continuing Students completing 41 – 65 credits	Continuing Students completing 66+ credits
Fall 2001 – Fall 2006	868	375	253	115	125

*Source:* 2007 GO Program Report

Student persistence and student credit production data has been gathered since 1999, but not widely shared. Each program review and program report presented different information in varying formats. The full benefit demonstrated by the data over time has only recently been captured. A consistent format of outcome data reflecting the information valued by the college decision-makers would serve the program well.

Although there is a centralized coordinating role that provides standardized curriculum, program oversight, marketing and outreach, each campus puts their unique stamp on their program. This is largely a result of the instructional counselor assigned to the program, and the way the intake process is structured on each individual campus. Those campuses that dedicate a counselor to this student population put the students in touch with the program counselor as soon as they arrive. Smaller campuses provide general matriculation services to the students before referring eligible students to the program counselor for the GO intake process. A recurring recommendation from each of the three program reports I reviewed included the need for stronger internal marketing so that the entire campus community can better understand the program and assist with referring appropriate candidates. In this way, institutional practices not only support student access to the program, but also increase FTSE.

Overarching priorities of the program are consistently focused on the students, and how to be more effective in addressing their needs. Evidence from coordinator meeting minutes and the progression of program goals and objectives over the years points to ongoing interest in identifying barriers to success for participants and finding ways to address those barriers while continuing to find ways of supporting students who

are doing well and celebrating their achievements. Examples of this include: the growth of the course content, additional support activities packaged and offered to the students, a parent club offering homework and childcare assistance, increased scholarship money for continuing students, the Celebration, and marketing efforts targeting a wider range of re-entry students.

On several occasions, when the program experienced funding cutbacks from the college, additional marketing efforts to increase the number of students enrolled resulted in growth that kept the program viable. Fiscal challenges have prompted efforts to obtain grants, and promote fundraising for scholarships. Even as this attention to program improvement occurs, college support for the program seems to vary depending on external circumstances, fiscal resources, and competing needs. The program is strained to deal with marketing and fiscal needs on top of their primary student focus.

### **Interview Data**

This project sought to demonstrate different perspectives that seemed important to the overall consideration of student success outcomes for the program being studied. By listening to how students view success, what the instructors expect success to be, and which success indicators are used by administrators to make resource allocation decisions, I developed an enhanced, more comprehensive outlook used to inform not only this program, but also my practice as a college administrator.

During the course of my research, in one form or another, I heard from 46 students. Of these, 16 were interviewed by telephone, and 30 communicated in writing

(mostly in-class exercises.) The students interviewed were fairly representative of program participants, representing five classes, as indicated.

**TABLE 5.3. Demographics**

<b>A demographic representation of the students...</b>	
<b>...in the program:</b> <i>(based on 100 students)</i>	<b>...interviewed for this project:</b> <i>(based on 46 students)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 96% Female</li> <li>• 59% Hispanic</li> <li>• 31% Anglo</li> <li>• 5% African American</li> <li>• 4% Native American</li> <li>• 1% Asian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100% Female</li> <li>• 44% Hispanic</li> <li>• 37% Anglo</li> <li>• 12% African American</li> <li>• 0 Native American</li> <li>• 6% Asian</li> </ul>

*Source:* 2007 GO Program Report

The pool of potential student interviewees was identified as students who had participated in GO. Class lists of a course required for all students in GO provided student contact information; a class list was pulled for each of the six campuses in this multi-campus district. Fall 2004 was chosen because, at the time of this research, students who continued attending SCC would have two completed semesters, and would (presumably) have a perspective of what they gained from the program course. Students who “stopped out” and did not continue would, hopefully, still be in the area and available to interview.

Two sections chosen were from Spring 2005 because classes did not meet on those campuses in Fall 2004. In total, five classes were identified for the student interviewee pool (one campus did not sponsor a class either semester that year). A total of 95 students were registered in these five sections. My original plan was to contact as many of these students as possible. I came to realize that a) the proportion of students would be too great, given that the student perspective is one of three data sources I was examining, and b) after speaking with a dozen or so students, the messages began to sound somewhat the same; I wasn't sure how much 'new' insight there would be. Although the particulars of their stories were different, the patterns formed by their outcomes and expectations became familiar. It is worth noting, however, that the students who might have a different insight are probably the students I couldn't reach.

When contacting former students for interviews, many phone numbers listed in old student records were disconnected. Sometimes I couldn't tell from an answering machine message whether or not I reached my intended interviewee. Most messages left were not returned. From the original pool of 95 students, I actually called 59 students randomly from all five class lists: 22 phone numbers did not connect (discontinued, moved, wrong number, etc.), 21 students were not home or did not answer, and 16 students were successfully contacted and agreed to be interviewed. These sixteen students may represent a biased sample. The fact that I was able to get in touch with them may indicate that they represent students who had fewer challenges in general, and the fact that they are still at the same phone number may point to more established life circumstances.

It was more difficult than I anticipated to successfully contact former students although, in hindsight, it shouldn't have come as a surprise. A large number of students who participate in this program are living on the edge, with unstable home and personal lives. I observed during the recruitment process that a number of students who signed up for the program could not be reached when it was time to begin class. As well, often when students would stop coming to class it was not possible to contact them because of discontinued phone numbers. This can be indicative of the complex conditions and unstable experiences all too common for some of these students.

The students I did hear from spoke positively of the program and their experiences; they almost represented the homogeneity I tried to avoid. The students who complete the course are likely to have more consistency in their lives, which perhaps relates to the success they realized as a student. It may be that hard-to-reach students (disconnected phones, no phones, moved) have different perspectives about their expectations for achieving success in this program. A bias that limits this study results from what I did *not* hear from the large number of students I was not able to contact.

**TABLE 5.4. Interviewee Characteristics**

Sex #	Ethnicity #	Age Range	1 <sup>st</sup> time ever in college?	Still taking classes at SCC?
Female: 16	White: 6	18 – 24: 1	Yes: 10 No: 6	12 4
Male: 0	Hispanic: 7	25 – 44: 10		
	Afr Amer: 2	> 44: 5		
	Asian: 1			

The number of students interviewed was deemed acceptable, especially in relation to the number of faculty (seven) and administrators (four) interviewed. This is a case study more interested in qualitative than quantitative outcomes. The remaining students in the pool can be contacted for follow-up study. They can also provide useful feedback during the development of any future attempt to further explore the student perspective regarding expected outcomes and what they believe would help them succeed and achieve their goals. As well, a question is raised for future study about why some students stay on the fringe, and others don't continue at all.

When I did make contact with a student, they were open and willing to talk with me, even though I hadn't met most of them before. Of the sixteen students interviewed, I knew four of them – three had been students of mine. Overwhelmingly, the voice on the other end of the phone brightened when I mentioned the program, and they often started telling me their stories before I asked. Their enthusiasm for the program was noticeable. There seemed to be a sense of camaraderie because of our common bond with the program, even with the two students who I spoke to who did not finish the course.

Dora was a single mother who wanted to learn a new skill set that would allow her to make more money. She found that she was not able to continue in school because she couldn't afford to live on a part-time salary during the time it would take to finish a degree. *“It doesn't even matter what I do, I just need to learn something I can make more money doing – and I need to learn it fast. I had to go back to work because I couldn't keep going to school and live on a part-time check.”* Dora represents a growing number of adults seeking short, job skills training. According to the Emerging Pathways Project

(2004), 60 percent of colleges and universities have a continuing education division; and 65 percent of continuing education divisions make a profit.

Celia also went back to work: *I really wanted to stay in school, but I landed a new job. The confidence I brought from school helped.*” She isn’t sure if she will come back to school. If her goal, and view of success, coming into the program was to get a better new job, is she considered a success even though she didn’t finish the course, may not contribute to ongoing credit production, and may never get a certificate or degree? This begins to illustrate the different ways we might need to think about what constitutes success for these students.

During the interviews, I took copious notes. Initial questions asked were broad and general, *“tell me about your experience in the program,”* eliciting a good amount of information. Follow-up questions, *“tell me more about...,”* allowed me to clarify something that wasn’t immediately clear, and/or to delve deeper and gain a better understanding of something the interviewee said. Notes were reviewed after the interview, and notations made to further explain, or add something that I recalled after the fact. Although I asked for, and received, permission to call back for clarification if need be, I didn’t find the need, except with a few faculty members. The voices that came through when I reviewed the totality of notes were fairly clear, with common themes emerging that were easy to detect.

Permission to use their words was given by all who interviewed, it was agreed that their comments would be anonymous and presented generally. In two particular instances, candid comments were made and I was asked to not write down those

comments, and not to use any resulting quotes. These particular discussions are not referred to specifically, although general points made were included. Quotes are sprinkled throughout this paper, attributed to the role of the source – student, faculty, or administrator – and identified with an assigned name, or initials, as appropriate. All interviewees were offered the opportunity to review my work and read the final study.

Using the coding chart described in Chapter 3, I first identified and coded comments made by the interviewees. After all interviewee comments were coded, I read through the interview notes another time to make sure I didn't miss anything significant, and then organized and recorded the coded material. Data charts were created to present the data by codes to illustrate and/or support the theoretical concepts driving the propositions. This provided a condensed, visual representation that allowed me to examine the data for trends and themes about what is valued in this program.

In order to provide a more comprehensive overview, I also sorted interview information related to student characteristics (“*self confidence*,” “*assertiveness*”), institutional characteristics (“*scholarships*,” “*child care*”), academic issues (“*study skills*, *note-taking*, *and using tutors*,” “*career exploration*”) and non-academic issues (“*family and school*,” “*stress management*,” “*supportive classmates*”) into vertical tables. I expected this overview might provide additional information to support my understanding of student success and give me broader insight into what is important for program participants.

## Findings

Recognizing and documenting what success means to students, faculty, and administrators helped lead to a better understanding of what is really valued by the participants in this case study program. This mass of data was examined in an attempt to identify different perspectives that emerged representing various conceptualizations of success. The process also provided insight into the outcomes that seemed most important to the participants, and suggested ways student assessment data can be used to support desired outcomes.

During interviews with program participants, questions were asked to begin identifying what matters about this program, such as *“What kinds of success were you looking for?”* *“What kind of success did you find?”* *“What outcome expectations do you have for this program?”* *“What factors are used in making decisions about this program?”* Answers to these questions begin to demonstrate differences in the conceptualization of success by those involved with this program.

Students were much less clear on what success meant to them, especially when they first came into the program, as represented by Nadia who *“wasn’t even thinking about success at all. Given my situation, success would have been simply to be able to provide for my kids...I had no confidence in my self, no goals, no idea what I would do.”* Several of the instructors echoed the idea that students didn’t always arrive knowing what they want. Jill acknowledged that success for the students depends on their intent, *“students are unsure, it is hard for them to clarify. (We need to) help them get to know themselves better, (so they can) tackle goals that have been elusive for so long.”* Wilma

observed, *“when the student first comes in, they are unclear. We try to discover their goal intent – sometimes it is to take one or two classes, sometimes a degree or certificate, or an intangible success outcome – an overwhelming result heard from students is an increased sense of self-esteem.”*

Coming into the program, about half of the students interviewed said the success they were seeking was to do well in school and learn more about themselves. Kim described her concept of success as *“knowing what direction you are going, who you are, and what you are good at.”* For Beth, *“to make positive things happen in my life;”* and for Lisa, to *“set goals and walk toward those goals.”* These general statements illustrate a lack of clarity even for those students who did articulate an answer to the question, *“what kind of success were you looking for?”*

After learning about themselves through classroom experiences, career exploration exercises, and goal-setting processes, these students were better able to articulate more specific visions of success. Kim learned that she has a knack for computers, and as a result of the class has a career goal, and wants to get an Associates Degree. She says *“I feel successful because now I have a direction and I am doing what I need to do to make a new life for myself.”* Beth has decided on a new career goal, and feels confident that with her new learning skills she can attain an Associates Degree, but *“it’s slow for me,”* she explained, because she can only take one or two classes each semester. Lisa claims to have been successful in setting a goal and developing learning and planning skills to achieve it. She now feels confident that she will get her Associates Degree. Each of these women came into the program with a fuzzy sense of what they

were looking for, what success meant to them. In the process of accomplishing steps toward their first success, they ended up setting even loftier goals than they had coming in.

While it is positive to see students set lofty goals, it is also a challenge to help guide the students toward realistic goals. *“It’s tough. When they first come in they are either unclear (about their goals), or they are unrealistic,”* shared one of the seasoned instructors who shared stories of students who had big dreams that didn’t fit with their reality. *“One student wanted to be a child psychologist. It would have taken her twelve years as a part-time student. She needed to support her family. We looked at what was similar that she could start with. Still, she cried.”* At the same time, there are some students who have difficulty identifying their goals, *“because they know so little, think they have no interests, or can’t relate personally.”* When students don’t have their voice, it is harder for them to imagine anything different than what they have.

About a third of the students first mentioned success in terms of learning; they saw coming to school as a success all by itself. Jane illustrates this well: *“At first I thought success meant a degree...now, (it is) every class I take and finish. I am so much more enriched that I took and completed it successfully.”* Although her concept of success is connected with completing her classes, Jane is also committed to earning her Associates Degree, *“I know that I will get my Associates Degree...why? Because it is something I want to do for myself. I just know...feel it in my heart, I can.”* Similarly with Julia, *“I love to learn, and plan (to get) a Social Services Degree.”* Although the degree is seen as a standard of success, Julia credits the program for skills and abilities that

*“allowed me to learn what I needed to be able to keep coming to school.”* Perhaps there is value in successfully acquiring the skills and abilities necessary for continued, lifelong learning.

Ironically, the students did not typically discuss traditional success outcomes (gpa, degree, career) at first. Coming into the program, they did not articulate that success for them meant gaining job skills or getting a degree. It wasn't until they were exposed to goal setting, career exploration, and other concepts in the class that they began to establish educational and career goals for themselves.

Several of the instructors were able to articulate what success meant for their students. For Tara, success for her students is *“better education, better jobs, better lives.”* Jill wants her students *“to improve their skills, get better jobs, get promoted.”* Cathy is more comprehensive, *“students are successful (when they) do complete work, come to value education, get involved with their children's education, learn more about job opportunities and different careers, and get involved with workshops.”*

Success outcomes differed somewhat depending on whose perspective was considered. Students and instructors talked more about the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired that will allow them to be successful. It was more about the process of learning. Administrators, however, were more specific about the success indicators they were watching for; those that demonstrate student outcomes. Rita was clear, *“we want students to be retained”* as was Wes, *“it is the number of students who continue to take classes.”* Viv acknowledged, *“measures of success required by (district office) are long-term graduation rates, grades, retention rates.”* Theo was more specific, *“success for them*

*would be to finish the class, create a plan to succeed in college, and continue to the next semester.”*

Definitions of success varied, from student to student, and between student, instructor, and administrator. What is not clear is how these few perspectives are representative of the larger population of program participants.

### **Propositions Revealed**

Interview and institutional data was used to illustrate four propositions guiding this project. The first three are based on theoretical suppositions applied to social identity driven perspectives of success. Using the theories represented in these propositions as a point of reference, I created additional coding markers that were used to identify comments made during the interviews that related to constructs within the theoretical propositions. Comments were grouped and documented in tables to be reviewed for trends. By looking for patterns and matching theoretical constructs to actual comments, I was able to find evidence that either supported my propositions, or did not.

#### *Proposition 1*

Concepts included in the first proposition, “*Students who complete the program course will come to search for and define success in terms of finding their voice and developing cultural capital*” were not addressed by as many students as I expected. Understanding the tenets of learning theory that support a holistic approach to learning, I expected to hear from the students some kind of realization that getting to know

themselves better (as indicated by voice) was a way to help them unlock the secrets of learning. Four students shared this kind of growth in very specific ways. Jane demonstrated her voice when she took ownership of her self-definition:

*(Before GO), I reflected beliefs of those around me, no beliefs of my own...the light bulb went on when I realized that others were like me, we could work together and see ourselves in a different light...(I have a) better understanding of who (I'm) supposed to be, not who the world tells us. Stand on our own beliefs.*

Likewise, Denise shared her own definition of the voice she had discovered:

*I found a voice I didn't think I had...learning a new way of seeing things...finding writing strengths, skills that I didn't know...getting good grades on my paper...people letting me know there were good things about me... I was stretched...but grew. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I did...small successes became bigger successes and I realized I could go where I wanted.*

Twelve of the students spoke of increased self-esteem, gaining confidence, becoming stronger, and feeling a sense of strength and security. Is this a demonstration of voice? Perhaps not as technically defined by the original researchers, but I would suspect that further research would demonstrate that this kind of personal growth is, at least, a precursor to finding voice.

There didn't seem to be an initial awareness by the students of the benefit of self-growth and identity development; it wasn't an incoming expectation even though it was mentioned as an outcome and basis for success by many of the students interviewed. Based on interviews and my experiences with these students, although it was an outcome

they came to value, many of the students didn't expect to grow in this way and didn't realize the connection self-determination has to the learning process until we discussed it.

The expected "cultural capital" gap was present, but the students did not come into the program seeking the four areas of cultural capital specified by Valadez (1996). They did acquire this insight, however. Three of Valadez's four cultural capital considerations important to student success are specifically included in the course outline of the class. Assessments are required of all students. Acquiring these areas of cultural capital may not be considered success benchmarks, but it seems clear that they are important outcomes in support of student success.

A general lack of knowledge about college-going behavior was evident, although specific college-going behaviors were not clearly articulated by most of those interviewed. The following student's comment was typical, "*I had no idea what to expect from college.*" Even those who had previous experience, like Denise, "*had a lot to learn. Things have changed since last time.*" What she gained, though, was "*(I) learn(ed) my way around campus, how to access resources - the library, computer sites, learning center, tutoring. I'm not by myself...I have support, like scaffolding.*"

Assessments, their significance, or even the importance of basic skills was notably absent in my discussions with the students. This may suggest that many of these students are "pre-learners;" preparing for successful academic learning experiences in subsequent semesters by building confidence and success skills now. For many of the students, this was their only class. The significance of placement in academic classes was not yet relevant to them, but may be an important discussion necessary to include in the

course outline. Students on financial aid have to take at least two, up to four classes. It is difficult for new, nontraditional students to take four classes their first semester and succeed without extensive, targeted support. This may suggest an area for further discussion in planning a successful entry experience for these students, depending on their readiness.

Academic and career advising are cornerstones of this class, so it was expected that students would address the benefit of planning and having a goal in discussions of their success. This didn't happen to the extent I thought it would. Students interviewed spoke highly of the counselor who was also instructor for the course. They spoke more about the support and guidance afforded them personally, not as much about the academic counseling and educational planning provided. What the students did speak about were their goals – educational goals, career goals, and personal goals. This may be a result of the planning and goal-setting activities built into the course.

Attitudes about the world of work affect how these students, most of them women, see the possibilities that exist for them in this world. *“I felt empowered by the speakers,”* shared Nadia, *“the knowledge I gained, and the information...I never thought of gender equality at the level he (the speaker) presented it. (I now) look at things differently, so much more informed, more thoughtful.”*

The students were not always as clear about their specific needs when they came to the college program, but their different voices became almost unanimous in the knowledge, skills, and abilities they came to value; *“this class taught me to be a better student,”* *“it (gave me) a better understanding in (sic) what you want to study and what*

*classes to take,” “it helped me continue with more classes,” “to stick with it and stay positive,” “gave me a support system...helped me learn my way around campus, and how to access resources.”*

Students appreciate the variety of topics built into the course; the course objectives seemed to do a good job of meeting the holistic needs of these students, as evidenced by their general comments, overall. Those who did find their voice or grow in a personal way seemed more confident of their ability to succeed, as did those who began to acquire college cultural capital, like Anna: *“I learned how to learn, am more in control; I know where to go, how to get an answer, talk about stuff in general.”* I heard the students who participated in the program say they came to value the learning outcomes identified by the course learning objectives.

Although I originally set out to look at age correlation, I didn't find any significance in the data. The majority of students I spoke with represented the middle age range, 24 – 43 years old. Students from all ages found both success and failure. Positive growth processes didn't necessarily seem to be age-related in this situation. Belenky et al. (1997) describe cognitive development as a “culturally influenced psychological process” that does not happen in stages, as much as develop through perspectives. In his holistic studies of the influences of the college environment on development, Chickering (1969, 1993) found that students move through vector development at different rates, and may return at different times. This might explain why age wasn't a correlating factor for these students; cognitive development isn't age-specific as much as it depends on readiness.

*Proposition 2*

What became evident from interviews with the students was the influence of the instructional counselor assigned to manage the program, conduct intake processing, teach the class, and provide counseling to students in the class – in addition to their regular counseling load. These counselors had passion (Jane: *“teachers (were) role models, willing to share success and happiness,”*) and personal commitment to the students and this program, even as they demonstrated this commitment in different ways (Nadia: *“having someone who cares – makes you feel comfortable...the teacher made it seem so easy.”*). The instructors helped facilitate the learning communities so often cited as helpful to new college student’s success. Students offered many comments about the dedication of their teachers, *“our teacher was great, she understood and listened,” “she focused on our specific needs in the class,” “when I had my office appointment with her, she made me feel important,” “I am still in touch with my instructor, she likes to know how I am doing.”*

I interviewed seven instructional counselors in addition to the students. Considering the faculty perspective, I proposed that *“Instructors who teach the course will conceive of success outcomes in differing ways depending on the extent of their professionalization - locals will support a more traditional, academic oriented preparation whereas cosmopolitans and intermediates, to varying degrees, will embrace a more holistically developmental approach to the course.”* This generalization was not exactly borne out through faculty interviews and observations.

In order to determine their orientation, I relied on my familiarity with the program instructors, our history working together, and our interactions at program coordinator meetings. I also asked questions of the interviewees based on “The Guttman Scales” (Gouldner, 1957, p. 302); used by Gouldner to identify inner-outer group orientation, commitment to skills, and loyalty to the organization. Even though questions in these scales were oriented toward four-year faculty, and included questions unique to the institution it was used in, they provided guidance in making sufficient determination for the purposes of this study.

As indicated in the following chart informed by Gouldner’s Guttman Scales (1957) a local orientation was determined if the instructional counselor had a predominance of local characteristics, a cosmopolitan orientation determined if most characteristics were more professionally oriented. A few of the instructors seemed to be between these two, referred to by Gouldner as “Intermediates.”

**TABLE 5.5. Instructor Identities**

	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7
<b><i>LOCAL</i></b>	√				√	√	
Loyalty to the Organization (Intend to stay, share professional interests with colleagues on campus, know many people on campus – connected more to the institution)	√	√			√	√	
Low Commitment to Specialized Skills (Minimal professional development, focus on assigned work)	√				√		√
Internal Reference Group Orientation (use Org values and	√				√	√	√

beliefs as standards of judgment)							
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>		√					√
Demonstrates characteristics of both		√					√
<b>COSMOPOLITAN</b>			√	√			
Loyalty to Profession (Would likely leave for better opportunity, professional interests more with people off campus, don't know as many people on campus – more connected to profession)			√	√			√
High Commitment to Specialized Skills (Advancing education, training, research, publications, special assignments)		√	√	√		√	
External Reference Group Orientation (use Professional values and beliefs – from periodicals, books and other publications – as standards of judgment)		√	√	√			

Of the seven interviewed, three course instructors were determined to have a local orientation, based on my observations that they preferred the status quo, have great respect for the history of the program, and are very loyal to the institution and their campus in particular. They didn't indicate much involvement with professional organizations, but exhibited more of a campus focus. Two instructors were considered cosmopolitan, largely determined because they were pursuing higher education degrees (at the time) giving them access to greater professional insights, they often talked about student success strategies, and they are involved with national organizations committed to the advancement of higher education and student success. They have been responsible for innovations in the program (getting a grant to start an off-site class, conducting pilot classes, developing opportunities for select continuing students), and introducing

innovative class activities, some of which mainstreamed into the course outline (e.g. creating a personal portfolio, journaling), and some of which did not.

The other two counseling instructors are considered intermediates; loyal to the organization and very committed to the program. Their commitment keeps them open to new ideas and abreast of developments in their profession. (They do attend professional conferences from time to time.) They have supported program innovation as a way for the program to grow and improve their ability to help the students. Knowing the unique program needs, from years of working with this specific student population, has made these faculty members champions for these students.

As the instructors shared their general ideas about what kind of growth or success they expected, they didn't always articulate these ideas in the same ways that I have come to think about them. The distinctions between a "local" orientation and a "cosmopolitan" were less clear as attitudes and activities were described that blurred the difference between these two social identities in practice. Ultimately, it was the student who was the focus of their loyalty, more so than the institution or their profession. Whether the instructors acted based on history, or whether new ideas directed their actions, the group was most concerned about the student's progress.

This proposition hypothesized a difference between the instructional approach of a local and cosmopolitan. An outcome of this review was the realization that many holistic concepts were built into the course content. A structured course outline used throughout the district allows students to experience all aspects (academic and self-growth) of the course. In this way, anyone who teaches the course ends up promoting

holistic learning objectives. It does seem to be significant who teaches this class, as the students can tell how invested a teacher is. There was an overwhelming sense from the students who talked about teachers they had who truly made a difference in their lives, largely because the student was made to feel like they really mattered. This is a gift. “The quality of educational programs and services is linked directly to the quality of the professionals themselves” (Winston & Creamer, 1997.)

Students didn’t seem to detect a significant difference between instructors who were local and those considered cosmopolitan. The majority of students of both “local” and “cosmopolitan” teachers spoke of spending time on academic skill building *and* self-development, consistent with the adopted syllabus. Only one student who was in a cosmopolitan’s class shared that “*if we had done more study skills, it would have made a difference when I went full-time,*” and one student from a local’s class said “*there was too much work, and it wasn’t learning friendly.*” I attribute these singular statements to individual preferences but note the need for a feedback loop from student to teacher. Should these experiences be more widespread, systematic feedback would prompt attention from program coordinators.

The various instructor perspectives on student success can be generalized to represent locals who feel “*the students are doing fine...this program has worked well for many years,*” and the cosmopolitan view that “*there are so many new developments in the area of retention and adult learning.*” It was interesting to note that a normative effect was seen as the course developed; class syllabi, assignments, activities, grading charts, and formatting were shared across the district. Evidence of professionalization

was found in handouts, course activities, and other “innovations” usually introduced from a conference, another class, or some professional source. This sharing of materials, activities, and ideas resulted in similar course features being replicated and repeated from class to class (“mimetic isomorphism” per DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The instructors shared general ideas about what kind of growth, or success they expected from their students, but they didn’t always articulate these ideas in the same ways that I have come to think about them. The distinction between a “local” and a “cosmopolitan” orientation were more pronounced in my mind than they seemed to be in the practice, or language, of the instructors I interviewed. I expected clear-cut support for my notions about the role social identities played in the focus of classroom topics, but did not find such clarity. Faculty interviewees didn’t speak of ‘developing voice’ or ‘building cultural capital,’ but they did provide examples indicating how they expected their students to succeed. From an intermediate: *“I want them to want it for themselves, to have the desire to do well so they can feel good about their accomplishments;”* from a local: *“they need to be able to do well in a regular classroom and have the tools to be a fully functioning college student.”*

I anticipated local instructors to orient their students more toward academic skill building, traditional student success skills (note-taking, researching, study tips), and typical career exploration (find a major, research careers). The instructors thought to be locals would more likely embrace the roots of the original program (preparing students for jobs), teaching very much as they always have. These instructors would likely have a more traditional, structured class, with higher academic expectations.

On the other hand, instructors with a more “cosmopolitan” approach would be presumed more likely to support a holistic approach to student development, focusing on development of the self in support of critical thinking and reflection about self and purpose. These instructors would be more apt to try new classroom activities, and introduce new ideas on a regular basis. Their approach to career exploration would be more value - and strength - based, with emphasis on career research to identify “fit.” I might expect their classrooms to be less traditional (as evidenced, perhaps by reference to “circles” and “journaling”).

I found these differences to exist, but not to the extent I might have expected. Those instructors who were more loyal to the history of the program did speak more clearly about gaining skills, but they were also aware of the growth of self-esteem that seems to be a result of the community formed by students in the class. The cosmopolitan teachers did focus more on personal growth and development, but used academic activities to teach those lessons (ex. identify personal strengths and show how they become valuable study skills). While instructors used different approaches, the structure of the course syllabus and commonly defined learning objectives ensured that students were consistently exposed to all areas of development intended, no matter which class they were in.

### *Proposition 3*

In consideration of the administrative perspective, the third proposition states “*Administrators will evaluate and allocate resources to the program primarily in terms*

*of traditional institutional measures of student success – student credit production and student completion.*” Given the dismal economic condition of higher education and resulting competition for scarce resources, it is especially important to know what is valued and what needs to be measured to demonstrate identified outcome indicators. In this case, interviews with administrators and campus coordinators, together with program budget information, established a viewpoint of how program resource allocation decisions are made, and on what information these decisions are based.

Social, political, and economic conditions change over time, as do the players. Without a structural foundation to ensure constant consideration, funding support is inconsistent at best. Historically, the program has had different external funding sources that provided for new student scholarships. When those funding sources disappeared, there was the expectation that the program would share equitably in district funding. There is competition for district funding by many worthy programs and activities, and not all within the college are program supporters. *“One of the administrators is pretty vocal... (he) thinks we are putting too much time, effort, and money on those who are high risk (that) we should put those resources toward students who are here and doing ok.”* Knowing that this kind of perspective exists points to the importance of confirming and demonstrating criteria for success.

At the same time, there were administrators who recognized all too clearly the value of providing a “first step” opportunity to these students in a way that they *“felt that they were special, not isolated, but they felt understood. (GO) provided time, location, space, and support to get started.”* This same administrator also spoke very clearly of

expected outcomes, “*growth in terms of the number of students served and, most important, retention. The students need to get an education plan.*” He spoke of the need for longitudinal tracking “*essential over time*” and to look at historical patterns to show reasons why some students return and others do not.

Another administrator focused more on the process, confident that it leads to desired outcomes, “*The mission of the college is to build community through learning...but learning takes many forms...this program helps students become successful as learners...it is a social investment.*” At the same time, he acknowledged that the number of students who continue college classes “*is pretty impressive*” and stated the need for ongoing evaluation and continuous feedback to be incorporated into college processes.

A third administrator cut to the chase; “*SCC is not a social services agency. The students must be retained, they need to persist to the next semester in order to achieve their educational goal – whether it be transfer, job skills, or to complete 1-2 classes.*” With resources being scarce, it was argued that this was money being spent on so few students, and they really could gain access to the same services as a mainstream student. “*The pie is only so big; we’d love to fund everything, but we have to put resources where the most students benefit.*” Despite the desire by some to acknowledge and support the social benefit of a program like GO, practical economic realities require demonstration of successful outcomes. This magnifies the importance of knowing what measures of success are valued, and aligning what is measured with what is considered during decision-making.

Completion data is difficult to quantify, especially for this population. Although program data shows that since 1999 581 program students have completed a degree, it doesn't show how many didn't, or how many students are still working on a degree. Almost 4,000 students have registered for the program class since its inception, but there aren't records to show how many students graduated prior to 1999, or how many are in the graduation pipeline (given that the average time to degree completion is six years for these students.) What is significant, however, is the total number of student credits (FTSE) that these students represent.

A 2001 program report shows that average re-enrollment figures (from one semester to the next) of program participants over three semesters to be 68%, in comparison to the college average of 50%. Again, this speaks to student credit production that needs to be captured and shared as a success indicator valued by administrators. An acknowledged problem with some of this data is that it is inconsistent – in the regularity with which it is reported, the specific information it is measuring, and the way it is presented. A pressing need is not only gathering data, but also formulating a strategic plan for what data is to be tracked and gathered, and how it is going to be analyzed and reported.

Accounting for success can be difficult; so is determining what is valued. I was pondering how to think about this differently, and something 'clicked' when one of the interviewees said, "*I was always so impressed with the way all the important college leaders came to the Celebration. It made me realize that they really thought the program*

*was important.*” This insight helped me understand the genius of including Board members and administrators from each campus in the end-of-semester Celebration.

The Celebration is a time-honored program tradition that includes all students who complete the class each semester and their families. Invitations are extended, families come in their Sunday best, the event is held in the campus theater (a beautiful, elegant space), and the entire evening focuses on the students and their achievements. Each class is presented and the students are acknowledged individually, allowing them to “practice” walking across the stage just like when they will graduate. Administrators form a welcoming line, each extending a personal expression of congratulations. One student from each class is chosen by their classmates to share their story. Scholarship recipients are acknowledged.

Hearing the stories of the successful students, and seeing first-hand the familial pride did convey to the administrators a qualitative aspect of the success these students achieved. As one administrator observed *“I really saw and felt that they were special.”* It was the regular exposure (there was a Celebration at the end of every semester) to the students themselves that provided “data” that contributed to decision-making processes.

Two examples illustrated how this made a difference in how administrators thought about the value of this program. A new administrator attended the Celebration and was duly impressed until he came to find out exactly what the event celebrated; *“...all this for a class? I thought they finished a whole program.”* This demonstrates that we can’t take for granted that decision-makers understand the unique circumstances of these disadvantaged re-entry students, for whom finishing a semester is an impressive

accomplishment, and the first of many small successes that might not otherwise come to be.

This administrator sees the program in purely economical terms. His criterion for success is bottom-line, which he investigated with the idea of discontinuing the program. To his surprise, he found the numbers to be sufficient to demonstrate that the program was bringing in more revenue to the college than it was costing. What he did have an issue with, however, was calling it a program. So, while the “program” was able to provide performance data that demonstrates a significant number of students do go on to complete additional classes, certificates, and degrees, it is no longer a program, but simply a class. This administrator doesn’t come to the celebrations anymore.

Understanding that not all decision makers value the same things, it is clear that we need to acknowledge what is considered important by those who do make decisions involving the program. There is the need to document and communicate specific milestones to help administrators appreciate the short-term successes experienced by these students on their journey to an academic goal. As a supportive Dean noted, *“We need to look at historical data. Longitudinal tracking is essential to demonstrate what is happening to these students.”*

Secondly, there were a few instances where an administrator championed the program because he did hear the stories and recognized the benefit of supporting these efforts in support of the mission of the college. One administrator, a solid advocate of the program, spoke of identifying community partnerships that serve common goals to provide revenue resources, as a way of using political capital to leverage support for the

program. Program advocacy takes place when you “*line up goals and objectives of the institution with your division, and then your program,*” he shared.

The Board (to whom the Chancellor reports) has become a champion of this program as well. A big reason has to do with the success stories they have heard about the students in the program, and the recognition that this program serves an important community service. About five years ago, facing budget woes and an uncertain future, the program coordinator decided on a marketing campaign – both out in the community and within the college community. The push to share information about the program benefits was to gain support, financial and otherwise. Part of that effort included a special presentation to the Board during a monthly meeting. During the presentation, three students shared their personal stories, along with a report that demonstrated successful student outcomes, far-reaching benefits, and modest resource needs. Several Board members were reportedly very personally touched.

Soon thereafter, the Foundation established a separate scholarship fund and found several donors who have been extremely generous. This accounts for scholarships made available each semester to promising continuing students. Funding for scholarships available to new, non-Pell students is uncertain, but continuing scholarships are assured thanks to the students’ stories, and an administrator who cared enough to institutionalize a small piece of this program to ensure its continued success. Three to four Board members continue to attend the Celebration each semester.

*Proposition 3a*

Lastly, the fourth proposition spoke to the presence of different perspectives: *“Perspectives of success based on students finding their voice, gaining cultural capital, and holistic developmental outcomes are not considered nor valued independently by administrators in their decision-making.”* There are diverse perspectives, both between the different groups, and among the different groups. Reflected in the perspectives were the unique individuals who take part, many of whom had very strong, emotional ties to the program. There is a bond that connects those who have been involved with the program, largely because of the students and their stories. This connection makes the ideals of the program, the center of efforts on behalf of the program. This centrality balances any differences, and provides a focus of endeavor.

Based on interviews with the participants of this program, each individual shared what they valued and deemed as “success:”

**TABLE 5.6. Perspectives of Success**

<b>Student perspective of Success</b>	<b>Faculty perspective of Success</b>	<b>Administrator perspective of Success</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Finish class(es)”</li> <li>- “Knowing what direction you are going in, who you are, and what you want and what you’re good at”</li> <li>- “Given my situation, success would have been simply to be able to provide for my kids.”</li> <li>- “To set goals and work toward those goals”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Increased confidence” (C)</li> <li>- “Changed attitude, a change in thinking” (C)</li> <li>- “Better education, better jobs, better lives.” (L)</li> <li>- “The ability to identify skills and interests; learn how to build on them to get a good paying job.” (L)</li> <li>- “The students learn the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Grow in terms of numbers; return the following semester...get an educational plan.”</li> <li>- “Development of the student as a whole; but also finishing the class and continuing to the next semester.”</li> <li>- “The program numbers show evidence of success;</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “To make positive things happen in my life.”</li> <li>- “Give me study skills and help me navigate through the system.”</li> <li>- “Gained self esteem, confidence; I am more in control”</li> <li>- “Valuing self; the idea that we can go forward even if there are obstacles”</li> <li>- “ The graduation ceremony made me feel proud.”</li> <li>- “Ultimately, it helped me figure out what I am good at.”</li> <li>- “Now I value education, I know how to do it, and why I am doing it.”</li> <li>-“The personal development I experienced; from ‘I can’t’ to ‘I can.’”</li> <li>- “My increased confidence helped me land a new job.”</li> <li>- “Opened my eyes to opportunities, what I am capable of.”</li> <li>- “I understand better how school is; it helps me continue.”</li> <li>- “Now I know I can finish college and have a career.”</li> </ul>	<p>correlation between better education and a better life.”</p> <p>(I)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “The students come to know themselves better; know what it takes to make improvements, tackle goals that have elusive for so long.” (I)</li> <li>- “The student’s knowledge that they have real input into their life.” (L)</li> </ul>	<p>Long term persistence rates, gpa”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Students must be retained, persist to the next semester, and meet their educational goal.”</li> </ul>
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The students conceive of success in very fuzzy terms coming into the program, probably because their goals are also unclear. Upon reflection, they focus on the ways that the class helped them succeed. In general, some of them were able to articulate the knowledge, skills, and abilities they gained to help them understand and navigate within the college environment, and the self-understanding to know what they want and what

they have to do to get it. The students attain their goals to various degrees, depending on how much control they have taken over their life circumstances.

Faculty members want the same kind of success for their students; long and short-term academic and personal growth. They want the students to gain skills in the short-term to be able to demonstrate committed students behaviors, to be able to continue taking and finishing classes, and ultimately find long-term success in the job market.

Administrators support this program largely because of the successful student outcomes and the cost/benefit economics of student credit production. Their view of success is in support of students persisting from semester to semester until the students complete and get certificates or degrees. The stories told by the students have an effect in personalizing the extent of their success and demonstrating the successful small steps being taken. While the holistic growth and promotion of the section of the college mission that “grows the community through learning” might be appealing to administrators on some level, it is the economics of enough students generating a value of FTSE that is greater than the cost of the program that allows this program to continue.

Different perspectives illustrated the individual connections, professional commitments, and institutional strategies that converge to create an experience that fulfills a critical mission of the community college – to develop individuals in a way that supports their personal, academic, and career goals. The different conceptualizations of success might suggest conflicts in the alignment of goals, however I don’t believe this to be the case. There appears to be a continuum of success with all perspectives heading in the same direction. As students feel more confident in themselves and learn how to

navigate the culture of college, they are more receptive to the holistic learning that occurs both in the classroom and from being part of a supportive learning community. This situation creates a culture of success that has allowed a good number of participating students to continue taking classes. Their successful continuation supports their academic goal, promotes the mission of the college, and creates outcome measures (FTSE and completion rates) valued by the administration.

### **Success Outcomes**

The students spoke of success in ways that were relevant to their lives now. Their concept of success was more short-term, rather than based on a longer-term view of what they wanted their life to be. They didn't necessarily talk about success in the specific ways I expected they would, especially when it came to voice and cultural capital. It was interesting to note all the ways the students felt successful, and the various outcomes that they attributed to their success. This data will be useful for class and program planning.

As I reviewed interview notes, applicable comments, especially those related to success, were sorted using the general headings of *student characteristics*, *institutional characteristics*, *academic issues*, and *non-academic issues*. This enabled me to examine a large amount of interview data in a way that shaped some sense of understanding about what was being said. I relied on the guiding propositions to examine the data further for specific matches to theoretical constructs identified to be relevant to student success.

While the first proposition focused specifically on voice and cultural capital, the general category *student characteristics* provided a broader look at what kind of success

the students were seeking and/or experienced, what meaningful skills and abilities these students found valuable to succeed, and/or what characteristics they found to be helpful as they went through the program. Thirteen of the sixteen students referred to personal growth as a key success outcome, as demonstrated by comments from students such as Nellie, *“My self-esteem was (zero) before I came to this class, and now I see a future for me and my family.”* Other students shared similar kinds of personal successes: *“gained self-confidence,” “learned to be more assertive,” “I learned so much about myself and how many things I can accomplish.”*

Several of the students interviewed articulated their need for assistance to successfully get through the experience, as represented by Mary: *“I took this course as a means to prepare myself for a college setting. I needed discipline, strength, study habits, and more importantly, the drive and determination...this is the first step to get (sic) an education.”* Preserving this kind of ‘first step’ opportunity seems to be warranted by the expressed desire of the students in their support of the program course, the observation of their instructors, the affirmative demonstration of their ability to succeed (as documented by their persistence and retention data), and the positive regard created by participants in the program via their “stories.”

*Institutional characteristics* that were mentioned by eight of the students seemed to alleviate non-academic pressures and allow them to focus their energies on school. Two students specifically highlighted the benefit of childcare assistance, as represented by Kelli, *“it made it a lot easier when I could get (my son) into the (on-campus) day care center. Before that, it was really hard.”* Emergency funds, access to community

resources, and referrals provide additional sources of assistance. These resources become a safety net for those who are attempting a very new path in their life.

Six interviewees specifically identified scholarship benefits, *“the financial support makes it easier,” “help with books, scholarships, emergency \$, to know it is there, to be able to plan” “I really wanted a scholarship,” “scholarships helped a lot.”* Submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a requirement of the program, and often a classroom activity. Rose demonstrated how this kind of cultural capital has benefits beyond the student: *“not only did I learn how to get financial aid, but I was able to help my daughter (a high school senior) with her application.”*

Also significant are the numbers of continuing students who benefit (some unexpectedly) from scholarship workshops and Foundation scholarship opportunities; as expressed by Tina, *“I went to every (scholarship) seminar, did everything...”* and Carmen, *“I couldn’t believe it when they announced my name at the Celebration and I got that scholarship... I was able to get it every semester that I kept my grades up.”*

Noteworthy institutional support includes the Celebration, during which scholarships are awarded to GO students who successfully completed the class and are continuing attendance at SCC in pursuit of a specific academic goal. Scholarships for new students are a big draw for the program initially, and the biggest source of campus funding needs. However, Foundation scholarship support for continuing students demonstrates a significant show of community support for the program.

The College Foundation established a scholarship fund targeted specifically for single mothers, and re-entry students who have successfully completed the program class,

maintain academic standards of progress (complete courses attempted with a C average or better), and are working on a certificate or degree. Currently \$50,000 is made available each year to recognize and provide scholarships for successful continuing students (as determined by their goal identification, successful completion of classes, gpa, and a personal essay.)

Common to the student interviews were positive comments about the support and encouragement of their instructor / counselor, as voiced by Sofia, *“I felt that I could – but that I needed help...I loved the teacher, she was more helpful than I imagined. Got me to delve into things...it was a positive experience, learning who I am and what I want to do.”* This brought to mind the concepts put forth by Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968) in their book *“Pygmalion in the Classroom.”* These researchers were able to demonstrate, and the research has been repeated over the years, the impact of teacher expectations on the intellectual development of students. When instructors expect a certain level of performance (high or low) from students, how the instructors behave toward those students can produce different results (“self-fulfilling prophecy”). The students in this program had the full faith, encouragement and support of these instructors.

In addition to the institutional characteristics that can play a role in student success, there are *academic issues* that challenge the students and provide opportunity for support. Eleven students interviewed spoke about specific academic successes, thanks to the support received in the class, as represented by Marina: *“I learned what kind of a student I needed to be, the benefits of working hard – how to do that.”* Specific comments from different students demonstrated multiple benefits: *“I learned study skills,*

*different learning styles, time management,” “resumes, career exploration really opened doors for me,” “studying skills, testing skills, and how to present myself for employment.”* A few students showed a highly developed level of personal insight, *“actually doing academics after all these years is a challenge...I learned that you can prepare yourself to be a good student” “I learned the benefits of working hard, and how to do that”* or knew exactly what they wanted *“I need a good math instructor.”*

As many of these students are not in the habit of coming to school, and few have had successful educational experiences, it becomes important to be aware of the additional challenges that exist in their reality. The students have to be ready to take responsibility for their own success to happen. Equally important, the institution has the shared responsibility to provide the support necessary for the student to be able to do so.

The *non-academic issues* that mattered most to the students seemed important in promoting positive outcomes. On the one hand, students appreciated that they were able to gain practical skills to help balance their responsibilities at school with their responsibilities at home. Half of the interviewees talked about the benefits of gaining non-academic skills (time management, stress management, problem solving, and decision making skills were mentioned).

Another non-academic skill highly valued by many students, as indicated during interviews and by classroom feedback, was goal setting (academic, career and personal). A majority of the students indicated the need to figure out what they wanted to do and how to do it. When asked about something significant she gained from the class, she talked about the difference she experienced as a student from when she was younger. *“I*

*had gone to school before without purpose, but dropped out. I didn't know the value of going to class, of keeping up. Now, I know how to study, manage my time, and organize myself. I think about what I really want to do. I'm not aimless; I have a purpose. (The class) helped me set a goal; helped me continue.*" Establishing an academic/career goal and educational plan was an important achievement cited, as represented by Sue, "*my ultimate goal is to figure out what I'm good at.*"

Instructors also reported that students were more clearly able to identify a goal as a result of being in the class, as reported by an intermediate, "*the student is afraid in the beginning, they don't believe they will succeed. But we do things in class, the rest of the students are there to provide support, and the student has a little success. Success builds upon success. There is a boost in esteem, and growth. Now the student believes that they have the ability to accomplish a goal and we can think about setting one.*"

When it comes to the most significant benefit that helped promote their success, the students were unanimous that they valued the support system which developed in the classroom through the semester as expressed by Maria, "*it was very supportive, not just the instructor, but also fellow students*" and Nadia, "*Without GO, I wouldn't have been connected into school nearly so well...(the) sense of belonging, people cared so much – made you feel part of the group. I connected and was made to feel part of the group, that was what made the difference, similar situations, shared stories, I didn't feel alone.*"

Research supports the notion that a positive outlook and high goals promote persistence (Hagedorn, Maxwell & Hampton, 2002). This case study program includes outcomes that help students more clearly identify their academic, personal and career

goals; promotes a positive outlook and high degree of commitment to these goals; and supports academic achievement. This awareness provides direction in establishing outcomes and developing assessment tools.

In reviewing the first four general thematic areas of focus, I heard that the students found value in personal growth; developing self-confidence, assertiveness, increased self-esteem and strength. The institutional characteristics that they valued most were financial aid (scholarships), supportive instructors, and childcare. Without them saying it directly, I heard that having instructors who were counselors with a skill-set indicative of their profession is vital for the needs of these students. Classroom activities empowered the students with information about the financial aid application and course registration processes, and also helped remove potential barriers to ongoing success.

Academic support that helped the students succeed included the development of study skills, test taking, career exploration, and resume development. Other class activities were recognized as providing skills that will be used for future success, like the development of a personal portfolio, and practicing public speaking. The development of self-management skills, defining a goal, and the ability to be part of a learning community were positive outcomes identified by the students as making them feel successful. These outcomes are currently included in the class objectives. The acknowledgement of the role these outcomes had in success for the students is to be noted.

As demonstrated by the way students spoke of the outcomes that helped them feel/be successful, their view of success was immediate to their needs. When

measurement of success is required, it is significant to be able to assess the short-term outcomes that support long-term success. This study set out to look at various definitions of success. However, the students I spoke with found small, short-term successes to be meaningful. These steps along a process that will take them to their academic goal seem significant. From this study, I learned that success is a process, not a destination; that small success steps are as important to the students as their long-term goals; and that personal growth as a precursor to academic success is important.

The GO program has evolved to meet the needs of the students it serves. Local, intermediate, and cosmopolitan instructional counselors worked collaboratively to create a course outline that addresses both personal growth and academic skill building. Program data, while not complete or consistently tracked during the history of the program, has recently been compiled. It shows, historically, that students in the program course are retained at a higher rate than the general student population, and experience on-going retention and completion rates comparable to the student body as a whole. This is significant, given the additional challenges these students experience. Of importance to the administrators is the robust FTSE (student credit production) generated by these students over time.

In the concluding chapter I will review these results in light of their ongoing implications. Considering long-term needs is necessary to ensure program viability. Identifying funding sources is required to provide for financial stability. Learning what to measure becomes important for accountability, and resource acquisition. In addition to addressing the propositions driving this study, I will discuss implications for scholarship

and practice. In reviewing the outcomes of this study, questions for additional inquiry will be raised. These questions, along with recommendations for practice and lessons learned will conclude this discussion of the case.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

*The case study format derives its strength from “it’s sensitivity to individual situations, patterns of relationships, contexts, and natural environments in organizations” (Hearn and Corcoran, 1988, p. 640).*

Based largely on the feedback from my GO students, and my observations over the years, my expected outcomes track in large part with the propositions driving this research – with a few unexpected findings.

I did expect that the students who participated in the program would articulate more clearly the expectations they had when they first came back to school. I presumed their initial expectations would involve learning about the college, *“I took this course as a means to prepare myself for the college setting,”* learning about study strategies, test-taking, and maybe help getting over their fear of math, *“I wanted help with whatever I could get – stress management, time management, financial, library use, etc.”*

But these expectations weren’t articulated as often as I anticipated. More often, student expectations were vague, like the student who participated in the program and took the class *“to get my life back,”* or the student who *“knew that I needed to do something, and this seemed like a good place to start.”* For many of the students, *“the class was recommended by a counselor”* and the students didn’t really know what to expect. As one instructor put it, *“they don’t know what they don’t know.”*

I expected that the varying perspectives of what success means to the students would largely be determined by the way they think about learning, and the cultural capital they bring to the class. How they view themselves, especially in terms of the teacher, the classroom, the school, the workplace, and society, plays a role in how the

student views the knowledge-acquisition process; how they learn. A stronger sense of self supports the ability to think critically and widen spheres of interest. When that sense of self is weak, or nonexistent, there is not the same view of potential or confidence in ability. Opportunity doesn't seem as possible until that notion comes from within.

In support of this, I anticipated the transformational experiences I heard from several of the students; *“this class helped me feel stronger,” “I used to let people control my life, but from being in this class that changed,” “it changed my way of thinking about school and life.”* These transformations suggest a confirmation of self, accommodated by clarity of purpose that leads the student to a more internally driven commitment to their academic goal. It is this internalization that promotes optimum success. I did, however, expect to hear about this from more of the students.

It may be that more transformational experiences occurred than I had privy to, or that the students even realized about themselves. I did notice that the students from my classes, about 25% of the sample, talked much more openly with me than the other students. Although all interviewees were receptive to me simply because of the program bond, there is probably a level of trust that did not yet exist with me, and prevented many of them from talking about personal feelings and revelations to the extent that they might from their instructors. As assessments are designed to capture this data over time, it seems prudent to focus on classroom methods of assessment to involve as many students and obtain the most relevant insight possible.

I expected that the students who completed and continued to take classes would talk about this transformation experience. Students who did not continue would not be

expected to have this awareness and/or will not talk about it. My expectations did not exactly play out. Four of the students talked openly and clearly about their transformations. All of them have specific plans for academic degrees, but they weren't always able to continue taking classes. Two of the 'transformed' students were not currently enrolled because of health reasons; they both expressed a desire to return to school when they could.

Although I found that many students did not articulate transformational or change experiences clearly, and certainly did not necessarily have a conscious awareness of such, there may have been more change experiences than acknowledged by the students. This could be checked by more in-depth interviews using more targeted questions, and perhaps a different approach to better establish a deeper level of trust. If this process were to become a programmatic activity, it would magnify the importance of having the counseling component so integrally involved; an institutional characteristic worth noting.

One of my expectations was that the social identity of the counseling instructors would have an impact on the degree to which the students a) found their voice, b) gained cultural capital, or c) experienced both. Given the notion that cosmopolitan, and to a degree intermediates, would have more current understanding of student development and best practices, I expected a difference in student perceptions based on the social identity of the instructor. I also thought there would be a difference in how the instructors approached the class. This was not the case, given that the instructors worked together with a common goal of student success to develop a course outline that supported both

academic and personal growth for the students. This was a pleasant surprise that speaks to the value of mission centrality.

The administrative decision-making process provided another opportunity to test my expectation of how success is considered in relation to bottom-line results. In the case of student success programs, traditional quantitative results are typically used to demonstrate promising return on investment. It seems that there are other important indicators of success that are not as easy to demonstrate in a power-point presentation. I expected decisions to be made solely on traditional results, without consideration of the short-term outcomes experienced by the students in this study. I was pleasantly surprised to learn how administrators in this case had access to the “stories” of the students, and it was these stories that sometimes prompted administrators to recognize the short-term results voiced by the students (increased esteem, sense of community, knowledge of college expectations, effect on their families) which did have an effect on decisions made in support of the program.

It is vital that the GO program continue to find ways to document student stories and other qualitative evidence that shows the effect of student success programs. This view of the student experience is rich in its demonstration of different kinds of meaningful learning outcomes, including those not typically considered. My expectations were exceeded by discovering the effect of this non-quantitative demonstration of success on the decision making process. This legitimizes the direction of this effort - to find different ways of identifying and demonstrating (incremental) student success, and determining how the Institution values different kinds of success outcomes.

If we accept the premise that development of self and knowledge of college processes are necessary for successful learning, then it becomes important that the program reflect this; the faculty support this in their lesson planning and classroom experiences; and the college acknowledge this in their assessment of students, evaluation of program effectiveness, and decision-making, especially in terms of resource allocation. Formalizing these interrelationships, creating “tight couplings,” legitimizes the effort and demonstrates the extent to which the institution values this specific program.

Any discussion between participants representing different perspectives is likely to uncover conflicting values and beliefs. This makes it difficult to accommodate all ways of thinking about success in this program – and yet it seems imperative to make an attempt. The ideals of this program are socially and educationally significant. The college supports the program, counseling faculty who work with the program are personally and professionally committed, and the students have high praise for how they are affected by the program. I found evidence to suggest that there are more similarities than differences in how this program is conceived and delivered.

### **Significance of the Outcomes**

*“Education has in America’s whole history been the major hope for improving the individual and society.”*

- Gunnar Myrdal, 1974 Nobel Laureate in Economics

Given the diversity of students who attend community college for multiple reasons, the college must recognize the many different ways it responds to this variety of needs. “Think of a student’s development as a mosaic of changing skills, attitudes,

beliefs, and understandings...each within a kaleidoscope of individual shapes, colors, textures” (King, 1994, p. 415). The institution must come together in a collaborative effort to retain students and help them persist toward completion of their educational goal.

Retention and persistence research points to social and academic integration (Astin, 1993; Bailey, et. al., 2005; Tinto, 1993) as key factors in student success. A 2004 ACT Policy report explores the role of academic and non-academic factors in improving college retention, recommending that “educational administrators and policymakers take an integrative approach to design and develop programs and policies that address both the academic and non-academic factors that relate to college retention and performance, and recognize differences among student populations” (ACT, 2004, p.20).

Students at different stages in their academic journey have different needs, as was clearly echoed in the comments of students participating in this study. Those at the beginning of their transition into a higher education environment often have college readiness and developmental needs that are not only academic; “*knowing what direction you are going in, who you are, what you want, and what you are good at.*” Specifically, these students are usually new to higher education and tend to lack a personal relationship with the learning process and the cultural capital that makes it easier to deal successfully with academic and life challenges.

*“Coming back to school, I had a lot to learn, things had changed since last time. GO helped me learn my way around campus, how to access resources, gave me a support system.”* This student articulates the need for the support offered in programs like this

one. These students transition into a college culture unfamiliar to them, with unresolved academic struggles from their last – usually high school – educational experience. *“It had been so long...I really needed guidance.”* This, together with the personal and family lives that demand of them physically and emotionally, can be overwhelming to a student new to the college experience; *“I really didn’t know how I was going to do it all.”*

Learning about a college environment, gaining the tools to study and learn effectively, and adopting the self-management skills to succeed were mentioned by many students and instructors alike as key outcomes of this program; *“because of this class, I have the courage to get through the rest of school...I learned how to use (college) resources to further myself and now I know that I am not alone here.”* Students and instructors with a more cosmopolitan outlook recognize and acknowledge the importance of self-growth, increased self-esteem, and transformational experiences. Local oriented instructors seemed more focused on career exploration and study skills; yet their students also gained personal awareness.

For many students, the opportunities presented in class came together to create a sense of empowerment that fueled personal motivation toward clearly defined goals and transformed them. *“Before, I was on welfare, had no confidence in myself, no goals or idea of what I would do, no idea how to take care of my kids. Today, I am a confident, successful professional, a college graduate with my own home and the means to take vacations to visit my children, who are all doing really well.”* This particular (former) student credits the program, in large part, with the encouragement to set loftier goals than she otherwise might have. She continued in school, earned her Bachelor’s degree, and

came back to work for the college where she started many years earlier. She even spent time working with the program that began her life transformation. Success under these circumstances is especially significant.

This points to the societal benefit that is so hard to account for, yet is a key element of the college mission and the purpose of this program. Many of the students I talked with spoke of benefits from their involvement that extended to their children and their families. *“After being at home for fifteen years, my daughters now see me in a different light...they think it is cool that I am going back to school. (I am) trying to be a good role model for my daughters...not wait until the last minute to do my work. I can show them that I can balance work and school and still get a 4.0 (gpa) – and they can, too.”* And yet, without the kind of support offered in the environment created by GO, these students likely would not have attended or succeeded in college. The number of them that do attend, and do successfully complete, makes the program a benefit to the community in the spirit of the college mission, “to develop our community through learning.”

It was common to hear students talk about their career goals in the service professions, especially social services, *“now I can help others...teach them the tools that have helped me so much.”* Largely because of their background and experiences, many students plan to work with victims of domestic violence or substance abuse; others seek careers as marriage, family, and child therapists. The societal benefit from mothers who successfully stop cycles of negative behaviors that have generational effects is considerable and needs to be captured.

Mothers (especially single mothers) have a particularly hard time balancing all the various roles they are expected to fulfill. Students often mentioned the competing demands from their families and school; *“once I get home, I’m not a student...I’m mom.”* A study by Bers and Smith (1991) suggests that the persistence of older community college students is affected by home responsibilities. This bears out in the comments of the students in this study; *“it is hard to juggle family and school.”* Many of the students interviewed mentioned a conflict and/or balancing issues with their families that can take a toll on their schoolwork; *“it seems easy until I get home...I get overwhelmed by how much there is to do.”*

The instructors noted this, too; *“I am amazed at how much these students go through – between their kids, extra jobs, school, and doing it on their own...I really respect what they are doing.”* Another instructor spoke of the multitude of excuses and missed assignments; *“we have to teach them about reality...they are going to have to figure it out, because it is what will be expected of them.”* These students benefit from an environment that can address their unique challenges while supporting their success and empowering them in ways that address the holistic aspects of their needs, both academic and non-academic. The learning community creates a network of support that becomes a vital link for their successful goal completion.

This program demonstrates why efforts to support students holistically are necessary in community colleges; as evidenced by the stories of students who participate (stories of transformation and hope), their success rates (450 program participants have met the requirements for a certificate or degree since 1999; these being students who

might not otherwise have attended, or succeeded in, college), and their retention (average 80% retention rate historically in this program, and average 68% persistence). The network of support, together with an opportunity to develop self-awareness (an often mentioned benefit) and increased knowledge, skills and abilities makes a difference for a good number of students and seems to account for their success. The documentation of this success, however, is a key element in the accountability trail that leads back to resource allocation.

In order to get funding, a program and the students it serves must be able to demonstrate success. To be able to accurately assess this, we must know what aspects of success are necessary for students to achieve their goal, whatever the goal. We expect they will achieve it by staying in class all semester (retention), and progressing into the next term (persistence). These are often-used student outcomes. Ideally, students go on to graduate (completion). Other students may “only” finish several semesters, but then go on to a more successful job opportunity than the one they had before. Or, they may have a very successful, enriching class experience that gives them a better sense of themselves (voice) and a better understanding of education in general (cultural capital) which benefits their children. Are these also considered successes? It depends on who defines success.

Research, and the development of theoretical models of student retention and completion were completed primarily at four-year institutions through studies involving traditional aged, often residential students. The applicability of these models in the community college setting is questionable, given the different kinds of students (typically

older, more likely to work, have family obligations, and attend school part-time) and their different goals and readiness for college. It just may be that very different kinds of retention and success models are necessary to address the different needs of students, mostly nontraditional, who attend community colleges for a variety of reasons. Efforts sponsored by the Lumina Foundation, through their Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count initiative (2003) promotes efforts “based on the premise that research about and at community colleges must play a central role in any strategy to increase student success” (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005, p. 1).

This project provided a legitimate way to explore a complex set of issues faced by community colleges with regard to providing access, challenge, support, and retention opportunities in support of ultimate student success. In order to demonstrate the important ways that students do feel they are successful I asked them about their success and listened. This provided important data that contributes to the discussion about student success, outcomes, and assessment. Given that the community college claims to be more concerned with the student and learning process, it is reasonable to expect that the issues around success might be different for community college students than for typical, traditional four-year college students.

This case demonstrates how the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to navigate the college experience is valued by the students as a form of cultural capital needed in order to be successful in college. The students can gain this from many sources, including from an advisor, counselor, or mentor; or through orientation programs lasting a day, a week, or even a full semester. The purpose of an orientation is to

introduce a new student to the campus and available services, and to provide a foundation of information to help the student survive through new academic processes. The class featured in this case study provides a comprehensive, semester-long orientation within a community of learners. This format seems to work especially well for this population of students, as it provides information over time within a supportive network of students with similar issues and needs.

### **GO as a Learning Community**

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) regarding the effect of various types of advising and student services, “The most consistently effective program format appears to be a first-semester freshman seminar that meets as a regular class with an assigned instructor” (p. 403). Community colleges often offer student success skills credit courses, although participation is voluntary. The program studied uses a required class format, with an instructor who also serves as an advisor and counselor. The success reported by participants for this kind of experience suggests that we consider carefully the benefits of this model.

Recognized success outcomes includes the opportunities it creates for re-entry students, providing support and the (personal) skill set necessary to further their education and increase their (job) skill-set. To do so successfully requires the ability to identify and measure additional college readiness outcome indicators for students who are preparing for academic success. The students interviewed didn’t just identify learning and academic success as class outcomes, they also talked about the self-confidence they

gained, their ability to realize their capabilities, and opportunity to set career goals for themselves. The “stories” that students tell contain powerful data demonstrating real-life transformation and change. The program would be well served to formalize a process to gather and document these stories.

The challenge to understand what creates a successful experience for these students illustrates the related need to identify, measure, document, and present successful classroom activities, experiences, and outcomes. In “Classrooms as Communities: Exploring the Educational Character of Student Persistence,” Tinto (1997) found that participating in a learning community did increase the probability of persistence in a community college. Based on a study at Seattle Central College, he claims learning communities promote persistence by facilitating supportive peer groups, encouraging shared learning experiences, and giving students the opportunity to actively engage in knowledge creation. “Designing the classroom experience to promote more meaningful interaction among students and teachers is one promising strategy for community colleges” (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Most of the students in the program at Southwest Community College would agree; it was “*nice to know you weren’t alone, others (were) in transition, too...when scared, someone is there.*”

One of the outcomes most valued by the students interviewed involved their experience as part of a community, as evidenced by their observations about how critical the supportive environment of the classroom and other students was. A learning community can make a major contribution to the enhancing the quality of student / faculty experiences (Love & Love, 1995; Tinto, 1997). A community of learners provides

help from social networks of peers, increases student involvement, improves student performance, has a positive impact on student retention, provides opportunities for faculty development, shifts the focus to student learning outcomes, and challenges us to rethink our teaching pedagogy.

The students in this case study, by and large, had no time for extra activities – not even those arranged for and promoted through the program. The way that they could integrate, however, was in the class. The resulting learning community was cited by many of the students as being key to their success; *“it was very helpful, more than I imagined...you think you are the only one, there is a fear of failure...but there are other people.”* The community was also key to the growth of confidence the students experienced when they came to realize they were not alone and had other students they could talk to who would understand, as illustrated by these comments: *“I don’t think I would have had the same confidence. I was tentative about seeing a counselor, now I feel good about calling.”* *“(The instructor) and other students were friendly...we talked, and shared. Now I feel good about going out in different directions. There are good support systems.”*

Opportunities for increased interaction with instructors and shared inquiry prompt the creation of communities that have been shown to have real promising results, especially in the community college setting. A review of over 100 studies of learning communities (32/119 covered community colleges) by the National Learning Communities Project at Evergreen Community College led to the conclusion that “a preponderance of studies indicate that learning communities strengthen student retention

and academic achievement” (Taylor, 2003, p. iii). Progressing as a cohort, students experience the class together and learn from each other as much as they help each other learn in class. The students I spoke with almost unanimously mentioned the sense of community, the camaraderie, or the comfort of knowing that they were in a class with other students similar to them.

Positive habits carry on for many of the program completers. A faculty member relayed a story of a former GO student who was struggling, along with a few peers, in a reading class. The former GO student took those other students aside, formed a study group and together they succeeded through the semester. This demonstrates a different kind of integration – one that is both social and academic – that could be a success indicator. Astin (1993, 1996) showed, through a longitudinal multi-institutional database of 82 student outcome measures, that the strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development is a student’s peer group.

A secondary outcome includes data that informs GO program coordinators what the college can do to remove barriers and better promote student success, especially for students who start at a disadvantage. Student characteristics, institutional characteristics, and academic and non-academic variables focus attention on what matters in the context of this program. Research on student attrition (students who do not complete a semester) in community colleges “suggests that factors leading to higher community college student attrition include working fulltime, registering late, not having clear educational goals, performing poorly in classes, and not engaging in a variety of student support services” (Summers, 2003, p. 77). Although the student controls their work hours, the

program has done a good job of addressing late registration concerns (by promoting a class practice of registering for the following semester before the end of the current semester); and developing not only an educational plan, but also career and personal goals as a part class objectives that include supporting study skills development, promoting the use of learning resources on campus, and establishing a habit of seeing a counselor on a regular basis.

Paying attention to the needs of the students promotes short-term successes necessary for persistence and ultimate goal completion. In this way, success expectations of the students, instructional counselors, and administrators are addressed.

*Proposition 1*

Students seem to come to this program with unclear expectations. A general desire to learn is shaped into self-awareness, conscious choices, and self-motivated academic, career, and personal goals through the experiences in the class. The students who are open to development often experience a transformation that internalizes their desire for learning. Gaining knowledge about self, resources, and possibilities; developing a skill set to allow for successful attainment of their academic, career, and personal goals; and having a safe, supportive environment to test new abilities are aspects of cultural capital that are developed in the class, and valued by students and instructors alike. This affirms GO course objectives and informs class design. If feedback from students about what they attribute their success to is captured, the insight can be used to

provide purposeful learning experiences. In doing so, assessing these outcomes provides tools to demonstrate short-term success outcomes.

It was clear that initially, the students viewed success as just making it through the semester. What was unexpected was that, for the most part, the students didn't understand what that meant. With little academic experience (whether they had a voice or not) and little cultural capital, these students didn't think in terms that educators do. Many of the students I talked with didn't even articulate the need for study skills at first...they just spoke generally about "*getting through the class.*" For the most part, they did not expect such an emphasis on self-growth, nor did they initially associate development of self ('voice') with the learning process. They did appreciate the results, however. This points to the importance of pre- and post-testing, to identify and measure the extent to which the program meets student's expectations and addresses these important pre-learning activities. Most of the students voiced that when they started the program, success meant "*to learn more about school and help me find a goal.*" Upon leaving they often felt successful because "*now I know what I want, and I know what I need to do to get it...I can do it!*"

Other successful experiences most often cited by the students involved other students. (I took the class) "*to become re-acquainted with school work, and to meet others like myself...I feel successful because I felt like I belonged.*" To a lesser degree, students did appreciate the study skills, although students who continued to take classes indicated that their study skills really developed over time, but "*no doubt the seed was planted in my GO class.*"

*Proposition 2*

Although the instructors each easily fit into one of three faculty social roles (local, cosmopolitan, intermediate), I didn't find the resulting differences to be as significant as the common dedication they had to the students and ideals of GO. There was consistent demonstration of a passionate, internally driven commitment to the program that was evident not only in the way the instructors talked about their joys and frustrations on behalf of the students; but also the way the students were buoyed by the genuine regard these faculty members had for the individuals in their classroom. This must be recognized.

Commitment to the mission of the program provided the common bond that united the different perspectives of local instructors, cosmopolitans, and the intermediates. Historical elements of the program, the traditions of the institution, and innovative ways of thinking about student success came together in support of the students. The structure of the class, and common course objectives, provides a consistency that insures all students are exposed to the same elements considered important for success. These elements will have to be continually reviewed and may need to be updated as student, faculty, and/or administrative perspectives change, but they currently do a good job of reflecting the stated needs of students and the faculty.

*Proposition 3*

It became clear that administrators looked to long-term performance outcomes to justify the program. The high retention rate of students who complete the course, persistence of students who continue to take classes, and the numbers of student credit units (FTSE) produced by the program were sufficient to bring in enough state funding to cover the costs of the program, which is why the program continues. Foundation fundraising produced generous community donations that are specifically earmarked for the students in this program, and produce a significant resource stream for the college.

It is the celebration event that gives the administrators an up-front and personal look at the specific individuals who are benefiting so greatly from the program. Supplementing the numeric representation of program participants, the stories illustrate a fuller array of benefits to the students and their families. These benefits are important, and need to be seen as sufficient to warrant investment in students who don't succeed in traditionally defined ways. Given the exposure to the students' stories, it becomes difficult for administrators to deny the important role the college plays in their success. If this interest translates into increased resources, then the program has a better chance of supporting student goal completion, which provides the FTSE and degree completion desired by the institution.

The Celebration provides a regular, public reminder that ensures exposure and increased commitment. When the decision was made to have the foundation develop outreach and establish a fund for the program, it was because of the stories. It was because of the students who told stories of their transformation, of what it meant to them

and to their families to be in school, that the board ultimately did use decision rationality (i.e. creating the Foundation scholarship program) to do what was “right” based on the guiding principles of the College. When champions of the program sell the concept of the program, they also sell the very positive resulting outcomes (e.g. high student credit production, gpa, and completion rates).

In addition to the stories, there is a need for comprehensive, formatted student success statistics that quantify the progress made by these students. What has to be kept in mind, however, are the different success indicators necessary to signify college readiness skills and short-term accomplishments. Assessments and different measurement strategies must be developed to demonstrate the student progress that takes place at the beginning of the educational journey. Long-term follow-up presents a challenge, unless the students get back in touch with the program after they graduate from the college.

### *Proposition 3a*

The diverse perspectives examined illustrate how three groups, with different areas of concern, form different expectations about intended outcomes. Students are most focused on daily concerns; they want to make sure they know how to deal with the college environment, do well in class, have enough time to take care of school and their kids, fulfill responsibilities at work and home, and do this while achieving their goals. Instructors want the students to learn the skills that will allow them to accomplish all of this, and provide long-term for themselves and their families. The faculty’s primary focus is student learning and course completion. Administrators judge the program, ultimately,

on its graduation outcomes; the relative number and percentage of students who earn degrees and certificates in comparison with other, similar programs across the district.

What was obvious from talking with the students was the effect of life's realities on their ability to continue coming to school. A stable, supportive home life is necessary for student success. Many students attempted the class without this and invariably, they were overcome by life issues. A more thorough up-front screening process would seem to be the obvious answer to this challenge. However, a thorough up-front screening process does exist. This raises the question about the pressure on the program to increase numbers in support of FTSE generation, which leads to the admittance of marginal students.

There is a pressure to get a certain number of students in each class (i.e. gain FTES – a funding indicator). Not only does this create a competition among campus programs, it creates an environment where the program scrambles for students at the last minute to fill classes. Needless to say, it is the student without stability and ability to handle life's realities who is more likely to arrive late to register, not knowing what they want and find themselves in this class because of the scholarship opportunity. Because they don't start from a position of intending to attend school, they are less likely to succeed.

Based on the evidence, students in the GO program can do as well as the general student population in terms of persistence and gpa. Since these students in this program return to school at great odds (given their at-risk status), there is likely an understatement of the program effect (Bailey and Alfonso, 2005, p. 26). This would seem to indicate that

the results are probably even greater than we can measure. It will become an ongoing challenge to find innovative ways to capture both the individual and societal benefits of a program that allows a “second chance” individual to have the opportunity to transition back into school in an environment that provides understanding, challenge, and support in a safe, encouraging environment designed to provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities to empower future success.

Finding ways to demonstrate value in order to obtain ‘buy-in’ becomes a challenge. Dickeson (1999) suggests the concept of “relative value” when considering what to measure in making programmatic decisions. Eckel uncovered differing conceptions of what that relative value might be. On the one side are straightforward decision rules centered primarily on minimizing costs and maximizing program quality while maintaining “mission centrality” (Gumport, 1993; Slaughter, 1993, 1995). Conversely, decisions are often made based on patterns of power, politics, and tend to be economically dependent on the market (Slaughter, 1995) or resource flows. Dickeson (1999) has come up with ten criteria suggested for academic leaders to consider during program discussions based on economic, quality, and centrality decision rules. I propose the same kind of thinking can be effective when applied to funding decisions for student success programs in community colleges.

<b>TABLE 6.1. Criteria for Program Consideration</b>
1. History, development, and expectations of the program

1. History, development, and expectations of the program

2. External demand for the program
3. Internal demand for the program
4. Quality of program inputs and processes
5. Quality of program outcomes
6. Size, scope, and productivity of the program
7. Revenue and other resources generated by the program
8. Costs and other expenses associated with the program
9. Impact, justification, and overall essentiality of the program
10. Opportunity analysis of the program

*Source: Dickeson (1999) Prioritizing academic programs: A comprehensive agenda for colleges and universities.*

This suggests the kind of systemic assessment that is necessary to fairly deal with the diversity of student needs served by community college support programs. To understand that multiple considerations are required for student and program evaluation is important. Likewise, an understanding of the different points of view of what constitutes success provides a sense of ‘*verstehen*’ that allows us to appreciate the student point of view, the various faculty perspectives (locals, cosmopolitans, and intermediates), and the different considerations used by administrators when making decisions concerning the program.

### **Questions for Further Study**

This case describes a program that works for a specific, targeted population of re-entry adult college students. The study has provided a better understanding of how it

benefits the participants. Further measuring the long-term outcomes of these students will provide a basis of evidence valuable in obtaining sustainable funding. Continuing to share and document the stories of the students in the program will also demonstrate the worthiness of how this program supports the college mission and gives back to the community. Highlighting those positive ties is an opportunity for further qualitative study.

Student success programs designed to serve the needs of high-risk students are marginally supported, even if unintentionally because of scarce resources. At the same time, this program seemed to provide elements desired by the students and demonstrated in their class completion rates. Could the same outstanding first semester persistence rates be maintained if the cohort was maintained?

This case study was limited by its scope. There is no real validity or applicability beyond the program and institution studied. Further study with additional students within the institution (i.e. students on the “fringe”) or outside the district could potentially replicate these findings and make them applicable to similar student populations in other institutions. Would a required course help establish communities of learners to provide support for holistic student development under different circumstances?

Overall, a single student, or a small group of students, cannot speak for the whole. However, what they have to say is worth noting. Upon review, several individual voices have threads of common themes. These threads weave themselves into stories that do represent groups, rather than individuals. Patching these stories together creates a historical and holistic representation of individual students in a unique program in a

specific institution. This was valuable for those of us involved. Of value to a larger audience would be a meta-analysis of community college student success program outcomes. Knowing the commonalities of what programs are effective, what outcomes can be expected, and what alternate assessment methods have been used can be helpful and enlightening.

### **Recommendations and Lessons Learned**

It is important for the community college to provide support for the students served by this program. Not only does this promote a mission of the college, but the impact on the community is significant (albeit unmeasured.) Documenting the stories of these students is necessary to begin capturing the individual and social benefits of this program.

Student outcomes seem to indicate impressive results, but further quantitative analysis is necessary to confirm that initial persistence data follows the students who continue. Data collection must continue to allow a comprehensive view of the overall effects of this program – from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective.

Building important developmental constructs into the course objectives provides a holistic orientation for all students, despite who teaches the course. This allows for a consistency that promotes excellence. Relating the core objectives of the class through the mission of the program to the mission of the college is a strategy to increase resource allocation by maintaining centrality (Hackman, 1985.)

The learning organization (O'Banion, 1999) promotes ongoing assessment as a form of continuous improvement. When research data plays a prominent role in the processes of the campus, a "culture of evidence" can develop. Bailey and Alfonso (2005) offer several suggestions for developing a culture of evidence, the majority of which are also supported by my research.

**TABLE 6.2. *Suggestions for Developing a Culture of Evidence***

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) "Colleges must assess the resources and skills needed for effective institutional research, recognizing that research is an investment. As with even the most rewarding investment, its payoff emerges over time."</li> <li>2) "Colleges must recognize that assessments of program effectiveness are difficult and involve a continuum of activities and analysis."</li> <li>3) Projects should combine quantitative research on student outcomes with qualitative research to elicit insight from students about those outcomes.</li> <li>4) Colleges, states, and college associations must provide more opportunities for faculty and administrators to engage in the research process and to discuss evidence about student outcomes.</li> <li>5) Colleges and states must develop more systematic methods to publicize and disseminate research findings.</li> <li>6) Collaboration among institutional researchers at different colleges and between college-level and state-level researchers should be promoted.</li> </ol> |
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*Source: Bailey and Alfonso (2005) Paths to Persistence: An analysis of Research on program effectiveness at community colleges.*

Ultimately, I set out to discover how students, faculty, and administrators conceptualized success for students in this program. As it turns out, there are subtle differences.

The students I heard from come into the program (and the educational experience) with fuzzy expectations. They usually just wanted to learn how to do well in school. In hindsight, though, it is very clear that they found several aspects of the program especially important to their success: a) learning about college policies, campus resources, and academic practices provided important “cultural capital,” b) students who found their “voice” were able to advocate for themselves, and c) being part of a supportive group made a big difference for many students who found strength in numbers. Their success was focused on the short-term.

On the other hand, faculty members, while acknowledging all of the above, were especially interested in helping the students gain skills and abilities that allow them to get a “living wage job.” The instructional counselors sought to promote skills and abilities that would allow the students to successfully address short-term goals, while they helped the students identify and establish long-term goals. There were not significant differences between how locals and cosmopolitans viewed success – both promoted holistic and academic growth as designed by the course outline.

Administrators appear to focus more on long-term outcomes, and want to see demonstration that students not only do well in the course, but continue to register for (generating FTSE), attend classes (retention), and do well in them (likely to persist). Ultimately, goal completion (especially as evidenced by graduation) is the expected outcome. Aligning short-term success indicators with long-term student outcomes provides a measure that can be monitored to promote more effective goal completion.

Exploring the ways that participants in this program view success, it became clear that while there were different perspectives, there was also universal support for the ability of this program to help students identify and achieve their goals. The quantitative acknowledgement of demonstrated outcomes was a positive confirmation that seemed to be under-appreciated. This is an important realization in an environment that is ultimately interested in outcomes. The positive outcomes that result from this program must be better documented and widely acknowledged. To do so, we must be clear on what elements of the program contribute to the student's success, what outcomes are measured and considered, and make sure they are the same outcomes that are valued by the institution and the student. This project has attempted to do just that.

*“Human development should be the organizing purpose for higher education.”*

(Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 265)

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